

Are Dietary Supplements Safe?



What Is a Dietary Supplement?

Dietary supplements are substances you might use to add nutrients to your diet or to lower your risk of health problems, like osteoporosis or arthritis. Dietary supplements come in the form of pills, capsules, powders, gel tabs, extracts, or liquids. They might contain vitamins, minerals, fiber, amino acids, herbs or other plants, or enzymes. Sometimes, the ingredients in dietary supplements are added to foods, including drinks. A doctor's prescription is not needed to buy dietary supplements.

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Scientists are still working to answer this question. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) checks prescription medicines, such as antibiotics or blood pressure medicines, to make sure they are safe and do what they promise. The same is true for over-the-counter drugs like pain and cold medicines.

But the FDA does not consider dietary supplements to be medicines. The FDA does not watch over dietary supplements in the same way it does prescription medicines. The Federal Government does not regularly test what is in dietary supplements. So, just because you see a dietary supplement on a store shelf does not mean it is safe or that it even does what the label says it will or contains what the label says it contains.

If the FDA receives reports of possible problems with a supplement, it will issue warnings about products that are clearly unsafe. The FDA may also take these supplements off the market. The Federal Trade Commission looks into reports of ads that might misrepresent what dietary supplements do.

A few private groups, such as the U.S. Pharmacopeia (USP), NSF International, ConsumerLab.com, and the Natural Products Association (NPA), have their own "seals of approval" for dietary supplements. To get such a seal, products must be made by following good manufacturing procedures, must contain what is listed on the label, and must not have harmful levels of things that don't belong there, like lead.

What's Best for Me?

If you are thinking about using dietary supplements:

Learn. Find out as much as you can about any dietary supplement you might take. Talk to your doctor, your pharmacist, or a registered dietitian. A supplement that seemed to help your neighbor might not work for you. If you are reading fact sheets or checking websites, be aware of the source of the information. Could the writer or group profit from the sale of a particular supplement? For more information from the National Institute on Aging about choosing reliable health information websites, see For More Information.

Remember. Just because something is said to be "natural" doesn't also mean it is either safe or good for you. It could have side effects. It might make a medicine your doctor prescribed for you either weaker or stronger.

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Tell your doctor. He or she needs to know if you decide to go ahead and use a dietary supplement. Do not diagnose or treat your health condition without first checking with your doctor.

Buy wisely. Choose brands that your doctor, dietitian, or pharmacist says are trustworthy. Don't buy dietary supplements with ingredients you don't need. Don't assume that more of something that might be good for you is even better for you.

Check the science. Make sure any claim made about a dietary supplement is based on scientific proof. The company making the dietary supplement should be able to send you information on the safety and/or effectiveness of the ingredients in a product, which you can then discuss with your doctor. Remember that if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

What Can I Do to Stay Healthy?

Here's what one active older person does:

When she turned 60, Pearl decided she wanted to stay healthy and active as long as possible. She was careful about what she ate. She became more physically active. Now she takes a long, brisk walk 3 or 4 times a week. In bad weather, she joins the mall walkers at the local shopping mall. When it's nice outside, Pearl works in her garden. When she was younger, Pearl stopped smoking and started using a seatbelt. She's even learning how to use a computer to find healthy recipes. Last month, she danced at her granddaughter's wedding. Pearl is 84 years old.

Try following Pearl's example—stick to a healthy diet, be physically active, keep your mind active, don't smoke, see your doctor regularly, and, in most cases, only use dietary supplements suggested by your doctor or pharmacist.

Source: www.nia.nih.gov/HealthInformation.

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