

Health supplements: More style than substance?

BY DR SHILPA McQUILLAN

I WAS scrolling through social media one day and up popped an advert for menopause supplements. Usually, I scroll straight past these things but it caught my eye, claiming: UK's No 1 bestselling menopause treatment; No need to wait for a GP consultation; 99

per cent effective; Get back to feeling yourself; Award-winning weight loss capsules; Expert treatment for anxiety and sleep.

"How did they know? These were all me.

"And it didn't stop

there: 'We also recommend these products', 'People who bought these items also bought... hair supplements, skin boosters....' The words just kept resonating.

"I was desperate, my marriage was on the brink and this could be just the stuff to get back my confidence, so I clicked and before I could think straight, I had spent £500 on my credit card.

"Fast forward six months. Did any of them work? Not really. The honest truth is I just don't know but I don't want to stop in case there's

'As the name implies, these are products that aim to supplement the diet with nutrients that may be missing'



a chance I'll suddenly notice a dramatic difference.”

This is, sadly, a true story of a patient of mine who wanted me to share her experience of buying 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 and gummies.

Herbal supplements made from plants, algae and fungi come in the form of teas, extracts, tablets and 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.

But 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. Here are my tips to help you make safe decisions about your use of supplements and avoid just falling for clever advertising.

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).

‘It can be easy to get drawn into all the promised benefits, especially when you are feeling vulnerable and desperate for help’

SAFETY

Though most supplements are considered to be “natural” this does not mean they are safe. Unlike prescription and over the counter medications, the law does not require the 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 pharmacy or supermarket, as they are most likely to have undergone quality checks.

Do 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 be able to check this for you.

Check the products have a batch number and expiry date.

Cont'd





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, a herbal remedy may be advertised as “reduces 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, it is 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.

Vice versa, does the supplement contain too much of the vitamin, increasing the risk of overdosing/ toxicity?

There are many resources that may help guide your decision as to whether a supplement and its individual nutrients are

likely to be safe and effective. One example is 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 explains which patient groups might benefit from supplements and how to choose the right product.

Hopefully, armed with the above, you can will

be in a better position to make informed decisions about your health supplements.

However, if you are ever in doubt, always consult your healthcare professionals.

‘How do we know which ones are effective? With thousands of products available from many different manufacturers, it is hard to know’

Dr Shilpa McQuillan, from Emmer Green, leads the Berkshire Menopause Clinic in Henley. For more information, email info@berkshiremenopauseclinic.com or visit www.berkshiremenopauseclinic.com

Do you have a story you would like featured in Henley Life?
Contact Amanda Stewart
amandastewart@henleylife.co.uk