Using Vitamins, Herbals, and Other Dietary Supplements Wisely

Know Your Pharmacist, Know Your Medicine

Choose your pharmacist as carefully as you choose your doctor. Your pharmacist is an important member of your health care team. Using just one pharmacy and getting to know the pharmacists on a first-name basis can benefit your health. That way, your complete medication record will be kept in a single place and your pharmacists will become familiar with you and your medical history. Your pharmacist can help you select an appropriate dietary supplement, avoid common problems when using your medications, and recognize when your condition needs more than self-care and refer you for treatment by a physician.

Helpful Resources About Good Nutrition and Dietary Supplements

Dietary Reference Intakes: The Essential Guide to Nutrient Requirements


This comprehensive book on dietary requirements is useful for health professionals and consumers.

MEDLINE Plus


MEDLINE Plus provides information on vitamin and mineral supplements as well as herbal remedies.

National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine

www.nccam.nih.gov

NCCAM distributes trustworthy information on complementary and alternative medicine. Nutrition.gov

www.nutrition.gov

This federal resource has reliable information on choosing healthful food and proper use of dietary supplements.

Office of Dietary Supplements

http://ods.od.nih.gov/Health_Information/IBIDS.aspx

ODS at the National Institutes of Health provides fact sheets on dietary supplements and the free app My Dietary Supplements at https://myds.nih.gov.

What Sources Should I Trust When Selecting Dietary Supplements?

Your pharmacist can help you check whether the product is from a reputable manufacturer that follows high-quality standards. Does the label look like the product is from a dependable manufacturer with a toll-free phone number and website for more information? Do claims seem exaggerated or too good to be true? Your pharmacist can help you find current information on the supplement to separate hype from the facts.

Check to see if the Product carries the unique United States Pharmacopeia (USP) Verifed Dietary Supplement mark. USP is a third party, scientific, nonprofit organization that establishes federally recognized standards for the quality of drugs and dietary supplements. It is the only such organization that also offers voluntary verification services to help ensure dietary supplement quality, purity, and potency. Through the Dietary Supplement Verification Program, USP awards the distinct USP Verifed Mark to products that meet its stringent verification criteria for use on product labels, packaging, and promotional materials. This mark lets consumers, healthcare professionals, and retailers know that the product contains quality ingredients in the amounts listed on the label.

Who Is Responsible for the Safety and Labeling of Dietary Supplements?

The individual manufacturers of dietary supplements are responsible for the safety of their products. Before marketing a supplement, the manufacturer is in charge of quality control and product labeling. Many people assume that the government requires dietary supplement labels to contain warnings about possible side effects or dangers, similar to the warnings that appear on drug labels. However, current law does not give the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) the power to regulate dietary supplements as it does with prescription and OTC medications. Consumers should be aware that just because a supplement product label does not list a caution or warning, it does not mean the product is safe and effective.
What Do Consumers Need to Know About Dietary Supplements?

Many people use dietary supplements—including vitamins, minerals, herbals, and other products—for the purpose of improving their health. Their reasons for taking the supplements may be to boost their intake of vitamins to make up for poor eating habits, take advantage of certain reported health benefits, or generally feel healthier and stronger.

Dietary supplements can have health benefits, but these products are not risk-free. Under certain circumstances, they may cause side effects or unexpected consequences. It also is possible that these supplements may not be necessary based on the foods you eat.

Before you choose a dietary supplement, talk with your pharmacist or other health care professional. You already know that your pharmacist is your neighborhood medication expert. But you might not be aware that your pharmacist also can answer your questions about dietary supplements and help you use them correctly.

What Is a Dietary Supplement and What Are the Benefits of Using Supplements?

Dietary supplements include vitamins, minerals, herbals, botanicals, amino acids, and enzymes. They are intended to provide additional nutrients beyond the nourishment you get from food. These products are not designed to replace the foods that are important to a healthful diet. Dietary supplements are manufactured and sold in a variety of forms such as tablets, capsules, and softgels. Even though these dosage forms may look like medicine, dietary supplements cannot make claims to treat or cure a disease.

The goal of using dietary supplements is to help you get an adequate amount of essential nutrients for your body to function properly. However, too much of certain vitamins and minerals can become a problem. Reliable information on various supplements and safe limits to use are available from the organizations listed in the Helpful Resources section. You also can ask your pharmacist for advice on recommended nutrient amounts.

Are There Any Risks Associated With Using Dietary Supplements?

Some dietary supplements may interact—or interfere—with certain prescription medications, over-the-counter products (also called OTC or nonprescription medications), or foods. Supplements, medications, and foods interact in many ways. It is important to talk with your pharmacist before you select and use a dietary supplement because interactions can happen to anyone. You may be at an even greater risk for harm from a dietary supplement interaction if you are pregnant or nursing a baby, or if you have a chronic medical condition, such as diabetes, high blood pressure, or heart disease.

For example, people who use the blood-thinning drug warfarin should not take dietary supplements that contain vitamin K or vitamin E because they interfere with the desired effect of warfarin. St. John’s wort—most commonly available as tablets, capsules, and in tea bags—may reduce the effectiveness of birth control pills and many drugs used to treat heart disease, depression, seizures, HIV, and cancer. Dietary supplements that contain calcium may disrupt the action of certain antibiotics.

In some cases, dietary supplements may have an unwanted effect during surgery. Be sure to tell your physician and other health care providers (for example, your dentist) about the vitamins, minerals, herbals, or any other supplements you take so they can properly plan well ahead of any scheduled surgery or procedures.

How Can I Use Supplements Safely?

Do’s

- Read the package and label of all dietary supplements carefully. Follow dosing instructions exactly. Pay special attention to warning statements.
- Make sure your physician, pharmacist, and other health care providers have a list of all the prescription medications, OTC products, vitamins, minerals, and herbal supplements you use.
- Use one pharmacy for all of your prescription medications, OTC products, and dietary supplements.
- Ask your pharmacist or physician to help you choose dietary supplements that are right for you, especially if you have any allergies, dietary requirements, or are taking other medications. Just because a label says “natural” does not mean it is safe or meets your needs.

Tell your pharmacist or physician about any side effects or problems you have after taking a dietary supplement or medication. Serious reactions can be reported to the FDA by calling 1-800-FDA-1088 or reporting online at www.fda.gov/Safety/MedWatch/HowToReport/ucm053074.htm.

Don’ts

- Don’t combine prescription medications, OTC products, vitamins, or dietary supplements without guidance and advice from your pharmacist, physician, or other qualified health care professional.
- Don’t take any prescription medications, OTC products, or dietary supplements that were prescribed for another person.