About Supplements

Vitamins and herbal supplements are more popular now than ever and usage rates have skyrocketed in the past decade. All the health claims supplements make can leave consumers perplexed. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not regulate supplements, which is both good and bad. The bad part is there are no regulating standards or guarantee of quality or potency of supplements; such that some can claim an adequate dose of vitamin E and not contain any at all. The positive side of no FDA regulation is that you have more options as a consumer and prices remain relatively inexpensive. It is also important to note that manufacturers cannot put a patent on a supplement or vitamin, which leaves very little incentive for anyone to pay for long-term research studies. Pharmaceutical drugs can be patented so that is why there can be much more “scientific evidence” for medications. The first company to follow the FDA guidelines, the first to get the patents, thus the first to collect financial gains. What can be patented is what is called a “proprietary blend” which is usually seen on herbal supplements. Typically, it is a combination of herbs and vitamins that function together. You might see a “detox” or “liver cleanse” supplement with a proprietary blend of herbs.

Labels

It is important to discuss the label standards because that is what you will see as a consumer. It began in 1990 with the Nutrition Labeling Act whose purpose was to set the guidelines for labeling. In addition, in 1990, the United States Pharmacopeia (USP) published the first standards for multi-ingredient vitamin and mineral products. Next to follow was the FDA’s ANPR - Advanced Notice of Proposed Rule Making. The ANPR suggested that vitamins and minerals be limited to low multiples of the RDI’s and that some botanicals were inherently drugs, not supplements, and amino acids were food additives. This was rather ground breaking because supplements are not considered drugs as legal status. It forced both manufacturers and the FDA to define herbal supplements.

Brought about by consumer concern were the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA) in 1994. This set the standards used today. The DSHEA brought about the following regulations:

- Defined Dietary supplements as food not additives or drugs
- Put the burden of proof on the FDA
- Third-party literature may be used in connection with sales of supplements
- Labeling requirements
- Allows structure/function claims on labels
- Required manufacturer’s to use GMP’s (Good Manufacturing Practices) for potency, cleanliness, and stability
- Created the Office of Dietary Supplements and Commission on Dietary Supplement Labels

In regards to “structure/function” claims, the DSHEA allows free reign to make these claims as long as the companies:

- Notify the FDA within 30 days after using a new claim
- Print the following disclaimer on the label: “These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease”
Structure function claims are claims seen on labels for food or supplements that suggest a health benefit of the food or herb. For example, “improves memory”, “prevents wrinkles”, “helps you relax” are all claims that require no prior approval by the FDA. In 1999, The Consumer Lab was founded (CL) and today is the leading provider of independent test results and information aiding consumers in evaluating quality supplements. CL also serves as a watchdog over the supplement industry.

Currently, supplement labels must include:
- Manufacturer’s information: place of business, phone number, and address
- Serving size, amount per serving, and %DV
- Name of product
- List of ingredients
- Proprietary blend: total weight, compounds in descending order
- Quantity
- Directions for use
- Other ingredients (fillers, stabilizers, etc)

Also monitoring supplement claims is the NSF, a non-profit international agency that aims to protect public health and the environment by developing national standards for food and supplements while providing scientific research. The NSF label seen on supplements means it has met the four main components of the NSF Dietary Supplement Certification Program:

1) Verification that the contents of the supplement actually match what is printed on the label
2) Assurance that there are no ingredients present in the supplement that are not disclosed on the label
3) Assurance that there are no unacceptable levels of contaminants present in the supplement
4) Compliance with GMP (Good Manufacturing Practice)

Watch out for extras: not only can you check for allergens, but lots of fillers or binders also reduce your body’s ability to absorb the vitamin or herb. Common extras to avoid: food glaze, shellac, pharmaceutical glaze, food colorings, artificial flavoring, soybean oil, sugars, starches, yeast, wheat, and carnauba wax.

Consider the source: buying supplements at a chain grocery or drug store may not be the best idea. Chain stores are often too large to be in direct contact with supplement distributors. Your best bet is to buy from a health food store or health care provider; they usually can provide references and are often much more familiar with their products. Doesn’t mean you need to break the bank either, you can find a good supplement somewhere between the most and least expensive.

Check the dates: Make sure the bottle has a “best-by” date clearly labeled. Without this, there is no guaranteed potency by the time of consumption.

Choose glass: whenever possible, choose dark glass supplement bottles because they provide the best barrier to sunlight and moisture ensuring maximum potency and freshness.

Look for third-party evaluations: Look for at least one (or more) of these ConsumerLab, NSF, NNFA (National Nutritional Foods Association) or USP symbols on supplements. These symbols indicate that a third party (not the makers of the
supplement) has evaluated the supplement for potency, quality, and good manufacturing procedures.

www.consumerlab.com

www.nsf.org ★Read Labels: Here are a few things to look for on supplement labels:

★ Call the company: As noted, all manufacturers must list their phone number on the label. You can call them with any questions you may have about a product or the company itself. If you cannot get through, or the manufacturer is unwilling or unable to answer your questions, it is probably not a reliable company.