
Safe Use of Dietary Supplements

Dietary supplements have gained in popularity during recent years and have grown into a multi-billion dollar industry. Most people take supplements for health-related reasons, from pain relief to preventing or curing cancer. As a consumer, you may wonder if the health claims on the product labels are really true and if they are safe to use. So.....

What Is A Dietary Supplement?

A dietary supplement is a product that contains one or more dietary ingredients (including vitamins, minerals, herbs, amino acids, enzymes, and other substances) or their components. It can be in pill, capsule, tablet, powder or liquid form. Since dietary supplements are not intended to treat, diagnose, prevent, or cure any disease, manufacturers may not legally make such claims.

How Are Dietary Supplements Regulated?

Dietary supplements are regulated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). However, they are regulated as foods rather than drugs. The companies who make dietary supplements do not need to prove that their product works, nor do they have to test for a safe dose. Dietary supplements are not analyzed by FDA, are not subject to the same strict standards of safety and effectiveness as drugs, and do not require FDA approval before going on sale. After a product reaches the market, FDA has the responsibility to take action only if the product turns out to be harmful. Because of limited regulation, the quality and strength of the products can vary greatly from one manufacturer to another.

To increase consumer protection, FDA now requires manufacturers to verify the identity, purity, strength, and composition of their products. Hopefully, the new rule will help to ensure that dietary supplements contain what their labels say and are free of contaminants.

What You Need to Know Before Using Dietary Supplements

Always check with your health care professional (doctor, pharmacist, nurse, or dietitian) before taking any supplements. This is especially important if you are pregnant or breastfeeding, are planning to have surgery, or have a chronic medical problem. Children and the elderly are no exceptions.

Keep in mind that some supplements may cause allergic reactions or have unwanted or unexpected side effects. Using them in combination with other supplements or medications, or substituting them in place of prescribed medications could lead to serious health problems such as kidney, liver, or heart failure, increased bleeding, blood pressure or blood sugar levels. Long-term use of some supplements has also been shown to increase the risk of certain cancers.

Be Safe and Smart

Before buying a dietary supplement, ask yourself these questions:
Do I really need it?

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A healthy diet containing plenty of colorful fresh fruits and vegetables, whole grains, low fat dairy products and lean protein is usually sufficient to meet most of our nutritional needs. In fact, taking large amounts of supplements may do more harm than good. For example, taking huge doses of certain vitamins and minerals can be toxic. Some supplements are expensive and may not necessarily provide you with the benefits that you expect.

Does it sound too good to be true? If your answer is YES, you should probably think twice before buying the product.

Beware of a product that:

- Claims to be “all natural and totally safe”
- Claims to prevent, treat or cure multiple diseases without any side effects
- Promises instant or fast results
- Uses personal testimonials or celebrities in their advertisements

Most dietary supplements can be safe when used properly. Never self diagnose and/or self treat any health condition.

Know that:

- Natural does not always mean safe
- Supplements may have serious side effects
- Supplements should not replace prescribed medications
- Supplements should not be a substitute for a healthful eating habit and lifestyle
- Health benefits of most dietary supplements are not conclusive

Always seek proper medical advice and learn how to safely maintain and achieve good health.

Where to Report a Problem

If you experience a serious side effect or illness from a dietary supplement, report this to your health care provider, or to the FDA:

1-800-332-1088

www.fda.gov/medwatch

Where to Get More Information

U.S. Food and Drug Administration
Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition

www.cfsan.fda.gov

National Institutes of Health
Office of Dietary Supplements

www.ods.od.nih.gov

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