Dietary Supplements as Additional Sources of Zinc in the Human Organism

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Abstract

Zinc is an important oligoelement of the body. It is a component of all biological systems and it is required for the proper function of many enzymes. Important physiological role in combination with the relatively frequent insufficient supply means that this element is often recommended for additional supplementation. The aim of the study was to assess the zinc concentration in the popular dietary supplements available in Poland. Zinc content in supplements was determined and compared with the declared characteristics on the package. Zn concentration was detected in samples of 42 different multinutrient dietary supplements by the flame atomic absorption spectrometry method. Declared zinc varied from 0.5 to 15.6 mg per tablet. The obtained results showed that the determined concentration of zinc is not always compatible with its content indicated by manufacturer. In general, zinc content for all tested products was lower than declared. Both excess and deficiencies in the concentration of metals can lead to adverse health effects. For ensuring a good quality, the supplements need regulation of their composition. Considering the results of our research and the fact that both excess and deficiencies of zinc may lead to adverse health disorders, the composition of dietary supplements should be carefully controlled.

Keywords: dietary supplements, zinc, atomic absorption spectrometry

Introduction

Nutrients supplied to the body should satisfy the demand for quality and quantity. The varying living conditions, polluted environment, food modification processes make that their amount in diet not to be equal to the quality. High availability of drugs, dietary supplements and special products made the supplementation of nutrients and enriching the diet with additional substances to become very popular [1]. It has been estimated that the growth of the dietary supplements (DS) market in Poland will amount to 8% annually by 2020 and will reach an estimated value of 5.04 billion polish zloty (PLN) [2]. Supplementation is recommended in the prevention of illnesses or increased body demands [3, 4, 5]. However, the estimated data indicate that nearly 50% of the society uses nutrient supplements [6]. This applies to persons of various age (infants, youth, adults) and in most cases is not related to medical recommendations [6-9].

Zinc is a mineral with important and versatile physiological functions [10, 11]. It plays catalytic, structural and modulatory functions in the tissues. Zinc finger transcription factors are characterized by finger-like DNA binding domains that require one or more zinc ions to stabilize the structure; they play an important role in many biological processes [12]. It plays an important role in the production of hormones (such as the growth hormone and insulin), is an ingredient of many enzymes (such as carbide anhydrase) or their activators (such as enolases, arginases) and maintains the stability of biological membranes [13]. It is involved in the metabolism of xenobiotics, activates the synthesis of metallothionein which binds toxic metals [14-16]. Zinc determines protective, antioxidant effects [17]. It is involved in the structure of superoxide dismutase,
an enzyme responsible for neutralizing the superoxide radical. What is more, a number of other mechanisms has been identified, through which zinc ions interfere with the oxidative status of cells; the inhibition of NMDA receptors, the modulation of intracellular calcium levels that regulates the activity of enzymes such as NADPH oxidase or nitric oxide synthase. Another intermediate mechanism of regulating the redox balance is the inhibition of the lipid peroxidation that depends on iron or copper ions [18]. The role played in the body is so versatile that this element is involved at least partially in all biological processes [19-25].

For ensuring the physiological role, the recommended zinc supply is 6.5 to 14 mg/day [26]. This amount varies depending on factors such as: age, sex, nourishment, co-presence of diseases or a period of increased physiological body demand, such as pregnancy, lactation or convalescence. Zinc is present in many food products, however, its absorption is variable, with much higher amount in animal products than vegetable ones [27, 28]. Also other ingredients, such as the proteins in the diet may affect zinc bioavailability in the body [29]. Despite high zinc availability, relatively often its deficit in the body can be detected. It is estimated that a low supply of zinc from diet may be a problem of about 20% to even 40% of population [11, 30].

Body support products may be available as drugs or supplements. Supplements, in contrast to drugs, are not subjected to restrictive quality regulations. The Federal Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act requires that producers who wish to market dietary supplements that contain “new dietary ingredients” to notify the competent authorities [33].

The legal regulations specify that the packaging must include the term “dietary supplement” and the ingredients included. The quantity list of ingredients should be given as calculated into the daily dose of product recommended for consumption and should contain the information on the percentage content in relation to the recommended daily consumption. The manufacturer is also required to place the warning on the package related to not exceeding the daily portion recommended for consumption [34].

The amounts of individual product ingredients are based on the basic product analysis of the manufacturer. The legal regulations do not specify the process of inspection and verification of the actual content of product ingredients. The guidelines determine only the tolerance limit for the declared content of nutrients. According to this limit, the bottom tolerance level for vitamins and minerals is 20% and the upper limit is 50% for vitamins and 45% for minerals [30, 35-39].

