



## No. 50 – Vitamins, Alcohol, and

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Title: **Vitamins, Alcohol, and ITP**

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Recently Shirley Watson was asked whether patients with ITP should supplement their diet with vitamin B12 and folic acid tables and reduce or eliminate alcohol. The source of these recommendations was [www.wikihow.com/Increase-Platelets](http://www.wikihow.com/Increase-Platelets) which is titled “How to increase platelets”. We were not familiar with WikiHow. We’ve learned that, like Wikipedia, it’s the product of everyone. Anyone who wants to can “create a new page and write about how to do something”. The recommendations in this WikiHow page are not only for patients with ITP, but for anyone with a low platelet count. They are presented as recommendations for “treating thrombocytopenia with lifestyle changes”. We don’t think that these WikiHow recommendations are appropriate for patients with ITP. Severe deficiencies of vitamin B12 or folic acid and excessive alcohol can cause low platelet counts. But these are extreme conditions that occur very rarely. Here are what we consider to be sensible recommendations.

First, vitamin B12. A severe deficiency of vitamin B12 is a condition known as “pernicious anemia”. It is caused by the absence of a factor secreted in the stomach that is required for the absorption of vitamin B12. One hundred years ago, when this condition was named “pernicious”, it was fatal. Not only were platelet counts low, red cells (therefore the name “anemia”) and white cells were also low. And not only were all blood counts low, but other tissues were also abnormal. Eighty years ago the cause was discovered to be vitamin B12 deficiency; vitamin B12 injections immediately correct all of the abnormalities. Related to our question, vitamin B12 deficiency caused by a poor diet is extremely rare – we have never seen this. Almost all foods (all animal products: meat, milk, cheese, eggs, everything) contain vitamin B12. Also the body stores of vitamin B12 are very large, large enough that if our diet contained no vitamin it would take many years to become deficient. Therefore ITP patients do not need vitamin B12 supplements.

Second, folic acid. A severe deficiency of folic acid can cause the same problems that occur with a severe deficiency of vitamin B12. The dietary source of folic acid is green, leafy vegetables, so it is more likely that a diet can be deficient in folic acid. Also the body stores of folic acid are limited; absence of folic acid from your diet can result in deficiency in just a couple months. Folic acid supplements are routinely prescribed during pregnancy, because the requirement for folic acid is increased. But normal people with a normal diet (this, of course, includes ITP patients) do not need folic acid supplements.

Finally, alcohol. Again the WikiHow recommendation is based on extreme situations, not on normal lifestyles. In people who have a severe alcohol habit, the extreme excess of alcohol can suppress bone marrow production of platelets. But this is rare. Also severe alcoholics have a poor diet since they get all of their calories from alcohol, so they are often deficient in folic acid, which also contributes to a low platelet count. But moderate alcohol consumption has no apparent health risk. Moderate alcohol consumption actually decreases the risk of cardiovascular disease. Therefore ITP patients do not need to avoid alcohol.

To summarize, our recommendation for ITP patients is to eat a healthy diet and don’t consume excessive alcohol. In fact, this sounds like the right thing for all of us.