



# 'Natural' supplements not necessarily healthy

Many people turn to dietary supplements to help meet their essential nutrient requirements. Some are self-medicating with supplements in attempts to fix minor or major ailments, and others hope to maintain their memory or even extend their life span.

Too often, people consider dietary supplements to be completely safe. But safety is not guaranteed, even when a product is considered to be "natural." The safety of a product depends not only on the supplement's contents, but also on the condition and health status of the person taking the supplement. But, despite the many reasons for taking a supplement, it is important to make safe choices.

**Question:** What products are considered to be dietary supplements?

**Answer:** The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA) of 1994 defines a dietary supplement as "a vitamin, a mineral, an herb or other botanical, an amino acid, a dietary substance for use by man to supplement the diet by increasing the total dietary intake (e.g., enzymes or tissues from organs or glands), or a concentrate, metabolite, con-

stituent or extract or a combination of these ingredients."

**Q:** What factors are essential to consider when choosing safe dietary supplements?

**A:** Here are four key issues to keep in mind when choosing a dietary supplement:

1) Supplements are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, but FDA is not responsible for determining the safety or effectiveness of dietary supplements. Safety is the responsibility of the supplement manufacturer. So, choose supplements from reputable companies that have sound safety records.

2) Know why you are taking a supplement. Are you mainly attempting to meet your essential nutrients, or are you trying to reverse specific health problems?

Self-medicating with dietary supplements can be risky because different health problems can have similar symptoms, and self-treatment can delay rapid diagnosis and effective treatment. Also, some dietary supplements can affect the results of blood and urine tests. Therefore to assure correct interpretation of test results, supplements should not be taken for a few days prior to

blood or urine tests.

3) Learn about what "Daily Value" means on the supplement nutrition fact panel. It is difficult to make generalized recommendations for choosing a dietary supplement based on percent Daily Value (DV). Your personal needs are affected by your eating style (for example, vegetarian or semivegetarian) and whether you are pregnant, lactating or consuming prescribed or over-the-counter medications. Consequently, it makes sense to get supplement advice from a health professional who is fully aware of your health status and knows about any medications that you are taking.

4) Know how much is too much. To find information on safe upper limits for nutrient intake, visit [www.nutritionatc.hawaii.edu/UL.htm](http://www.nutritionatc.hawaii.edu/UL.htm). For information on specific brands of dietary supplements that includes the data on product labels for percent daily value along with other ingredients included in the dietary supplement, visit [dietarysupplements.nlm.nih.gov/dietary](http://dietarysupplements.nlm.nih.gov/dietary).

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