The aim of the present study was to assess the zinc concentration in the popular dietary supplements available in Poland. Zinc content in supplements was determined and compared with the declared characteristics on the package.

### Materials and Methods

The study covered 42 different dietary supplements. These were generally available products in the sales points (pharmacies, stores) and commonly used by consumers. The products were acquired from 36 different manufacturers. Almost all were complex products containing other substances in addition to zinc, mainly vitamins, minerals and plant extracts. The products were recommended mainly for adults, some had annotation that they may be taken by children > 12 years old. The recommendation to use the products was various, both general (products recommended to improve health, supporting in periods of higher demand for nutrients) and special, such as anti-ageing, improvement of eye-vision, recommended during pregnancy and lactation. The products were in the form of pills.

Two packages of each dietary supplements were used for the study. Two pieces were chosen from each package and weighed (analytic balance RADWAG AS 220/C/2, Poland).

Each sample was crushed and homogenized to a mass of about 0.3 g. The samples were submitted to microwave mineralization: 65% HNO₃ (Supra pure, Merck, Dormstadt, Germany), mineralizer Magnum, ERTEC, Poland. Mineralized samples were filled up in calibrated flasks up to 25 cm³ with purified water (Millipore SAS, Molsheim, France). The zinc concentration was determined in the samples with atomic absorption spectrometry (AAS) in the acetylene-air flame (Spectr-AA 880Z VARIAN). In order to verify the accuracy of the used method, the analysis of a reference material was performed using Mixed Polish Herbs (INCT-MPH-2), Institute of Nuclear Chemistry and Technology Department of Analytical Chemistry, Warsaw (results from six repetitions of assays: Zn: 32.2 ± 0.6 mg/kg (certified value 33.5 ± 2.1 mg/kg, recovery 93.9 - 97.6%).

The results of the zinc content determinations were analysed based on the mean content of this element in four tested samples. The determined and declared content were compared by calculating the relative deviation according to the following formula:

\[ \Delta C = \left( \frac{C_{\text{determined}} - C_{\text{declared}}}{C_{\text{declared}}} \right) \times 100, \]

where: \( \Delta C \) – relative deviation from declared zinc content [%], \( C_d \) – mean determined zinc content [mg], \( C_{\text{declared}} \) – declared zinc content [mg].

The results analysis was conducted with Statistica 13 (StatSoft, PL) and Microsoft Excel. \( p < 0.05 \) was assumed to be statistically significant.

### Results and Discussion

Table I shows the general characteristics of the tested products. The mass of the tested tablets ranged from 0.2 g to about 5 g, with average mass of 0.96 g. The
relative standard deviation from tested product mass varied between 0.2 to 2.72%, on average 1.2%. The result indicates that the difference between the mass of individual tested samples showed low variability.

