



HOW TO SAFELY CHOOSE SUPPLEMENTS

As the name implies, these are products that aim to 'supplement' the diet with nutrients that may be missing. Examples include vitamins, minerals, amino acids, and enzymes. They are available in a variety of forms including capsules, tablets, powders, liquids, sprays, gummies. Herbal supplements are those made from plants, algae, fungi and example products include teas, extracts, tablets, or capsules. It can be easy to get drawn into all the promised benefits especially when you are feeling vulnerable and desperate for help. In the right context, certain supplements can be an effective way of topping up or replacing nutrients.

How do we know which ones are effective?

With thousands of products available from many different manufacturers, it is hard to know. The answer is, you probably won't know until you try. Even with prescribed medicines, what works for one person might not for someone else. Every person is unique.

However, before buying any, do your research to make sure they are safe and worth the cost.

Tips to make safe decisions for buying supplements.

- **Cost effective**

Ask yourself, is it necessary and is it worth the cost? - There are situations where there are increased nutritional needs or deficiencies, and here supplements may be utilised to 'top up' or 'replace' low levels. However, many nutrients can be obtained through a varied and balanced diet. The British Nutrition Foundation has produced an 'Eat Well Guide' booklet outlining dietary sources of nutrients (www.nutrition.org.uk).

- **Safety**

Though most supplements are considered 'natural' this does not mean they are safe. Unlike prescription and 'over the counter' medications, the law does not require the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) to approve safety and effectiveness of dietary supplements. So, how can you be reassured...Buy them from a reputable known source such as a local pharmacy or supermarket, as they are most likely to have undergone quality checks. Check you recognise all the ingredients? If not, find out what they are. Some supplements contain ingredients or contaminants that may interact with your existing medications or medical conditions. Your local pharmacy may also be able to check this for you.

Check the products have batch number and expiry date. These help a company trace a specific product batch if any issues arise and is a way for companies to alert consumers and hold themselves accountable to rectify any issues.

- **Effectiveness**

-Has the promoted health claim been proven? For example, an herbal remedy may be advertised as 'reducing hot flushes' but have those individual ingredients been proven in proper medical trials to provide these health benefits. Be aware of these false claims- no dietary supplement can lawfully claim to diagnose, cure, treat or prevent a disease. For example, 'cures bladder damage'- If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

- Is the promoted ingredient the main star of the show? - For example, a supplement may be advertised and sold as collagen but if the supplement only contains a small percentage of collagen and is bulked up with other unknown ingredients, is it questionable whether the amount is enough to provide benefit

- Is the dose of the proclaimed nutrient in line with medical guidance? For example, a supplement may contain vitamin D to 'help with bone health' but if the dose is less than the medical recommended daily amount proven to help with said condition, then it will be inadequate in proving its benefit. AND vice versa, does the supplement contain too much of the vitamin, potentiating a risk of overdosing/ toxicity.

Resources

The National Institutes of Health that holds 'Dietary Supplement Factsheets' with useful evidence-based information such as composition, benefits and potential risks, dietary sources, the recommended daily dose, and medication interaction.

The British Dietician Association (BDA) explains which patient groups might benefit from supplements and how to choose the right product.

