



# THE PLAIN DEALER

## NUTRI-NEWS

### Supplement safety loosely regulated

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In my last three columns, I've reviewed the evidence for safety and effectiveness of using dietary supplements for weight loss. Today, let's look at dietary supplement regulations - and what consumers can do to make safer choices.

Dietary supplements are not as stringently regulated as pharmaceuticals. Under the Dietary Supplements Health and Education Act, or DSHEA, of 1994, supplement manufacturers are not required to prove their products are safe and effective before marketing.

"We don't evaluate safety," says Kim Rawlings, a Food and Drug Administration spokeswoman. "The manufacturer is responsible. Once a product is on the market, we have authority to take action regarding the labeling, or if there is an unreasonable or significant risk to the public."

For example, ephedra was removed from the market following reports of heart attack, stroke and deaths associated with its use.

This is a matter of concern to many who support responsible use of dietary supplements. David Grotto of Chicago worked in the natural foods industry for 25 years before becoming a dietitian.

"I was involved in lobbying for [DSHEA] because there was concern that access would be limited," he says. "The downside is that the burden of proof is with the government to show that there is harm."

Dietary supplement manufacturers are required to label their products accurately, but are not required to prove it through third-party analysis. So, how would the FDA learn of a labeling problem?

"It can come to us in several ways," says Rawlings. "It can be through consumer complaints, based on observation, or if someone in the industry files a complaint. Once we learn of it, we follow up."

As a result, Grotto says, "It's a roll of the dice as to whether what's on the label is what's in the bottle." Manufacturers who use standardized products and good manufacturing practices may be at a cost disadvantage.

Dr. Robert Bonakdar is a physician at Scripps Center for Integrative Medicine. As an integrated-medicine provider, Bonakdar sees the need for more regulation.

"We need to even the playing field, and fully enable the DSHEA," Bonakdar says. "It's important for manufacturers to have mandatory reporting of ill effects. Good manufacturers do that voluntarily."

#### Get savvy about supplements

If you choose to use supplements, you'll need to educate yourself. Here are some suggestions from experts for navigating the supplement minefield.

When considering a dietary supplement, ask the manufacturer for verification of the ingredients. Smart

consumers will make sure they feel comfortable before becoming part of a large-scale experiment, says Bonakdar.

Stick with companies that have been around a while and have a lot at stake. Larger companies have the resources to assure quality. There are good companies out there, suggests David Grotto of Nutrition Housecalls in Chicago.

Be cautious until you see proof that things do what they say they'll do. Reputable companies provide proof that their products work before marketing, says Trevor Gorin, spokesman for Unilever UK.

Ask the company to provide evidence of third-party independent verification of ingredients, suggests Mark Blumenthal, president of the American Botanical Council.

Finally, and most important, talk to your health-care provider. In a survey by the AARP, fewer than half of respondents discussed use of dietary supplements with their physicians. Many don't think it's important to tell their doctors, or fear a negative response.

That might have been the situation in the past, but things are improving. Scripps Center sponsors an annual Natural Supplements Conference, targeted at physicians and other health care providers, and attendance is growing each year.

"Eighty percent of practitioners feel uncomfortable speaking about complementary and alternative medicine because they're unfamiliar with it," says Bonakdar. "Physicians won't know they need to know about these things if patients don't ask." He suggests that if your doctor can't help, you should get others involved who can, such as a pharmacist or dietitian.

Bonakdar, Blumenthal and Grotto agree that supplements are not the long-term answer to the nation's obesity problem. "It's a reflection of our culture that we want to find a magic bullet," says Grotto.

"We do not believe that people should use dietary supplements as a primary tool for weight loss," says Blumenthal. "It should be an integrated lifestyle modification involving exercise and diet."

Cinda Williams Chima is a registered dietitian on the faculty of University of Akron. Her column runs on alternating weeks in Taste. E-mail nutrition and weight-control questions, labeled "Nutri-News," to [food@plaind.com](mailto:food@plaind.com)

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