



Dietary Supplements

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Are the supplements you are taking doing any good? Are the necessary for your health? Are they doing any

harm? It can be difficult to answer these questions because of the claims made about certain products, unsupported anecdotal evidence and testimonials. It is also made difficult because there are few checks on claims of efficacy, or even contents.

Fortunately, in Canada, we do have some regulation and testing that can lead to approval. But what is in place and what is needed are not quite the same.

Dietary supplements are, by definition, additions to a diet that are not food, but are taken by mouth. They can be capsules, tablets, powder and so on. A supplement can contain a vitamin, mineral, herb, hormone, plant extract... or practically anything. They are called a supplement because they are supposed to provide something diet does not supply in sufficient quantity.

When evaluating supplements, or just learning about them, we come across some dubious 'facts'. First is the claim of what is included among the ingredients. What is in the product is not always what the label says. There may be more or less of the ingredients, or even ingredients not listed. Another belief is that if it says 'natural' it must be safe. Good idea, but strychnine is natural, too and you would not want to ingest it. Another fallacy when it comes to vitamins, herbs, minerals and other supplements is that if a little is good, more will be better.

Supplements can be very 'drug-like' but are not as carefully tested for efficacy or harmful side effects. In fact, they are not that closely regulated, if at all. There

are risks inherent in taking dietary supplements, just as with any drug.

Some supplements have been associated with serious, even fatal, side effects: kava with liver failure; aristolochic acid with kidney failure. Some supplements have adverse effects just as prescription drugs may because they contain the same drug. For example, red yeast rice supplements claim to lower cholesterol actually contain a statin drug.

Moreover, supplements can interact with each other or with other medications, affecting the drug's potency or its side effects. Talk to your doctor or pharmacist about all the drugs and supplements you are taking. They can help catch interactions that harm your health.

Canada is moderately good at testing and regulating supplements, but there are also concerns. The Natural Health Product Regulations introduced in Canada in 2004 do some good. They initiated a process of licensing for natural health products. Products that have been sufficiently evaluated and that meet regulations are issued with an eight-digit Natural Product

Number (NPN) or Homeopathic Medicine Number (DIN-HM). But because of the volume of products not yet certified, many are allowed to sell un-

der an exemption number. These products have had an initial assessment, but have not yet been tested.

Even with certification buyers should be wary of making decisions based on only anecdotal evidence, especially when it comes from the Internet. And if a website tells you doctors are lying because they don't want you to know about "this" miracle cure, it's a safe bet that the product is quackery.

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