

Play it Safe with Supplements

Knowing which supplements to take—and how—is essential.



Don't let headlines about dietary supplements being harmful scare you away from taking them. "With proper use, high-quality herbs and dietary supplements are safe to use, with extremely low rates of reported adverse reactions," says Jennifer Brusewitz, N.D., medicinary development supervisor at the National College of Natural Medicine in Portland, Oregon.

Supplement quality in the United States has improved significantly since the FDA implemented Current Good Manufacturing Practices (CGMPs) in 2007. "CGMPs assure a product's quality by addressing production processes and records, lab operations, packaging and labeling," Brusewitz says.

CGMPs ensure properly labeled, unadulterated supplements, but manufacturers must address ingredient safety under the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act. "The FDA doesn't approve supplements or their ingredients before they are marketed and sold to the consumer, unlike pharmaceuticals," says Brusewitz. "Consumers can contact manufacturers directly to inquire into the quality of their products by requesting peer-reviewed documents, third-party testing and adverse-event reports." For an annual \$33 fee, ConsumerLab.com provides its independent tests, quality ratings and product comparisons.

Knowing which supplements to take—and how—is as important as their quality. Sipping a cup of chamomile tea without a health practitioner's advice is fine, but it's best to consult a naturopathic physician or master herbalist, who can recommend high-quality products at the proper dosage, before you start a supplement regimen.

Working with an expert is especially important if you have a health condition or take prescription medication, as supplements can interact with drugs. "Some herbs and supplements, especially when taken long-term, can affect how the liver metabolizes pharmaceuticals, potentially increasing or decreasing their potency," Brusewitz says.

Shop Wisely

Look for these third-party certifications when buying supplements.

National Sanitation Foundation (NSF) tests and verifies the identity and quantity of ingredients declared on labels. nsf.org

United States Pharmacopeia (USP) sets standards for quality, identity, purity and strength of supplements, medicines and food ingredients. usp.org

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