

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 AND 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 products 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 true or legal. **Herbal supplements can be sold without prior approval or testing by any government agency.** The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) may remove a supplement from the market, but usually does so only after people have complained about suffering serious side effects or injuries.



Because herbal supplements are not as closely regulated as drugs, it's harder to be sure the product contains what its label says, that it's not contaminated with other substances, or that it's 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 have substantiation for all of their claims, but do not have to substantiate them to a regulator 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.

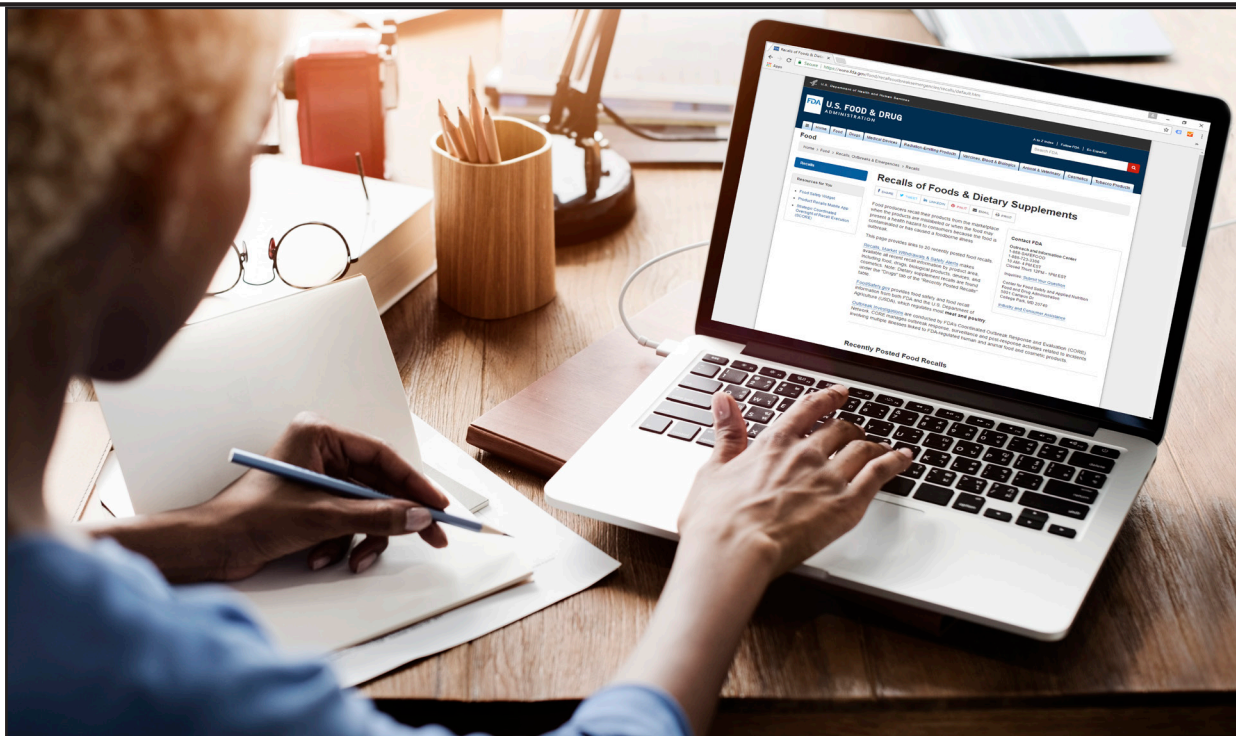
The Maryland Attorney General advises consumers to make informed decisions about herbal supplements because **some supplements can be dangerous, or even deadly.** The FDA has issued warnings to consumers or required some manufacturers to recall products after reports of serious illness and deaths in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

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

Organic and “natural” products are increasingly popular and are heavily marketed to consumers, often without proof they are safe or effective. **Just because a product is “organic” or “natural” does not mean it's safe. Poison ivy and arsenic are both “natural.”** Also, “all-natural products,” like those that promise to enhance sexual performance or increase sexual stimulation, may contain hidden drug ingredients or other undisclosed ingredients that could endanger a consumer's health. Taking these supplements could lead to serious side effects or dangerous interactions with other prescription drugs taken by the consumer.

Products marketed as “miracle cures” for cancer, AIDS, arthritis, COVID, 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, inducing serious side effects





in the process. Worst of all, the consumer may miss out on legitimate treatment that could actually help.

How to Protect Yourself

- Tell your doctor if you take any herbal or dietary products.
- Contact your doctor if you think you're having an adverse reaction to a supplement.
- Stay informed. Listen to the news and check out the FDA website (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, so you should also 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.
- Be wary of cure-all claims, "must act now" offers, money-back guarantees, glowing testimonials, and claims of "scientific breakthroughs."

Visit the websites of the Federal Trade Commission (www.ftc.gov) or the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (www.fda.gov) for information about supplements before purchasing or taking them. If you have any questions or concerns, contact the Consumer Protection Division's Health Education and Advocacy Unit.

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
En español: 410-230-1712
9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday
www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/CPD/
- **Health Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-1840
Toll-free: 1-877-261-8807 TDD: 410-576-6372
En español: 410-230-1712
9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
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

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ATTORNEY GENERAL
BRIAN E. FROSH

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