

## ***Natural Supplements: What to Look For & Why***

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The supplement industry is booming. Sources report that annual sales of supplements in the United States alone top \$23 billion.<sup>1</sup> Lest you think this is solely the result of bodybuilders and athletes loading up on protein shakes (which is certainly part of it!), recognize that over \$9 billion of this total was spent on vitamins and \$5 billion on herbs.<sup>2,3</sup> Clearly, there is a strong movement toward natural health that has people seeking supplements to alleviate symptoms, boost well-being, and achieve a level of wellness that medical science was supposed to be able to deliver, but hasn't...at least, in an affordable, sustainable, and healthy way.

All of that is well and good, especially if you make or sell supplements! But for the consumer, who often has to look out not only for her physical, but financial well-being, it's important to know which kinds of supplements are worth looking into and which aren't. One of the things to take note of is whether or not the supplement of interest is "natural."

Simply put, a natural supplement is one that is made from natural sources. The alternative, of course, is a supplement with ingredients that have been created in a laboratory. While you may think the latter would be superior – the result of cutting-edge science targeting active, biological compounds and then replicating them – the truth is that there can be a benefit to natural sources of nutrients and botanicals, precisely because they retain their complex nature.

Many herbs, for example, are more effective when they are taken in their natural, unprocessed form, as they contain not only "active ingredients" but other factors that work synergistically to affect the body. The same holds true for vitamins. As one source suggests, "It is now believed that the 'unknown' co-factors found in natural vitamins, not found in synthetic forms, act as catalysts which make the vitamins more effective."<sup>4</sup>

And then there are the ingredients that are often added to supplements that simply don't need to be there. These include artificial coloring agents (dyes), artificial sweeteners, and preservatives. For example, it's not uncommon to find fiber supplements that come in a variety of colors and flavors, none of which are natural. Practically speaking, it's simply silly to suggest that a naturally sourced supplement needs to be denatured to look or taste a certain way; companies that load their supplements with unnecessary ingredients cater to customers who want something good for them to taste like candy and sugary sweets! What's more, these added, unnecessary ingredients may actually be harmful; artificial sweeteners, colors, and other additives have been linked to a number of health concerns including cognitive dysfunction and even cancer.<sup>5,6,7</sup> Do these ingredients really belong in a supplement intended to *improve* your health?

By and large, it's important to remember that organic, whole foods are the best way to obtain the nutrients that you need for lasting health. There's really no substitute, supplements included, for a truly healthy diet. Unfortunately, the cleanest, healthiest whole foods are also harder to obtain than

conventionally grown and processed varieties, and this makes supplementation just about essential for optimal health and wellness.

The natural supplement industry is not going away. Our culture is awakening to the power of nature that can be bottled and sold to consumers who want and need targeted nutrition and botanicals for individual health concerns. When shopping for supplements, you can make sure that you get your money's worth by looking for those that come from natural and, if possible, whole food sources. Steer clear of those with ingredients that are unnecessary and potentially harmful. Additionally, look for some indication on the supplement's label that it has been manufactured according to current Good Manufacturing Practices (cGMP), as this is one rigorously protected measure of purity and efficacy.<sup>8</sup>

If you have questions about whether a supplement you are interested in is natural or synthetic, ask a certified holistic health practitioner, nutritional consultant, herbalist, or naturopathic physician.

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<sup>1</sup> Hart, A. (2009). Annual USA Sales of Nutritional Supplements Top \$23 Billion, But Where's the Quality Control? *Sacramento Nutrition Examiner*, Retrieved September 14, 2011 from <http://www.examiner.com/nutrition-in-sacramento/annual-usa-sales-of-nutritional-supplements-top-23-billion-but-where-s-the-quality-control>

<sup>2</sup> Alderman, L. (2009). Knowing What's Worth Paying For in Vitamins. *The New York Times*. Retrieved September 14, 2011 from <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/05/health/05patient.html>

<sup>3</sup> Cavaliere, C., Rea, P., Lynch, M. E., & Blumenthal, M. (2010). Herbal Supplement Sales Rise in All Channels in 2009. *American Botanical Council*. Retrieved September 14, 2011 from <http://cms.herbalgram.org/herbalgram/issue86/article3530.html>

<sup>4</sup> Natural Vs. Synthetic Vitamin: What You Need to Know. (2010). *The Greatest Herbs on Earth*. Retrieved September 14, 2011 from [http://www.greatestherbsonearth.com/articles/natural\\_vs\\_synthetic.htm](http://www.greatestherbsonearth.com/articles/natural_vs_synthetic.htm)

<sup>5</sup> 12 Dangerous Food Additives: The Dirty Dozen Food Additives You Really Need to be Aware Of. (2009). Retrieved September 14, 2011 from <http://www.sixwise.com/newsletters/06/04/05/12-dangerous-food-additives-the-dirty-dozen-food-additives-you-really-need-to-be-aware-of.htm>

<sup>6</sup> What Food Additives Add. (2005). *University of California (UCLA)*. Retrieved September 14, 2011 from [http://www.dining.ucla.edu/housing\\_site/dining/SNAC\\_pdf/FoodAdditives.pdf](http://www.dining.ucla.edu/housing_site/dining/SNAC_pdf/FoodAdditives.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Hoy, P. (n.d.). In Pictures: Most Dangerous Food Additives. *Forbes.com*. Retrieved September 14, 2011 from [http://www.forbes.com/2008/04/02/food-additives-preservatives-forbeslife-cz\\_ph\\_0402additives\\_slide\\_4.html](http://www.forbes.com/2008/04/02/food-additives-preservatives-forbeslife-cz_ph_0402additives_slide_4.html)

<sup>8</sup> Pharmaceutical cGMPs for the 21st Century – A Risk-Based Approach: Second Progress Report and Implementation Plan. (2009). *U.S. Food and Drug Administration*. Retrieved September 14, 2011 from <http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/DevelopmentApprovalProcess/Manufacturing/QuestionsandAnsweronCurrentGoodManufacturingPracticescGMPforDrugs/UCM071836>