

Beneath the Label

what's in your supplement?

The profusion of dietary supplements that line store shelves has turned personal health care into a part-time job. There are supplements to ease depression and fight off airborne germs; tonics to fortify the male and female reproductive systems; homeopathic tinctures with alluring names made with exotic-sounding botanicals. Like chemists, we study the backs of bottles and add up the IUs, hoping to right whatever imbalance exists in our bodies, and with faith that the products we see before us are the real deal.

In this den of good health, the presence of suspect products, such as herbal supplements promising larger breasts, or “natural” fat-burning products, is a startling clash. Without scientific studies to back up these claims, it seems that this good-for-you industry has welcomed some questionable bedfellows.

“The vast majority of the supplement industry is responsible, and they are very careful to make products that are scientifically sound. Unfortunately, there are some companies that aren’t,” says Judy Blatman, vice president of communications for the Council for Responsible Nutrition (CFRN), a trade association that represents suppliers and manufacturers of dietary supplements and ingredients.

Legal loopholes

When the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA)



was signed into law in 1994, a “dietary supplement” was defined as a product taken by mouth with a “dietary ingredient,” such as vitamins, minerals, herbs, botanicals, amino acids or enzymes. Dietary supplements can be in the form of extracts, concentrates, tablets, capsules, soft gels, gel caps, liquids, powders or bars. This law placed the responsibility for the safety and purported benefits of the dietary supple-

ment squarely in the hands of the company. But there are no rules in place forcing manufacturers to establish efficacy, safety, standard dosage, side effects or interactions with medications and foods.

It is illegal to promote a dietary supplement as a treatment, prevention or cure for a specific disease or condition. But manufacturers can make health claims about products based on their own review and

interpretation of studies without authorization from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The FDA and Federal Trade Commission do regulate dietary-supplement advertising, which raises the most red flags. When questionable products come up, they will alert the public through press releases, as with incidents stemming from misuse of herbs such as kava and St. John's Wort. The FDA can remove a supplement from the market that has proven to be unsafe, as it did in early 2004 when it banned shipment of the popular weight-loss supplement ephedra (also known as ma huang), which has been linked to numerous deaths from heart attack, including the 2003 death of 23-year-old Steve Bechler, a prospective pitcher for the Baltimore Orioles.

It will also take action against companies that mislead consumers with unsubstantiated claims. In September 2003, the FDA seized Forticel and Forticel Mix from Jean's Greens in New York after determining the company was making unapproved medical claims for its products—including that they could cure diseases such as cancer—with no scientific evidence to back up these assertions.

But, as experts agree, with the U.S. dietary-supplement industry brimming at \$17.7 billion and growing, these federal agencies have a big job on their hands—and self-regulation on the part of manufacturers isn't guaranteed.

Consumer protection

Although trade associations like the CFRN try to encourage industry-wide standards, ultimately, when it comes to supplements, it's up to consumers to protect themselves.

Thanks to the Internet, books, health articles and in-store kiosks that help consumers research herbs and vitamins, learning about the science behind the products has become easier (see sidebar, "Get informed"). Don't rely on a company's internal studies or personal testimonials as a substitute for science, say industry experts. Reputable dietary-supplement companies are climbing above the rubble of nebulous claims and marketing ploys by contracting clinical studies to support the health benefits of their products. "The most important thing for consumers to know is brand loyalty. Go with supplement companies and sources that you know and trust," advises Blatman.

Turning to health-care providers, such as physicians, dietitians and pharmacists, may be helpful in making decisions about dietary supplements. Also, Blatman suggests that registered dietitians are in the prime position to offer nutrition counseling on the best ways to add supplements to the diet, and that supplement companies are turning to these health professionals as an important nutrition resource.

Meanwhile, efforts are being made to bring more science into the picture. The National Institutes of Health (NIH) has created an Office of Dietary Supplements to help educate consumers and health-care professionals on credible information about these products. And studies are underway to identify the active ingredients in herbs and understand how they affect the body.

With science on its side, the dietary-supplement industry hopes to regain its sunny reputation, and get the word out to consumers that supplements are a valuable—and safe—addition to a personal health-care plan.

"About two-thirds of the U.S. population is using dietary supplements," says Blatman. "Consumers are saying loud and clear, 'We want to use them, tell us how to safely.'"

—Sharon Palmer, R.D.

Get informed

Herbal, vitamin and mineral supplements can provide a valuable boost to our health, by filling in the gaps left by inadequate diet, environmental detriments or the stresses of life. But before you buy, get informed about which products are right for you, and which companies deserve your trust.

- Check out the product with your health-care provider, pharmacist or registered dietitian first. Some dietary supplements may interfere with health conditions, medications or may be inappropriate for pregnancy, breastfeeding, or prior to surgery.
- If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Watch out for miracle claims, such as "eat all you want and still lose weight." If an advertisement seems exaggerated or unrealistic, think twice.
- Keep tabs on your total. Too much of a good thing can sometimes be bad. Dietary supplements in addition to dietary intake can often exceed the Tolerable Upper Intake Level for nutrients, which may cause toxicity or interfere with the absorption of other nutrients. For many herbal products and botanicals, no guide exists for safe dosage.
- Watch out for supplements that claim a quick fix, or chase the latest study. Sound health advice usually considers a whole body of research.
- Do your homework. Read about herbs and supplements before you take them. Check out the NIH Office of Dietary Supplements database on scientific information at <http://ods.od.nih.gov/showpage.aspx?pageid=48>. The American Botanical Council (www.herbalgram.org) provides information on many supplements. Don't be afraid to ask the manufacturer for more information on products.

—Sharon Palmer, R.D.

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