

# CONSUMER'S EDGE

CONSUMER PROTECTION DIVISION, MARYLAND OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

BRIAN E. FROSH, MARYLAND ATTORNEY GENERAL

## HEALTHY LIVING: MAKING INFORMED DECISIONS ABOUT HERBAL & DIETARY SUPPLEMENTS

Different people try different remedies to maintain their health and combat illness, including taking herbal and dietary supplements.

Herbal and dietary supplements and natural remedies are sold at grocery stores, gyms, health food stores, and on the Internet. Many people take these because they are promoted as a safe way to lose weight, boost energy, fight colds or even cure cancer – but not all these claims are legal.

**Herbal supplements can be sold without prior approval or testing by any government agency.** The FDA may remove a supplement from the market, but it usually does so only after it receives reports of people suffering serious side effects.



Because herbal supplements are not as closely regulated as drugs, it is harder to be sure the product contains what its label says, that it is not contaminated with other substances, or that it is safe or effective when taken as directed. Independent tests of supplements have shown that batches of the same brand can vary greatly in the amount of the active ingredients – or may not contain any active ingredient at all.

Although supplements cannot claim that they can treat, prevent or cure specific diseases or conditions, some may make claims that they will have a positive effect on the body, such as “antioxidants maintain cell integrity,” even though there may be no proof to back up those claims. Companies or manufacturers that sell herbal and dietary supplements are required by law to be able to substantiate any of their claims, but don’t have to substantiate them before selling them in the market. Often supplements are advertised with glowing testimonials from people who claim that the product changed their lives. Consumer testimonials are unreliable, may be exaggerated or untrue, and do not prove a product is safe or will work for you.

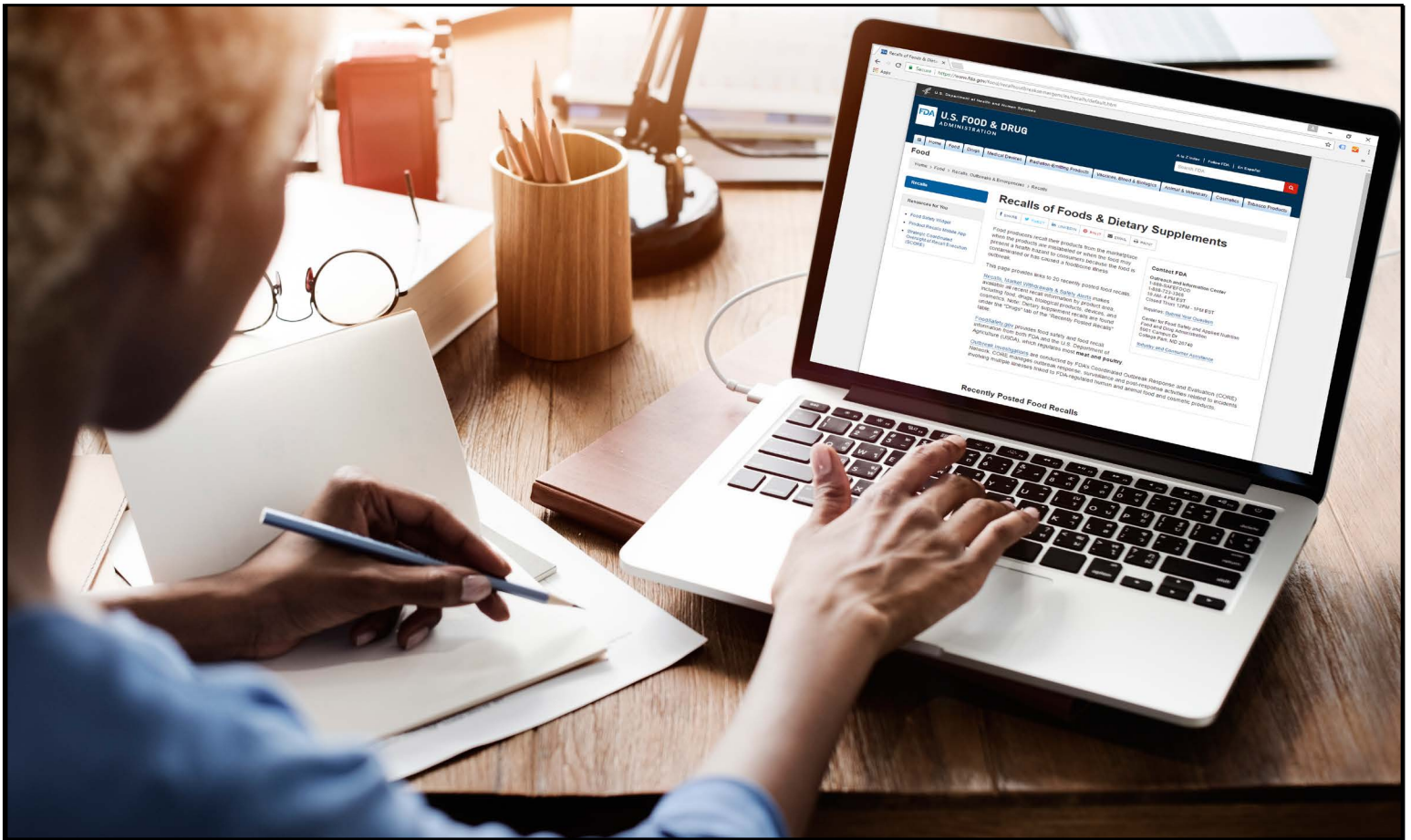
The Maryland Attorney General advises consumers to make informed decisions about herbal supplements because **some supplements can be dangerous, even deadly.** The FDA has issued warnings to consumers or made manufacturers recall the products after reports of serious illness and deaths in users, or evidence that they contained dangerous substances.

