

How to Evaluate Supplements

By ELLEN COLEMAN, M.P.H., M.A., R.D.

Nutrition consultant for the LA Lakers and The Sports Clinic (Riverside, CA)

Many athletes take dietary supplements, including vitamins, minerals, amino acids, herbs and others, to improve their performance and health. But caution is needed! Unlike medications, dietary supplements do not have to be approved by the Food and Drug Administration for safety or effectiveness.

Dietary supplements are not standardized, so there is no assurance of product potency (strength) or purity. Some manufacturers may have poor quality control where the amount of an active ingredient may differ from the amount listed. Some supplements have been shown to contain contaminants or dangerous levels of active ingredients leading to injury or death.

Just because a product claims that it contains "natural" ingredients does not always mean that it is safe.

Banned Substance Alert

Some dietary supplements may contain ingredients, such as androstenedione and ephedrine, that can produce positive tests for banned substances. Athletes may not realize that a product contains a banned ingredient because an unfamiliar name for the ingredient is used or the ingredient is not declared on the supplement label.

At the very least, the unwitting use of banned products by an athlete may result in a doping suspension.

Choosing a Supplement

Although there are no guarantees, select dietary supplements with the following:

- ✓ **Carry USP (United States Pharmacopeia) on the label.** USP means that the supplement passes tests for dissolution (how well it dissolves), disintegration, potency and purity. The manufacturer should also be able to demonstrate that the product passes tests for content potency, purity and uniformity.

- ✓ **Made by nationally known food and drug manufacturers.** Reputable manufacturers follow strict quality control procedures. If the company does not answer questions or address complaints, do not use their product.
- ✓ **Supported by research.** Reputable companies should provide research from peer-reviewed journals to support claims.
- ✓ **Accurate and appropriate claims.** If statements are unclear or the label makes preposterous claims, it is unlikely the company follows good quality control procedures. If the claims sound too good to be true, be wary.

Talk with a doctor or pharmacist about dietary supplements. These products may interact with prescription and over-the-counter medications as well as other supplements and cause potentially serious adverse effects. Read the product label, follow all directions, and heed warnings. Report any harmful effect to a physician and the Food and Drug Administration MedWatch.