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Editorial and Business Offices  
1719 N St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036  
202-785-2255; [scinews@scisvc.org](mailto:scinews@scisvc.org)

Advertising Representative  
Lewis Edge & Associates, Inc.  
366 Wall St., Princeton, N.J. 08540, 609-683-7900

Subscription Department  
P.O. Box 1925, Marion, Ohio 43305  
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Cover: The network of crystallized silica particles inside this opal scatters light, producing the jewel's fiery iridescence. Before it hardened into a gemstone, the opal started out as a colloid: The silica particles were suspended in a liquid. Scientists are now using colloids to model what happens to materials when they go from liquid to solid.
- 230 Why Do Women Menstruate?

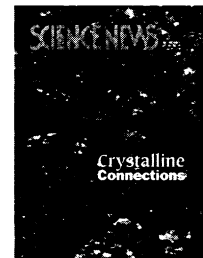
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## Letters

### Understanding IUs

In your article describing the efficacy of vitamin E supplements (SN: 3/1/97, p. 135), the dosages are given in milligrams. The vitamin E supplements sold over the counter are measured in IUs.

I've asked my pharmacist and my doctor and I've consulted scientific reference books, but I cannot find a definition of IUs or the conversion factor needed to equate them to milligrams.

Would you please enlighten your readers?  
*Vincent Sawka  
Fredonia, N.Y.*

*Vitamin E is a mix of related tocopherol molecules. There is no automatic rule for converting*

### CORRECTION

In "Deep sea not immune to climate change" (SN: 3/22/97, p. 181), thousands of meters (not kilometers) of water protect organisms near the bottom.  
—The Editors

*milligrams of vitamin E to international units (IUs), because any conversion will require you to know the particular proportion of different tocopherols present in the vitamin E studied. In the Scottish study, 1 milligram of vitamin E equals about 1.4 IU, so 280 mg translated to about 400 IU.*

— J. Raloff

### Catastrophic CO<sub>2</sub>

Could the phenomena discussed in "Life's Closest Call" (SN: 2/1/97, p. 74) relate to the fatal emissions from an African lake a few years ago?

*Mark Pottenger  
Los Angeles, Calif.*

*No, they are not the same. Lakes Nyos and Monoun in Cameroon (SN: 4/2/94, p. 215) overturned suddenly and released a cloud of carbon dioxide into the air, killing cattle and people. The Permian scenario would have happened slowly, by human standards, and would have been toxic for marine creatures.*

— R. Monastersky

**Is carbon dioxide** really a toxic gas? Either chemistry and biology have changed a lot since I attended school, or the definition of the word "toxic" has changed.

*Eric W. Gardell  
Wappingers Falls, N.Y.*

*At high concentrations, carbon dioxide is toxic.*  
— R. Monastersky

### Cheap pills

Robertson states that fish oil and garlic supplements can be as costly as prescription drugs ("Fish oil gets a garlic chaser for the heart," SN: 2/15/97, p. 101).

I buy retail 500-milligram capsules of garlic oil at \$1.49 per 100 (more than 1 month's supply at three capsules per day). I buy Omega-3 fish oil capsules at \$9.60 per 100 (1 month's supply). That is a total of \$11.09.

Tell me where you can get any prescription drug for that price.

*Ralph S. Blois  
Woodburn, Ore.*