10 top supplements

The supplement craze may have stalled in the face of negative press and questionable test results. But the fact is, some natural compounds do work. Here are 10 to look for.

By Timothy Gower

Throughout the 1990s, the dietary-supplement industry took off almost as dramatically as dot-coms. Each year during the last decade, sales of all-natural medicinal herbs and other health boosters spiked ever higher.

But America's love affair with these supplements is beginning to show signs of strain. According to industry journals, the overall growth rate of supplement sales has hit a plateau, and sales of such superstar herbs as ginseng and ginkgo biloba have plummeted. Consumer enthusiasm for these products may be waning because watchdog groups have found serious problems with the ingredients in some supplement brands. But the public's passion may have fizzled for a more basic reason: doubts about whether or not dietary supplements actually work. These pills, powders, and other potions aren't closely monitored by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, so companies can sell them whether or not there's proof they live up to their hype. Research suggests that many might not.

That's no reason to dismiss all supplements, though. We've reviewed the research, explored the claims, and sifted through the side effects to come up with this list of 10 natural compounds that offer real benefits. In this group, you'll find supplements that may help prevent or treat major causes of
pain such as osteoporosis, arthritis, and migraines—and even help combat such serious killers as heart disease. We’ve also developed a confidence scale, so you can see at a glance exactly how strong the proof is behind each pill (see the box below). That said, you still need to play it safe: Always talk to your physician before taking any supplement.

CONFIDENCE RATINGS

- Has shown promise in early clinical trials, but needs more study to verify its safety and efficacy
- Has undergone serious scrutiny, yet many doctors in this country remain skeptical
- Has an accepted role in mainstream medicine

CALCIUM
Rating: 🌟🌟🌟
The claim: Calcium builds stronger bones and helps prevent osteoporosis, which can lead to crippling fractures.
The evidence: Scientists know that calcium is critical for healthy bones; the recommended daily intake is 1,000 milligrams (1,200 milligrams for women over 50). A study in The New England Journal of Medicine found that taking 1,000 milligrams of supplemental calcium a day slowed bone loss in post-menopausal women by 43 percent.
The caveat: Exceeding the recommended daily intake could block the absorption of other minerals.

EVENING-PRIMROSE OIL
Rating: 🌟
The claim: Herbalists recommend supplements made from this plant for many inflammatory conditions, especially rheumatoid arthritis.
The evidence: Evening-primrose oil contains several essential fatty acids, including gammalinolenic acid, or GLA. In a few small studies, some people with rheumatoid arthritis who took supplements containing GLA had less joint pain, swelling, and stiffness. Evening-primrose oil probably can’t replace anti-inflammatory drugs, which are standard therapy for rheumatoid arthritis. But some arthritis sufferers who use the herb are able to reduce their drug dosage.
The caveat: Evening-primrose oil appears to be nontoxic, but the safety of using it for extended periods has not been studied. Side effects include nausea and headaches.

FEVERFEW
Rating: 🌟
The claim: Prevents migraine headaches, which afflict about 28 million Americans (75 percent of whom are women).
The evidence: British researchers have found that migraine

five supplements to avoid

SOME DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS HAVE NO PROVEN VALUE; others may be harmful. For either of these reasons, and sometimes both, these potions are best left on the shelf.

Bee pollen. There is no proof that these exotic-sounding pills increase physical vigor and energy, as is often claimed.

Bilberry. Extract of these berries supposedly improves night vision. But in a pair of studies published in the late 1990s, the men who took these supplements remained in the dark.

Ephedra. A review in The New England Journal of Medicine in 2000 found that this herb, widely used for losing weight and increasing energy, raises the risk of heart attacks and strokes. (To learn more, see "The Scoop on Ephedra," page 66, in the July/August issue.)

Kelp. There's no scientific evidence to support the use of seaweed-based pills and powders. And because of their potentially high iodine content, they could cause thyroid problems.

Shark cartilage. A book called Sharks Don't Get Cancer (Avery, 1992) promoted these supplements as a miracle cure. But sharks do get cancer, and there’s no evidence that these pills fight the disease.

Visit [here](#) for a list of additional supplements to avoid. Just click on "Magazine."
The most promising supplements may relieve pain as well as fight serious diseases. Sufferers who took a daily capsule containing the equivalent of two feverfew leaves (roughly 80 milligrams per capsule) had 24 percent fewer attacks than patients given a placebo. Several other small studies have found similar benefits. Lab research suggests that chemicals in feverfew thwart production of hormonelike molecules called prostaglandins, believed to be a factor in many migraine attacks. The caveats: Larger studies would clarify feverfew’s role in treating migraines. It doesn’t appear to diminish the duration of migraine attacks. Quitting this herb may cause rebound headaches, as well as nervousness, insomnia, and other symptoms. Feverfew may also interact with drugs used to prevent blood clotting and with iron supplements.

**FISH OIL**

*Rating: ⭐️ ⭐️

The claim: It reduces the risk of heart disease and eases symptoms related to some forms of arthritis and depression.

The evidence: One study found that people who eat fish at least once a week are half as likely to suffer sudden cardiac death. Fish oil appears to prevent blood clots and, at doses up to 6 grams per day, may also reduce levels of triglycerides, blood fats associated with an increased risk of heart disease. A few small studies suggest that taking fish-oil pills may allow patients with rheumatoid arthritis to decrease drug dosage. Preliminary research hints that the supplements may also help control bipolar disorder (manic depression).

The caveats: There’s little evidence that taking these supplements offers benefits you wouldn’t get from eating salmon or other fatty varieties of fish a few times a week. People who take blood-thinning drugs shouldn’t use fish-oil pills.