**Supplements may react with prescription or over-the-counter medicines, or reduce their effectiveness.**

Organic and “natural” products are becoming increasingly popular and are being heavily marketed to consumers. **Just because a product is “organic” or “natural” does not mean it is safe.** For example, poison ivy and arsenic are both natural substances. A “natural” product can cause allergic reactions or be toxic.

**Products marketed as “miracle cures” for cancer, AIDS, arthritis or other serious conditions can be equally dangerous.** These products are usually nothing more than scams designed to cheat desperately ill consumers out of their money. The treatments are ineffective, can have serious side effects, and cause the consumer to avoid getting legitimate treatment that could help.





### How to Protect Yourself

- Tell your doctor if you take any herbal or dietary products.
- Contact your doctor if you think you have had an adverse reaction to a supplement.
- Stay informed. Listen to the news and check out the FDA website ([www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)) for information about recalls or warnings about supplements.
- Look for information on labels about possible side effects and warnings for certain classes of people who should not take the product, such as pregnant or nursing mothers, people with allergies, or people taking certain prescription medications. Keep in mind that this information may be lacking on the label, and you should talk to your doctor.
- When buying a supplement, consider the name of the manufacturer. Supplements made by a nationally known food and drug manufacturer may have better regulatory oversight and controls.

Visit the websites of the Federal Trade Commission: [www.ftc.gov](http://www.ftc.gov) or the Food and Drug Administration: [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov). If you have any questions or concerns, contact the Consumer Protection Division's Health Education and Advocacy Unit at (410) 528-1840 or toll-free at 1-877-261-8807.



### HOW TO CONTACT US

#### Consumer Protection Division

200 St. Paul Place, 16th Fl., Baltimore, MD 21202

- **General Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-8662  
Toll-free: 1-888-743-0023 TDD: 410-576-6372  
9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday  
[www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/CPD/](http://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/CPD/)
- **Health Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-1840  
Toll-free: 1-877-261-8807 TDD: 410-576-6372  
9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday  
[www.marylandcares.org](http://www.marylandcares.org)
- **For information on branch offices** in Largo, Salisbury, Hagerstown, and a full list of offices across Maryland, visit: [www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/contactus.aspx](http://www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/contactus.aspx)

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ATTORNEY GENERAL  
BRIAN E. FROSH

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