



Patient Resources

Dietary Supplements FAQs

What are dietary supplements?

Dietary supplements include, but are not limited to, vitamins, minerals, herbs and botanicals, amino acids, and enzymes. Supplements can come in the form of tablets, capsules, softgels, gelcaps, powders and liquids.

What are the benefits of dietary supplements?

Individuals that are unable to get adequate nutrients from their diet for medical reasons or personal preference often use supplements to complement their diet. It is important to note that while taking supplements may be recommended for some, obtaining nutrients from a variety of whole food sources is highly encouraged to support overall health.

Are there risks in taking supplements?

Yes; many supplements contain active ingredients that can have a strong effect on the body. This could make them unsafe in certain situations and cause harm to your health. For example, the following may lead to harmful – even life-threatening – consequences:

- Combining supplements
- Using supplements with medicines (prescription or over-the-counter)
- Substituting supplements for prescription medicines
- Taking too much of some supplements such as vitamin A, vitamin D or iron.
- Some supplements may have unwanted effects before, during and after surgery.

If you are concerned about the risks of taking a supplement, talk with your doctor.

Are dietary supplements effective?

Scientific evidence shows that some dietary supplements can be beneficial, but many need to be studied further to determine their value and effectiveness. A few supplements that have been proven to be beneficial to overall health include:

- Calcium and vitamin D are important for keeping bones strong and reducing bone loss;
- Folic acid decreases the risk of certain birth defects; and
- Omega-3 fatty acids from fish oils may help some people with heart disease.

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Adapted from National Institutes of Health: Office of Dietary Supplements
& the Food and Drug Administration

Who is responsible for the safety of dietary supplements?

Although supplements are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), manufacturers of supplements are held to a different set of standards than food and pharmaceutical medicines. These standards are known as Good Manufacturing Practices (GMPs). GMPs are designed to help ensure the identity, purity, strength, and composition of the product. *The FDA does not determine if supplements are effective before they are marketed*, but the FDA does inspect manufacturing facilities every so often.

If a serious problem associated with a dietary supplement occurs, manufacturers must report it to FDA as an adverse event. FDA can take dietary supplements off the market if they are found to be unsafe or if the claims on the products are false and misleading.

You can also notify the FDA if the use of a dietary supplement caused you or a family member to have a serious reaction or illness (even if you are not certain that the product was the cause or you did not visit a doctor or clinic) by following these steps:

1. Stop using the product.
2. Contact your healthcare provider to find out how to take care of the problem.
3. Report problems to FDA in either of these ways:
 - Contact the Consumer Complaint Coordinator for SC: 404-253-1169
 - File a safety report online through the Safety Reporting Portal at www.safetyreporting.hhs.gov/

How can I find out more about the dietary supplement I am taking?

Dietary supplement labels must include the name and location information for the manufacturer or distributor. You may check with the manufacturer or distributor about

- Information to support the claims of the product
- Information on the safety and effectiveness of the ingredients in the product.

How can I be a smart supplement shopper?

- When searching for supplements on the internet, use noncommercial sites (e.g. NIH, FDA, USDA) rather than doing blind searches.
- Watch out for false statements like “works better than [a prescription drug],” “totally safe,” or has “no side effects.”
- Be aware that the term *natural* doesn’t always mean *safe*.
- Ask your healthcare provider for help in distinguishing between reliable and questionable information.
- Always remember – safety first!