

SUPPLEMENTS: *Are they safe?*



Dietary supplements such as vitamins, minerals and herbs are often seen as safer, more natural alternatives to prescription and over the counter medications. As a recent study on liver damage reminds us, this may not always be the case.

What are dietary supplements?



Dietary supplements are products that contain vitamins, minerals, herbs or other substances such as enzymes that are intended to supplement the nutrients you get from your food. Dietary supplements may be found in many forms such as tablets, capsules, softgels, gelcaps, liquids, or powders. You may also find them in forms that resemble foods and beverages such as bars or teas. A quick way to tell if something is a food or a dietary supplement is to look for the “Facts” panel. Foods have a Nutrition Facts panel and dietary supplements will have a Supplement Facts panel.

How are they different from medication?



Dietary supplements are just that - supplements to your diet. They are not intended to prevent, treat or cure any illnesses. Calcium supplements, for example, are used to increase the amount of calcium in your diet, not to prevent osteoporosis. A supplement that makes prevention or treatment claims is actually considered an illegal or unapproved drug. Medications, on the other hand, are used in the prevention and treatment of illness and have been tested for their safety and effectiveness in doing so before getting FDA approval to go to market.

How to choose safely:



Most people are able to get the nutrients they need from food without the added expense of dietary supplements. For those who need additional nutrients, supplements can have potential benefits. They are not, however, without risk. Some dietary supplements act strongly in our bodies and can interact with medications we are taking or impact medical procedures like surgeries. Be sure to include supplements in discussions with your health care providers to prevent unexpected complications. Dietary supplements are also not required to prove their effectiveness or safety before being sold to customers. When selecting products, look for reputable brands and third party certifications such as USP, NSF or Consumer Lab.



REFERENCES:

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