**FOLIC ACID**

*Rating: ⭐️

The claim: Taken before and during pregnancy, this B vitamin prevents birth defects that can result in diseases of the skull and spine, such as spina bifida.

The evidence: Two large studies published in the early 1990s found that women who took folic-acid supplements were up to 72 percent less likely to have babies with neural tube defects. Based on these studies, the U.S. Public Health Service recommends that women who may become pregnant should consume 400 micrograms of folic acid a day—preferably from foods such as chickpeas, spinach, and oranges but by supplement if necessary. Some evidence suggests that folic acid and other B vitamins could also reduce the risk of heart disease, but more study is needed.

The caveat: Very high doses of folic acid may mask a vitamin B-12 deficiency (see our B-12 story on page 86).

**GINGER**

*Rating: ⭐️

The claim: This spice is often taken in supplement form to prevent motion sickness and relieve nausea, particularly among pregnant women.

The evidence: A study published this year found that 90 percent of expectant mothers who took four 250-milligram capsules of ginger experienced less nausea and vomiting than pregnant women who took placebos. At least two studies suggest that taking ginger will reduce the risk of seasickness. In one, ginger was more effective than Dramamine.

The caveats: Other studies suggest that ginger may not prevent nausea and vomiting related to surgery and anesthesia. High doses might interfere with blood-thinning drugs such as warfarin, as well as medications that control blood sugar in diabetics. Some experts also question ginger’s effect on fetal development.

**GLUCOSAMINE AND CHONDOROTIN**

*Rating: ⭐️⭐️

The claim: These natural compounds (which are sometimes combined in one pill) are said to ease joint pain and stiffness caused by osteoarthritis, the most common form of arthritis.

The evidence: A scientific review for the National Institutes of Health analyzed 15 studies involving glucosamine and chondroitin—taken separately or together, in various dosages
**Workplace Wisdom**

"When criticizing another, the teacher always hopes to teach. That's it. The teacher never criticizes to make a point, to show off his wit, or to establish his own superiority." —from *What Would Buddha Do at Work? 101 Answers to Workplace Dilemmas* (Ulysses Press, 2001) by Franz Metcalf and B.J. Gallagher Hateley

**back in balance**

While we won't claim that a spritz of Seeking Balance's Chakra Balancing Blend ($20) on your skin will bring body and spirit into perfect harmony, we do think it's a pretty invigorating pick-me-up. The essences of rosemary, lavender, and juniper give this organic, water-based spray a refreshing scent. And each bottle contains seven tiny gems—one for each of your body's chakras, or energy centers—that you can string into a bracelet or necklace. To order, call 800-955-6445 or visit www.seekingbalance.com.

**NO SHELF SPACE REQUIRED**

For the facts on alternative-medicine topics ranging from acupuncture for you to homeopathy for your pet, check out www.healingpeople.com. Most helpful is the Web site's General Encyclopedia, a compilation of herbal interactions with prescription and over-the-counter medications; the history, uses, and dangers of a wide selection of herbs; and alternative approaches to common ailments.
(there’s no consensus on dosage yet). Although the NIH panel said some of the studies were flawed, the overall evidence suggests that these natural joint-pain relievers likely provide modest relief for osteoarthritis pain. A large NIH study is under way and is expected to wrap up in 2004.

The caveat: An arthritis sufferer may need to take glucosamine and/or chondroitin for several months before feeling any benefit.

MULTIVITAMINS
Rating: ✭✭✭

The claim: These pills safeguard health by providing the recommended daily dose of vitamins and minerals.

The evidence: Although a few surveys have found that people who pop multivitamins are no healthier than non-users, some preliminary studies have detected lower rates of colon cancer among women who use multivitamins. An ongoing study of more than 15,000 physicians should shed more light on the benefits of multivitamins, but its results won’t be known for several years. There’s no question, however, that taking a multivitamin each day increases blood levels of nutrients believed to fight various illnesses, including cancer and heart disease.

The caveats: Many multivitamins sold today are blended with herbs and other nonessential compounds that have not been well-studied and could be dangerous. Ignore label buzzwords such as “time-release” and “chelated,” which are meaningless.

NIACIN
Rating: ✭✭

The claim: This B vitamin lowers cholesterol and other risk factors for heart disease.

The evidence: In a 1994 study, high doses of niacin (up to 4.5 grams per day—more than 200 times the recommended daily intake) lowered LDL cholesterol (the “bad” kind) by 23 percent after six months, but the prescription drug lovastatin fared much better. Niacin, however, boosted HDL cholesterol (the “good” kind) more than four times higher than did lovastatin.

The caveats: Therapeutic doses of niacin can cause liver damage, which is why anyone taking these supplements must be monitored by a doctor. There is also some evidence that niacin may raise blood levels of an amino acid called homocysteine, which could actually increase heart-disease risk. A variety of health conditions, including diabetes, gout, and glaucoma, may be worsened by the use of this supplement, so check with your physician. Side effects include flushing, tingling, or a sensation of warmth that usually stop with continued use.

SAINT-JOHN’S-WORT
Rating: ✭✭

The claim: Although it has many purported uses, Saint-John’s-wort is best known as an herbal antidepressant.

The evidence: Two separate scientific reviews have determined that Saint-John’s-wort (typical dosage: 900 milligrams per day) seems to improve mood in people with mild to moderate depression. An NIH-sponsored study scheduled for completion in 2002 should show if it’s as effective as prescription antidepressants.

The caveats: Saint-John’s-wort does not appear to be effective in treating major depression, according to a widely publicized study in The Journal of the American Medical Association. Saint-John’s-wort may interfere with a long list of medications, including drugs used to thin blood, treat HIV, and prevent transplant rejections.