**Are Dietary Supplements Necessary for My Health?**

*6 things to know about dietary supplements before taking them*

Walk down the vitamin and mineral aisle of your local drugstore. You’ll see rows of capsules, liquids and powders listed as dietary supplements. Their labels claim they can help improve your health and well-being. But are dietary supplements necessary for your health?

It depends. Supplements contain nutrients but they cannot treat or cure disease. Some can be beneficial to your health and for managing some health conditions. But some can put you at risk if you take too many, or if you mix them with medication.

“Not everyone needs supplements. But if you're thinking of taking them, do your homework,” says [Immanuel Hausig, DO](https://www.scripps.org/physicians/8525-immanuel-hausig-do), a [family medicine physician](https://www.scripps.org/services/primary-care/family-medicine) at [Scripps Coastal Medical Center](https://www.scripps.org/medical-groups/scripps-coastal-medical-center) Carlsbad. “Learn how safe and effective they are first.”

The supplement industry is a $40 billion industry and growing. There are thousands of dietary supplements available on store shelves ready for purchase without a prescription. “Which is why you want to be cautious,” says Dr. Hausig.

With so many choices, it’s important to know how to read product labels and claims before buying. And if you want to read beyond the label, it's important to know where to get reliable information.

“You can check with your health care provider,” Dr. Hausig says. “Your doctor can tell you what conditions supplements can help with and which ones, if any, are right for you.”

Here are six facts about supplements to consider before taking them:

1. Dietary supplements are not regulated like drugs

The US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates dietary supplements. But it does not regulate them as drugs that can be used to treat or cure a disease. They are regulated as foods, but not conventional foods.

The FDA does not approve safety or effectiveness of dietary supplements before they go to market. It leaves that up to the makers of the supplements. The FDA can remove any supplement product from the market if it’s found not to be safe. It can also take action if claims on the products are false or misleading.

2. Dietary supplement makers can make limited health claims

Supplement makers by law cannot claim their product treats or cures a disease or health condition. Only an FDA-approved drug can make such a claim.

However, they can make health claims on how a nutrient or ingredient can help reduce the risk of a disease or health condition. They can claim, for example:

* Getting enough calcium as part of a healthy diet and lifestyle can reduce the risk of osteoporosis
* Omega-3 fatty acids from fish oils might help some people with heart disease.

There are two types of health claims that can be found on labels, qualified and authorized. Authorized claims have been reviewed by the FDA and have significant scientific agreement. Qualified claims have scientific evidence in support but not significant scientific agreement and must be accompanied by a disclaimer.

3. Supplement makers can make claims about effects on body structure and function

In addition to health claims, supplement makers can make structure-function claims. These are claims on how a nutrient or a dietary ingredient affects the structure or function of the human body.

Supplement makers can say, for example:

* Calcium builds strong bones
* Fiber maintains bowel regularity
* Antioxidants maintain cell integrity

4. Supplements can’t replace a healthy, balanced diet

Supplements should not be a substitute for a healthy, balanced diet. Make sure you’re eating a variety of foods and that they are healthy foods.

“If you’re thinking of taking a dietary supplement, ask yourself if you can get these nutrients from the foods you’re eating,” Dr. Hausig says. “Most of the time you can. You can even find fortified foods that carry extra nutrients at your grocery store.”

But not everybody eats as well as they should. In other cases, people have nutritional deficiencies for health or other reasons. Supplements can be used to fill in nutritional gaps in many instances. Folic acid, for example, decreases the risk of certain birth defects.

Dr. Hausig cautions not to take more supplements than you need because of the risk of side effects. Taking too much vitamin A, for example, can cause headaches and liver damage, reduce bone strength and cause birth defects, according to the FDA.

5. Some supplements can interact with medications or affect medical conditions

Before taking supplements, read the label and check with your doctor to see how they might interact with any medication you might be taking and any potential side effects.

Certain supplements may interact with certain medications and reduce their effectiveness. They may also increase the risk of side effects from those medications.

According to the FDA:

* Vitamin K can reduce the ability of a blood thinner to prevent blood from clotting
* St. John’s wort can speed the breakdown of many drugs and reduce their effectiveness
* Antioxidant supplements, like vitamins C and E, might reduce the effectiveness of some types of cancer chemotherapy

6. Use reliable resources to check quality of supplements

In addition to your doctor, you can get reliable information about dietary supplements from some non-commercial sources.

The US [Office of Dietary Supplements](https://ods.od.nih.gov/) is a resource for information about dietary supplements and their ingredients.

The US Pharmacopeia (USP) maintains a dietary supplement verification program. The [USP Verified Mark](https://www.usp.org/verification-services/verified-mark) on a dietary supplement indicates that the product meets the following:

* Contains ingredients listed in declared potency and amounts
* Does not contain harmful levels of specified contaminants
* Will break down and release into the body within specified amount of time
* Were made according to Good Manufacturing Practices for dietary supplements. These practices were set by the FDA in 2007 to help improve quality control.