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Roulette

The New England Journal of Medicine recently published online, in advance of the hardcopy publication date, a Perspective article written by Pieter Cohen, MD (1). The title was “American Roulette—Contaminated Dietary Supplements.” I always read articles related to supplementation, especially with such a provocative title, because I use supplements, I recommend them, and I know many people who sell them. His comments may never reach the mainstream press—at least, I hope not—but I felt I needed to address them sooner rather than later. He said a few things that were easily confirmed. He said a whole lot more that were simply unsubstantiated opinions. Let’s take a look.

The Good

Dr. Cohen spent a considerable amount of time talking about contaminated supplements. Supplements have been found to contain toxic plant material, heavy metals, and bacteria. Even more problematic are supplements contaminated with prescription medications, controlled substances, experimental compounds, or drugs rejected by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) because of safety concerns.

All of those are true concerns and are documented on the FDA website, but he provides no references to substantiate his claim. He also writes it in such a way as to make the reader believe that the problem is greater than it is. He suggests that the FDA can’t oversee the supplement industry. Nonsense—it was the FDA who discovered, reported, and closed down those companies who were guilty of these violations. Moreover, they assisted in stopping the importation of products from countries where those supplements originated. The responsible agency took the appropriate action to protect the consumer—it sounds to me like the system is working as it’s supposed to.

The Bad

Here are a few statements he makes:

“Now, more than 140 contaminated products have been identified, but these represent only a fraction of the contaminated supplements on the market.” He provides no evidence to support that claim. How does he know how many there are if he has no resources to substantiate it?

“Although manufacturers have since 2007 been required to report serious supplement-related adverse events to the FDA, the great majority of the estimated 50,000 adverse events that occur annually remain unreported.” Again he provides no evidence to support that claim. If you think about it, how could he? How do you estimate unreported events? I’d need a lot more information before I buy that one. If you check the Adverse Events Reporting System website of the FDA, there are no adverse event statistics reported for dietary supplements. If so many adverse events were actually occurring among the millions of doses of dietary supplements taken every day, it would seem to be a stretch to suggest that so few would be reported that they don’t even have statistics available.

However, to give you some perspective, there were 226,647 adverse events reported for pharmaceuticals by consumers and another 269,765 adverse events reported by healthcare professionals for pharmaceuticals in 2008 (2). That’s over 500,000 events in a single year, and that doesn’t include the adverse events reported by manufacturers.

He also doesn't analyze the adverse events in any way. The most common adverse events I was able to find were upset stomachs and feeling jittery taking supplements with caffeine (3,4). Oo-oo, scary! That doesn't sound like hospitals are filling up with people taking contaminated supplements—and there's no evidence to support that either.

The criminal part of this op-ed piece is that he lumps the quality manufacturers of vitamins, minerals, and other supplements with every other fly-by-night and third-world company that's here today and gone tomorrow. That's a disservice to those companies who spend the money for the scientists and the facilities to manufacture a quality product that is made with the Good Manufacturing Practices that the FDA is now enforcing.

Roulette? There's more risk in buying into Dr. Cohen's opinions than you'll ever find in dietary supplements.

My Observation

Almost every product that he identified as containing contaminants or actual drugs could be attributed to vanity: weight loss, body building, and erectile dysfunction. I've seen the ads on the Internet just like you have: "Buy this pill and your health problem will be solved."

So let me be blunt: if it sounds too good to be true, it often is! There are many safe ways to lose weight and safe supplements that assist weight loss, but you still have to do the work the old-fashioned way—eat less, move more. There are also supplements that support muscle growth, but again you have to do the work. And if erectile dysfunction is a problem, see your doctor; there are a number of well-tested pharmaceuticals available. But don't waste your time and money looking for magic pills that do all the work for you—they don't exist.

The Bottom Line

The simplest way to handle this is to make sure you know the manufacturer of the dietary supplements you want to take. Check them out. See if they own their own facilities. Check online to see if they use Good Manufacturing Practices in the production of their supplements. The quality ones will. Please remember one thing: no supplement will cure a disease. The only thing that a supplement can do is provide your body with the nutrients it needs to do what it's supposed to do: heal itself and become healthier. If the manufacturer claims anything else, move on.

What are you prepared to do today?

Dr. Chet

References:

1. WWW.NEJM.ORG. 10.1056/NEJMp0904768
2. www.fda.gov
3. *Pharmacoepidemiol Drug Saf.* 2007 Sep;16(9):947-57.
4. *J Med Toxicol.* 2008 Jun;4(2):84-92.

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