

Supplements: The Good, The Bad, The Best

By Ryan Harrison, MA

Ryan N. Harrison, MA is a Holistic Health Educator/Consultant in private practice (<http://www.BeWholeBeWell.com>). He has taught holistic nutrition, therapeutic herbalism and natural health for many years in both online and traditional settings.

It's no secret that vitamins, minerals and other nutritional supplements are part of a very lucrative, billion dollar industry. If nothing else, this is a clarion call, shouting loud and clear in a language everyone understands – money – that people not only want to be healthy, but that they want to stay that way.

This trend also demonstrates a shared rising desire to take some personal responsibility when it comes to health and wellbeing. Well, that's certainly an admirable goal, especially in the face of the enormous pressure that mega-industry, chemical-pushing monster companies place on consumers (doctors and patients alike) to pop the latest “miracle pill.” Phen Fen was one of those. So was Vioxx. Both of them proved more dangerous than healthful and were pulled from the market. And in the meantime, if you're like me, you've been shaking your head in disbelief and continuing your daily vitamin C and antioxidant supplements.

It probably seems like common sense that nutritional supplements are good for people. They're fairly ubiquitous in our present culture. You can find them in health food stores, supermarkets, convenience stores and even at gas stations! That doesn't mean, however, that you know how to recognise the best supplements from those of poor quality. And let's face it: If you're going to invest in some supplements, you certainly want the best, don't you?

So, how *do* you determine which supplements are superior and which are not worth their weight in cash? It can be hard to tell a “good quality” supplement from one that is inferior, and there can be any number of reasons why an inferior product is the way it is. As far as vitamins go, for example, fillers, binders, lubricants, disintegrators, colors, flavors, etc. typically do not have to be listed and often aren't. Yet some of these things make some supplements harder to digest than others or may be downright toxic, which means that your body isn't really getting all that it should from a nutritional supplement and may be getting something it shouldn't!

One simple step you can take to help you recognize value is through brand name recognition and reputation. While certainly not a statistical standard, it makes sense that those companies which have been around a long time and have steady return customers have remained in business because they have quality products. We expect good products to sell well and bad ones to fade away into anonymity. Finding a supplement company that has been around for a while and whose name you and your friends recognize is a good way to start shopping for nutritional and herbal supplements.

If you have the drive to look beyond this simple rule of thumb, there are a few more specific things to be aware of. One online resource¹ provides a good list of some things to watch out for. These include:

- **A Guarantee That the Supplements are Free of Toxic Fillers.** No stearates, no talc, no “natural” flavors (MSG), no sodium benzoate, etc. Even if you don’t see such ingredients listed on the label, you can ask the manufacturer to send you a written guarantee (provided the guarantee is not already on the label or in some other written company literature).
- **Testing Every Batch of Ingredients.** Very few supplement companies test every batch of raw materials to see that they are truly free of heavy metals, toxic chemicals and pesticide residues, not to mention whether they contain the potency and ingredients actually promised by the supplier. If you want to be sure that you’re getting a premium-quality supplement each and every time you buy it, then it behooves you to buy from a company that wants this same assurance, itself.
- **Use of Only Liquid, Powder, or Vegetable Capsules.** One thing you may not have thought of, but which makes sense, is to avoid tablets. By their very nature, tablets need glues (also called “binders” or “binding agents”) to hold them together. In addition, nutrients become highly heated when pressed together to form the tablets. Tablets are difficult to digest and can actually pass through your body undigested, especially if you have a compromised digestive system. Also, it’s a good idea to avoid gelatin capsules as they are made from animal parts and thus will often contain toxic preservatives, hormones and antibiotics that have been given to the animal.
- **Use of Grade 10 Ingredients Whenever Possible.** Where herbal supplements are concerned, there is an International Herbal Grade 10 Scale that manufacturers can use when sourcing their ingredients. You would do well to find a company that does use this scale, as it gives you assurance that the ingredients are truly potent.

In the United States, another standard of quality available is called the GMP. This stands for “Good Manufacturing Practices” and supplements can only carry the GMP logo if they meet certain criteria.

According to the GMP Institute, “GMP regulations require a quality approach to manufacturing, enabling companies to minimize or eliminate instances of contamination, mixups, and errors. This in turn, protects the consumer from purchasing a product which is not effective or even dangerous.”²

GMP regulations oversee all sorts of issues from recordkeeping and personnel qualifications to sanitation, equipment verification and even the handling of complaints.

As with most sets of rules and regulations, there is still some wiggle room within the GMP world. But this may be a case where some standard is better than no standard.

Nutritional and herbal supplements certainly have a place in the world of holistic wellness. Often, they alone can make the difference between disease and good health. If you have a question about the supplements you are taking or want to take, visit a trained nutritional consultant, herbalist, or holistic health practitioner, who will be able to help you determine whether they are of good quality and right for you.

¹ http://www.the-truth-about-vitamins.info/html/supplement_criteria.html

² <http://www.gmp1st.com/gmpinst.htm>