Table I

| No. | Indications                  | Other ingredients                                                                 | Weight | Zn [mg] | RSD % declared | RSD % determined |
|-----|------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|---------|---------------|-----------------|
| 1   | hair, skin, nails            | taurine, catechin                                                                   | 0.68   | 0.2     | 7.5           | 8.0             |
| 2   | hair, skin, nails            | Fe, vit: A, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, C, E, PP, H                                        | 0.95   | 1.2     | 7.3           | 10.9            |
| 3   | body                         | Mg, Fe, Cu, Cr, Mo, Se, Mn, vit: C, E                                             | 1.38   | 1.0     | 5             | 4.9             |
| 4   | liver                        | vit: C, E, extract of artichoke, mint, turmeric, rosemary                           | 0.63   | 0.5     | 15            | 12.7            |
| 5   | hair, skin, nails            | vit: A, C, E, B1, B2, B6, PP, H, extract of horsetail and nettle                    | 0.41   | 1.3     | 0.71          | 0.7             |
| 6   | eyes                         | Se, vit: C, lutein, taurine                                                         | 0.43   | 4.3     | 7.5           | 6.7             |
| 7   | body                         | Mg, Fe, Cr, Mo, Se, Mn, Ca, I, vit: A, C, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, H, PP        | 1.37   | 2.6     | 10            | 10.5            |
| 8   | body                         | I, lutein, vit: A, D3, E, B1, B2, B6, B12, C, PP, biotin, folic acid, pantothenic acid | 1.44   | 0.4     | 7.5           | 9.3             |
| 9   | body                         | vit: A, E, C, K, B1, B6, B12, D, lutein, biotin, folic acid, niacin, pantothenic acid, P, I | 1.26   | 0.4     | 5             | 5.2             |
| 10  | body                         | Fe, Mg, Cu, Mo, Mn, Se, I, vit: A, C, D, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP, H          | 0.92   | 1.4     | 10            | 12.3            |
| 11  | hair, skin, nails            | vit: A, C, B1, B2, B5, B6, H                                                       | 0.48   | 1.4     | 7.5           | 8.0             |
| 12  | body                         | Fe, Mg, Cu, Se, Mn, I, vit: A, C, D, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, H                 | 0.37   | 0.5     | 5             | 4.9             |
| 13  | eyes                         | Cu, Se, vit: C, E, extract of Tagetes sp., green tea, blueberry fruit                | 0.46   | 0.7     | 7.5           | 6.4             |
| 14  | body                         | Mg, Fe, Cu, Cr, Mn, Se, Ca, P, I, vit: A, C, D, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP, H, ginseng | 1.09   | 2.1     | 10            | 10.8            |
| 15  | body                         | Cu, Cr, Mo, Mn, Se, I, vit: A, D, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP, lutein            | 0.22   | 0.6     | 10            | 7.5             |
| 16  | body                         | Mg, Fe, Se, Ca, I, vit: A, C, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP, H                    | 0.94   | 1.0     | 9.4           | 8.8             |
| 17  | hair, skin, nails            | Fe, vit: A, C, E, B1, B2, B6, H, horsetail and nettle extract, chicory inulin       | 0.42   | 2.7     | 3.6           | 3.2             |
| 18  | skin                         | extract of the herb of a tricolour violet                                          | 0.35   | 1.1     | 5             | 3.9             |
| 19  | hair, skin, nails            | vit: C, B1, H, extract of the horsetail and nettle                                  | 0.51   | 0.2     | 4.95          | 3.6             |
| 20  | eyes                         | Cu, Se, Mn, vit: C, E, B1, B2, B6, B12, PP, troxerutin, lutein, omega-3 fatty acids  | 0.84   | 1.1     | 10            | 10.2            |
| 21  | hair, skin, nails            | Fe, I, vit: A, C, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP, L-cysteine, β-carotene, horsetail extract | 0.97   | 0.8     | 2.25          | 2.2             |
| 22  | hair, skin, nails            | Cu, vit: B6, theanine, taurine, inositol, acetylcarnitine                           | 0.50   | 1.2     | 6             | 6.6             |
| 23  | hair, skin, nails            | Cu, I, vit: A, C, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP                                  | 0.95   | 2.5     | 7.3           | 7.7             |
| 24  | body                         | Mg, Fe, Cu, Mo, Mn, Ca, Se, I, vit: A, C, D, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP        | 0.92   | 0.9     | 15            | 12.7            |
| 25  | fresh breath                 | none                                                                                | 0.71   | 0.5     | 7             | 7.3             |
| 26  | body                         | Fe, I, vit: C, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP, routine, lutein                     | 0.53   | 1.7     | 10.6          | 10.2            |
| 27  | skin                         | vit: B6, PP, lactoferrin, dandelion root extract, green tea, violet herb             | 0.63   | 2.1     | 15            | 13.9            |
| 28  | immunity                     | Se, vit: C, rutoside, citrus biflavonoids                                         | 0.40   | 1.9     | 2             | 1.8             |
| 29  | immunity                     | Se, vit: C, rutoside, citrus biflavonoids                                         | 0.21   | 0.4     | 1             | 0.9             |
| 30  | hair, skin, nails            | Cu, Se, Mn, Si, I, vit: A, C, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP, H, horsetail and nettle extract | 0.76   | 0.8     | 5             | 2.1             |
| 31  | body                         | Mg, Cr, Mo, Se, Ca, P, K, vit: A, C, D, E, K, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP, lutein | 1.31   | 0.0     | 5             | 5.0             |
| 32  | eyes                         | Cu, vit: C, E, lutein, zeaxanthin, omega-3 acids                                   | 0.67   | 0.9     | 10            | 9.9             |
| 33  | anti-allergic                 | Ca, quercetin                                                                        | 4.56   | 0.2     | 5             | 8.1             |
| 34  | body                         | Mg, Fe, Cu, Se, Mn, I, vit: C, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP                        | 4.96   | 1.1     | 7.5           | 9.9             |
| 35  | body                         | Mg, Fe, Cu, Cr, Mo, Mn, Se, Ca, I, vit: A, C, D, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP, H | 4.36   | 1.2     | 10            | 9.5             |
| 36  | body                         | Mg, Fe, Cr, K, vit: B6, B12                                                         | 1.64   | 1.9     | 5             | 4.9             |
| 37  | eyes                         | Cu, Se, vit: E, lutein, zeaxanthin                                                 | 0.82   | 0.1     | 10            | 9.5             |
| 38  | eyes                         | Cr, vit: A, C, E, B2, lutein, zeaxanthin, anthocyanins, resveratrol                  | 0.41   | 2.9     | 5             | 4.0             |
| 39  | body weight                   | Cr, vit: B6, PP, inulin                                                             | 0.46   | 2.5     | 10            | 7.5             |
| 40  | pregnancy and lactation      | Mg, Fe, Cu, Mn, I, vit: A, C, D, E, B1, B2, B5, B6, B11, B12, PP, H                 | 0.80   | 1.2     | 15            | 15.6            |
The declared Zn content in the tested products was between 0.5 to 15 mg. For example, the zinc content in products recommended for improving eye-vision was 5 to 10 mg. The highest concentration of this element was in products recommended during pregnancy and lactation. Zn content of 15 mg occurred also in products for general support and antioxidative action. The lowest Zn content, 0.5 g, was present in the product based on the yeast extract enriched with minerals.

