

What to Look for in a Supplement

Buying supplements used to be as easy as walking into the health food store and asking for some Vitamin C or a multi-vitamin. However, in the last decades, the natural health movement has exploded and now the average person is confronted with more choices than ever before. While this is good, it can also be very confusing since not all supplements are created equally. So, how do you identify which product is safest and most effective for you?

What is REALLY Important?

Whether you are purchasing supplement products to support your health or treat a chronic disease, here are a few key things to consider before you buy.

1. INGREDIENTS: there are basically four kinds of supplements on the market – pure chemical isolates (amino acids, vitamins, minerals), impure chemical isolates, herbs, and whole food.

- **Isolates** are synthetically engineered in a lab to resemble real nutrients. They are supplements that offer only one isolated nutrient (ex. Vit.B, Vit.C, Vit.D). They have the same chemical and molecular structure to herbal/whole food vitamins, but they're missing the complex nutritional benefits of natural ingredients.

- **Herbs and whole food supplements** come from nature. The nutrients come from natural ingredients you are familiar with (ex. oregano, ginseng, echinacea, carrots, beets, spinach) that your body can easily convert and use. When used in supplements, it is important that they are organically farmed, picked at the peak of ripeness, and fresh.

***Key:** choose a whole foods-based supplement. The body can recognize and use the real ingredients to greater advantage than a synthetic/chemical supplement.*

2. EXCIPIENTS: excipients are the inactive ingredients in a supplement – the fillers, binders, lubricants, glues, coatings, sugars, etc. that are added during the encapsulating process to make production of the supplement easier. They are the “other” or “non-medicinal ingredients” you will see listed on the product label. Here are some common examples of additives:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carmel colour • Cellulose Starch • Corn Starch • Crosscarmellose • Dicalcium Phosphate • FD&C red #33, yellow #5 • Hydroxypropyl Glycol • Lactose 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Magnesium Stearate • Maltodextrin • Methacrylic Copolymer • Methylparaben • Microcrystalline Cellulose • natural flavours • Palmitic Acid • pharmaceutical glaze 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Polyethylene glycol 3350 • Polysorbate 80 • Polyvinylpyrrolidone • Shellac • Silicon Dioxide • Sodium Acetate • Sodium Benzoate • Sodium Lauryl Sulfate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sodium Metabisulfite • Stearate • Stearic Acid • Talc • Titanium Dioxide • Triethyl Citrate
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While excipients can be important in achieving consistent dosage, evenly distributing the nutrients throughout the capsule/tablet, maintaining the integrity of the active ingredients, boosting tablet disintegration, and making sure that the active ingredients release properly into the body over time, not all excipients are the same. Many lesser companies use excipients to cut costs and increase production which ultimately result in poor quality supplements that have little, if any, therapeutic effect. Studies are finding that many commonly-used excipients register some level of toxicity and are potentially allergenic. This can affect how the body absorbs and uses the nutrients, and can also suppress the immune system.

***Key:** To minimize, avoid supplements in “tablet” form and pharmaceutical drugs. If possible, choose “excipient-free” products or ones with vegan-based excipients. A reputable supplement company will be able to account for the quality and source of all of their ingredients.*

3. **FORM:** supplements come in many different forms (capsules, caplets, softgels, tablets, powder, or liquid). Certain forms are easier to absorb than others, depending on the number and types of excipients used in the encapsulating process and on the health of an individual's digestive tract.

Key: *look for solvent-free vegetable capsules or vegetable-source gelatin capsules, powders or liquids. They are safer and easier to digest.*

4. **DOSING:** how much of a supplement should you be taking? Not all supplements will contain adequate amounts of the necessary ingredient to have a marked, "therapeutic" effect. However, just as taking too little is not helpful, neither is taking too much. While it seems logical that taking higher than the recommended dose of a supplement would make more of a therapeutic impact on your health, it may also have significant negative repercussions.

Key: *dosing requirements will vary from person to person and case to case. Discuss adequate dosing levels with a knowledgeable healthcare professional who can guide you.*

5. **PRICE:** Everybody likes saving money, but with supplements (as with many other things), it's important to remember that *you get what you pay for*. (Note: this is not to say that a higher price is a definite indicator of quality, but if the price seems to be too good to be true, you might want to ask why.) True quality will always cost money, and while it may seem expensive when you're standing in the store comparing price tags, the long-term benefits of a quality, whole foods-based product will save you in the future. Your body will thank you.

Key: *Don't let price be the deciding factor. Give more importance to what you're getting inside the bottle.*

6. **REPUTABLE MANUFACTURER:** A reputable company will create supplements based on solid research, buy the best raw ingredients, and pay independent labs to test their products for authenticity. However, most companies do not manufacture their own products, relying on contract manufacturers to make their supplements. (If a product label says "distributed by" or "manufactured for", it was not made by the company whose name appears on the label.)

Therefore, it is not inappropriate to research a company's website or to contact a supplement manufacturer to ask for verification of quality. Some questions to ask:

- what certifications does the company have for good manufacturing practices?
- does the company perform onsite and independent (i.e. third party) lab testing of their products? If so, are the labs also tested?
- can the company provide certificates of analyses for the following:
 - raw material purity, potency, and authenticity
 - that the product label matches the product content

Reading a Label:

Quality products will always have this information on the label:

1. The company's name
2. An identity statement – what is in the bottle (ex. multivitamin, ginseng, fish oil, B complex...)
3. Form and quantity – does the bottle contain capsules, tablets, powder, liquid...? How much/many in each bottle?
4. Serving Size – how much of the product to take at a time
5. Ingredients – what is in the product (in descending order of predominance, including "other" ingredients)
6. Amount of ingredient in each serving size
7. Potential allergy warnings
8. Manufacturer/distributor info – this is who to contact for more product information
9. Recommended dosage

10. Expiration date (not shown in photo) – quality supplements will not go “bad”, but they will decrease in potency past the expiration date
11. Lot number (not shown in photo) – identifies the entire history of the product from manufacturing through to distribution



Final Things to Remember:

- it takes about 4-6 weeks for your body to really start feeling the difference the supplements are making
- taking a supplement on its own will *not* bring optimal health. However, lifestyle, diet, and mental/emotional changes, together with quality supplements, can radically transform your life
- don't be fooled by flashy claims or “miracle” cures
- there is no substitute for good quality
- most Naturopathic clinics carry higher-quality, professional line products than what is commonly found in the market place
- remember that the final decision is yours

When choosing a nutritional supplement, it is important to keep all the above-mentioned points in mind. However, in the end, it boils down to purchasing the best quality supplements that will have a positive effect on your overall well-being at a price that you, as an individual, can afford.

It is always helpful to consult with a trained and knowledgeable healthcare professional such as a naturopathic doctor when choosing your supplements. Their aim is to provide you with the best, most personalized route for you to reach your highest health.