

Checking Out Dietary Supplements

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Dietary Supplements make up for a lack or deficiency in the diet. They include vitamins, minerals, amino acids, herbs and other plants (except for tobacco), or a combination thereof. Frequently used to enhance or restore health, the assumption is often made that they are *always* safe because they are natural and/or necessary substances. NOT ALWAYS – just think poisonous mushrooms! Even when particular supplements are safe, harmful reactions might occur when they are taken with some prescription or over-the-counter (OTC) medications, or when certain medical conditions are present. Then there is the matter of dosage. Taking too much Vitamin A, for instance, has been linked to an increased risk of bone density loss, which can lead to hip fractures. What all this means is that people should approach the use of supplements just as they should approach the use of prescription and OTC medications – by informing themselves.

Fortunately, an increasing amount of reliable information is available – a lot of it on the web. One site that deals specifically with dietary substances is the National Institute of Health's [Office of Dietary Substances](#). Another is the site of the U.S. Pharmacopeia's Dietary Supplement Verification Program ([DSVP](#)). This program "lends" its name to those supplements that have been submitted to and passed its tests. The USP label on containers of dietary supplements therefore indicates that those supplements contain what they claim to contain; in the stated amounts and strengths; are effectively dissolved in, and absorbed by, the body; have been screened for contaminants; and use a safe manufacturing process. It's important to note, however, that the lack of such labels does not automatically indicate a supplement's deficiencies in these areas. It may simply be the case that their manufacturers did not submit their product to the USP program.

Other sources for important information regarding dietary supplements may be found by visiting the sites of the FDA's [Center for Food Safety and Nutrition](#) and the National Institute of Health's [National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine](#). The latter provides consumer advisories, guidelines for finding reliable information on the web and more. The [Alternative Medicine Foundation](#), on its site, also offers several valuable resources for finding and understanding information about herbal medicines. And at the [Mayo Clinic](#) web site, information about dietary supplements can be found by looking under "health information". Descriptions of potentially harmful interactions between some supplements and medications can be found here.□

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