Table I shows the zinc content determined through our tests and also declared by the manufacturers. The determined zinc content varied between 0.5 to 15.6 mg. In 55% of the tested products, the determined Zn content was lower than the amount indicated on the package. Figure 1 illustrates the percentage deviation of Zn content found versus the amount declared by the manufacturers. The deviations between the declared and the determined zinc content were between 27.5%-61.4%.

Dietary supplements are a source of concentrated nutrients which counterbalance the deficits in the diet. In contrast to drugs, dietary supplements are not intended to treat diseases. They are also subject to a separate legal regulation [34, 39-41]. The literature on dietary supplements mainly refers to methods and techniques of preparation analysis [42-44]. Publications concerning composition most often refer to the content of toxic components, including metals, e.g. mercury [45-47].

The analysis of Zn content in the tested samples of supplementation products indicated that in most products [48, 49], the concentration of this element deviated from the amount declared by the manufacturer, which indicates that the amount of minerals supplied to the body deviates from the data on the package. Studies of other authors [37, 38, 50] also show the discrepancy between the declared content and the determined content. In the light of literature, also the excessive zinc supply may lead to pathological changes in the body [48].
these periods is very important. The dietary Zn intake for pregnant women in Poland is 10.5 mg/day, while zinc consumption from diet and supplements is 12.7 mg/day, as previously reported [5].

In the light of literature, the excessive zinc supply may also lead to pathological changes in the body. These are mainly disorders related to the absorption of other minerals (mainly copper and iron). The excessive and permanent zinc supplementation may lead to improper oligoelements homeostasis. Higher metal content may be also a carcinogenic factor [11, 31, 32].

In our study, all tested products did not exceed the safe quantity per day of 40 mg Zn [49]. It needs to be indicated as well that a health promoting or curative effect of a product is determined by dose, which is not defined for many products. The discrepancies that arise make that the same product may be a dietary supplement in some countries while in other countries it is registered as a drug [49].

Zn content determined in the tested products was higher than the declared amount by 2 to 61%. The standards allow for the upper tolerance limit of up to 50% of the content. Based on this assumption, almost all (except one) tested products were within the limit. However, the limit allowing for the increase of minerals content up to 50% combined with a different concentration of these ingredients than the declared one, may contribute to the fact that the dietary supplements may supply the body with very different doses of elements.

Qualifying dietary supplements as food products makes them available not only in the pharmacies but also in stores which undoubtedly increases their distribution. The wide availability of all products endorses their use in uncontrolled amounts and in various forms. The results of surveys indicate that the consumers very often use different products at the same time [51]. The important issue is the possible interactions of supplementation products taken together with the drugs [52].

The question is whether supplementing the standard with Zn products that exceed recommended dosages may produce an excess amount of zinc in the body. An excessive consumption of vitamins and minerals may affect the balance of other nutrients and cause side effects. Therefore, it is so important that the minerals are taken in specific doses and ratios. The daily dosage should allow for upper safe level for the nutrients based on generally accepted scientific data [49].

Incomplete analysis of authorized dietary supplements does not confirm the efficiency and safety of its use, therefore the consumers choice is on own responsibility.

Conclusions

The tests performed on zinc dietary supplements showed the differences between the determined and declared content in its composition.

In general, zinc content for all tested products was lower than the declared one. The differences were on average of 10%. The lack of studies on the dietary supplements in respect with the safety and the possibility of unwanted effects and interactions make that the consumers use them with risks.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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