

Supplements and Sports

Athletes are always seeking ways to enhance their performance, making them better, stronger, faster, and more powerful than before. To this end, some athletes turn to supplements for a competitive edge. However, athletes should use caution when choosing products with claims that seem unbelievable, because they probably are not true! Remember the following key points when considering any type of nutritional, dietary, or herbal supplement.

Regulations and testing

The manufacturing of dietary supplements in the United States is not standardized. It does not undergo rigorous testing and screening, as it does for medicines and other drugs. Therefore, the safety, efficacy, and purity of dietary supplements are not regulated. The concentration of active ingredients and whether they are contained in the preparation at all are inconsistent.

Ingredients

Many nutritional and/or dietary supplements contain National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)-banned and/or illegal substances. Furthermore, supplements that are impure and/or contaminated with banned substances may lead to a positive drug test.

Fatal and life-threatening consequences

Some dietary supplements, especially those containing ephedrine (ephedra), are known to have life-threatening and even fatal consequences. Other risky supplements include androstenedione (andro) and other prohormone precursors to testosterone, yohimbine, and kava-containing products.

Harmful in large doses over time

Supplements that contain vitamins, caffeine, creatine, and protein powder generally are safe when taken in recommended amounts, but may become harmful when taken in large doses for an extended period of time.

Gastrointestinal distress

Energy drinks that contain herbs, amino acids, protein, and other substances usually contain them in such small amounts that they are unlikely to have any noticeable effect (positive or negative) on athletic performance. However, they may contribute to the inefficient absorption of fluid and nutrients from the intestine, leading to gastrointestinal distress, which may impair performance.

USP label

Supplements that have a USP (United States Pharmacopeia) label have passed tests for dissolution, disintegration, potency, and purity. In addition, nationally known food and drug manufacturers often are trustworthy sources of supplements, because they generally produce them using the strict quality-control measures that they already have in place.

Hydration

Many supplements can negatively impact hydration status, which is a sure-fire way to hinder athletic performance.

Not a quick fix

The best way to achieve peak athletic performance is with a sound training program and good nutrition and hydration. Supplements will not provide a quick fix to performance problems.

Drug interactions

Athletes using any medications (prescription or over the counter) should avoid any product that contains herbs, because of possible drug interactions.

Medical information

An athlete's doctor should know about any supplements or herbs the athlete is taking, particularly if prescribing or recommending a medication.

Label facts

If the product does not have a Nutrition Facts or Supplement Facts panel on its label, then do not buy the product.

Claims

Avoid the product if the evidence for claims is nonexistent, incomplete, or unsubstantiated! You can investigate evidence for claims, product testing, and safety from third-party independent labs, such as ConsumerLab (www.consumerlab.com).

Too good to be true

When in doubt, do not take it. If the claim sounds unbelievable, it probably is not true. Taking it may even jeopardize your health and your life!

References and recommended readings

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