

REALIZE: There are risks associated with using supplements

For more information go to the USADA supplement page go [here](#). July 2020

Dietary supplements are risky because they could contain prohibited substances that can cause a positive anti-doping test or ingredients that cause health problems.

This section is designed to help you realize that:

- You can be harmed by supplements
- Laws and regulations cannot always protect you from dangerous products
- Doctors, coaches, and peers may not understand the risks of using supplements and could recommend an unsafe product to you
- Your reliance on dietary supplements may be unnecessary

Check Out SUPPLEMENT 411 <https://www.usada.org/athletes/substances/supplement-411/>

REALIZE: Athletes' health and careers can be harmed by supplements

REALIZE: Laws and regulations may not protect you from dangerous supplements because...

- Supplements are not evaluated or approved by the FDA before they are sold

Dietary supplements are a special category of food and are regulated in a post-market manner by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). To be considered a dietary supplement, a product must a) contain ingredients that have a history of use in the food supply, b) be taken by mouth and swallowed (like a food), c) be advertised only to improve the diet or to provide nutrients, and d) must have a supplement facts panel on it. In the eyes of the law, a product must meet all of the criteria above to be considered a dietary supplement. However, the FDA doesn't check to make

sure products meet these criteria before they are sold. It is important to realize that contaminated products make it to store shelves on a regular basis.

- **Some supplement companies buy impure or contaminated raw ingredients**

Most supplement companies don't grow or produce their own ingredients but buy them from ingredient suppliers all over the world. Some ingredient suppliers improve their profits by offering cheap, impure, degraded, or contaminated ingredients. Some suppliers will even pad the desirable but expensive ingredients with fillers, a practice known in the supplement industry as "fairy dusting." Even though supplement companies are required by law to test their ingredients on arrival or demand a certificate of analysis from the ingredient supplier, the tests some companies use to confirm the identity of ingredients are not robust enough to detect contaminants, and certificates of analysis can be faked. It's important to realize that you can't look at a supplement label and know the true ingredients.

- **Some supplement companies do things wrong without realizing it**

Some supplement companies want to make safe products but make mistakes, such as: labeling their products incorrectly, making illegal advertising claims, manufacturing their products with the wrong ingredients or the wrong dosages, accidentally buying adulterated ingredients, or including illegal or novel ingredients without realizing it. It's important to realize that even well-meaning companies can unknowingly sell contaminated supplements.

- **Some supplement companies deliberately spike their products with performance-enhancing drugs**

There are plenty of companies that deliberately sell products that contain steroids, stimulants, and other drugs with little regard for the safety or health of their consumers. Their primary goal is to use pharmaceutical agents to deliver results, and they market their products as dietary supplements because it makes them easier to sell and appear safe. Even though they are not technically "supplements," they are packaged and labeled just like legitimate supplements. It's important to realize that some companies will deliberately sell "supplements" that contain prescription or experimental drugs.

- **The internet makes it easy to get away with selling illegal supplements**

The internet makes it very easy to distribute unsafe or illegal products because it can be very hard to track down and prosecute the people behind a web store. Some sites are based in other countries, which makes it even more difficult, if not impossible for the FDA to enforce regulations. Buying a product from a “reputable” online nutrition store is also no guarantee. Several mainstream, trusted, web-based nutrition stores have sold products that contain prohibited or adulterated ingredients. It’s important to realize that the internet is filled with illegal supplements that contain prohibited and harmful substances.

- It is very difficult to remove dangerous products from store shelves.

Since supplements are regulated in a post-market manner, a product will usually need to yield an adverse event report saying someone has been hurt or sickened before the FDA will investigate. If the FDA determines that a product is dangerous in some way, they usually allow the company to continue selling the product as long as they promise to fix the problem. In extreme cases, the FDA can ask the company to recall the product, but even if the FDA demands a recall of the product (which rarely occurs), recalls are not always effective. For example, more than half of the supplements recalled between 2009-2012 were still on store shelves six months later. And even if the company recalls the product from stores, it’s very unlikely you will be contacted about a product that you have already purchased. For these reasons, it’s important to realize that the FDA often cannot prevent dangerous products from being sold.

REALIZE: Doctors, trainers, coaches, and parents may not understand the risks that supplements pose

Doctors may be unaware of the contamination or quality issues in the supplement industry, and they may not realize that supplements pose anti-doping risks to athletes. Coaches, teammates, parents, and friends also may not have all the facts when it comes to dietary supplements, or they might have other interests in mind influencing their decision to recommend supplements. It is important to realize that someone you trust could unknowingly recommend a dangerous or contaminated product to you.

It’s always important to be an informed consumer, especially when it comes to dietary supplements. U.S. Anti-Doping Agency Chief Science Officer Dr. Matt Fedoruk explains why supplements are so risky and how you can minimize the risks of supplement use.

REALIZE: Your reliance on supplements might be unnecessary

Do your assumptions about dietary supplements stand up to scrutiny? Often, supplement companies overstate, and consumers overestimate, the benefits of using supplements. You may

believe some of the statements below, but it's important to realize your expectations may not be realistic:

- Assumption: "I can't get everything I need from my diet."

Realize: A well-balanced diet usually delivers all the nutrients required for athletes. Most sports dietitians recommend a food-first approach to nutrition.

- Assumption: "I don't have time to prepare and cook everything I need."

Realize: Eating a balanced diet does require extra time and effort, but there are many examples of athletes who do this very successfully in spite of their busy training and competition schedules.

- Assumption: "My body is under a lot of strain and I need immune boosters to keep from getting sick."

Realize: Despite their claims, there is little credible evidence that supplements "boost" your immune system or keep you from getting sick. In fact, dietary supplements are not allowed by law to advertise that they cure or prevent any disease, including colds or the flu.

- Assumption: "Even if it's not proven, but there is a chance that a supplement works, it's worth it."

Realize: This approach relies entirely on the supposed benefits of a supplement and completely ignores the risks.

- Assumption: "They work."

Realize: There are a few supplement ingredients that might be beneficial for some athletes in certain sports and under certain conditions. Ultimately, your sport and your body composition will determine your nutritional needs. Some athletes think a supplement works because they feel something when they take it, but this might be due to the presence of stimulants or other contaminants in the product.

- Assumption: "Everyone uses supplements and they might gain an advantage over me."

Realize: Your peers might not know about the risks around supplements and they may simply believe the advertising promises of the product. If you decide to use a supplement, make your decisions based on scientific evidence of effectiveness and safety.

- Assumption: “Supplements are a natural and safe way to enhance health.”

Realize: Many ingredients used in dietary supplements are not extracted from plants, but are instead highly manufactured, and even “natural” herbs can be toxic in certain dosages. In addition, the USADA High Risk List has multiple examples of “all-natural” products that contain prohibited substances.

In conclusion, many athletes believe they must take dietary supplements in order to compete at the best of their abilities; however, it is important to REALIZE that there are real risks and safety issues associated with dietary supplements.

If, at this point an athlete or consumer believes that taking a dietary supplement is still necessary, the next step is to become fully informed about and RECOGNIZE risk when you see it.
(<https://www.usada.org/athletes/substances/supplement-411/recognize-risk-when-you-see-it/>)