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THE BETTER HEALTH NEWS

FRAUD IN THE VITAMIN INDUSTRY

SUPPLEMENT QUALITY

On Feb. 2, 2015, the New York Attorney General's office said they had conducted tests on top-selling store brands of herbal supplements at four national retailers — GNC, Target, Walgreens and Walmart — and found that four out of five of the products did not contain any of the herbs on their labels. The tests showed that pills labeled medicinal herbs often contained little more than cheap fillers like powdered rice, asparagus and houseplants, and in some cases substances that could be dangerous to those with allergies.

This is disturbing, because companies that you trust, may not be worthy of that trust. A company like Biotics Research has a pharmaceutical license and conducts tests and takes quality control measures that are far beyond what is required by law.

How can you tell if you are getting a high quality supplement?

Even if fraud is not being practiced by a supplement company, quality control is often lacking. Every supplement manufacturer talks about supplement quality in their marketing materials. They have nothing to lose--no one ever checks to see if they are telling the truth. If you spend your money on a substandard product, at the very least you are wasting it and at the very worst, harming yourself.

Manufacturers buy ingredients from all over the world and the good manufacturers are aware of the quality control practices of their foreign suppliers. Biotics Research always checks on the manufacturing practices of foreign suppliers. Biotics Research has a pharmaceutical license, and they only sell to health practitioners. Their company tests ALL materials coming from the outside for microbes and for impurities, and they will reject bad batches. Do you know what happens to those rejected batches? They are purchased by other vitamin companies. Most vitamin manufacturers do not go through the trouble of testing materials that arrive, so they often purchase rejected materials. When vitamin manufacturers focus on price, they often do so by neglecting quality. Results matter and good quality yields good results.

IS IT A GOOD SUPPLEMENT?

While everyone loves a bargain, there are some problems with shopping for supplements using only price as a guideline. The difference in quality between different brands of supplements is often considerable. Also, treating yourself or relying on untrained individuals for health advice is not a good idea.

Vitamins are cofactors that help the thousands of biochemical reactions that occur in the body. If they are not absorbed well or are in a form that is not well utilized by the body, they will not produce the desired result.

Many issues matter in supplement quality

Does the company actually make the vitamin? Many companies do not do their own manufacturing. They merely label and market the products. The problem here is that it is very difficult to do any kind of quality control.

Quality of components: Take another source of calcium, for example. Oyster shell has calcium, but the body can't use it (just like your car can't use the gasoline in coal). Calcium carbonate is cheap, but is not well absorbed, and it may contain lead. Calcium citrate is much more expensive than the oyster shell or the carbonate. A high quality supplement will use the citrate, a poor one will use oyster shell. There are similar quality issues for just about every vitamin and herb.

The quality of herbal constituents in a lot of products is often questionable. Herbs contain various active ingredients and if the quality or the preparation of the herb is not good, the product can be completely useless.

Calcium is an inexpensive component. Some companies who sell products with expensive components, like CoQ_{10} and glucosamine often do not provide the amount of product that is on the label.

Label claims: Are the ingredients listed on label actually contained in the product? You would be shocked at how often they are not. Part of the problem is how a lot of vitamin companies do business. They usually use a document called a *Certificate of Assay.* This document states that the batch of material actually contains the material. Most companies don't actually test batches of material—they rely on this document. The government doesn't even require them to have this certificate; face it, there isn't a lot of legislation governing the practices of supplement companies. The problem is that as the product changes hands, there is danger of contamination, tampering and outright fraud. Many companies don't actually produce their own vitamins, and they don't test what they buy. Without testing,

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you can be lied to about the content of the product. Second, by the time the product changes hands several times, anywhere along the line someone can substitute cheaper or even phony ingredients and not be held accountable. The product can be contaminated when it changes hands. Sometimes the label claims are fraudulent. What happens if the government finds out? It's usually not a problem for a company committing fraud—the government doesn't check unless there is a *specific* complaint. Even when the government does check, there is simply a product recall; no one is charged with fraud or any other crime. None of the players are required to keep records of the handling of the material. No one is accountable. Health care offices that deal with nutrition usually take the time to find reputable manufacturers.

Are the products tested for quality or for contaminants? There is not a lot of government regulation in this industry. The best way to protect yourself is to find a company that you trust, that makes its own products and tests the quality and purity of its products.

Where did the materials come from? Most of the botanicals purchased in the US come from the Far East. There are manufacturing practices in some Third World countries that would surprise many Americans. An equipment supplier to the vitamin industry described a situation in one Third World plant where material that had fallen on the floor was gathered and sold. In a sterile environment this would not be a problem, but the environment is seldom sterile in this part of the world.

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How is the tablet or capsule made? Something as simple as how a tablet is produced can affect bioavailability. Many manufacturers use inert ingredients that interfere with the absorption of the nutrients. Capsules generally have less inert material than tablets. Biotics Research makes tablets that are extremely bioavailable, they are made of food. In general, supplements in capsules are better absorbed than supplements in tablets (with the exception, of course, of the vegetable-based tableting mentioned in the last paragraph). But even capsules can contain inert ingredients that interfere with absorption. Sometimes it is necessary to use a little cellulose in capsules that contain very little active ingredient or with nutrients or herbal extracts that will not flow properly in the capsuling machine. When high volume is a concern of the manufacturer, inert ingredients are added to enable the machines to work faster. It speeds up production, but makes the vitamin less absorbable.

How long will the product keep its potency on the shelf? This is another "label claims" issue. Vitamins break down over time. Will the label be accurate after six months? A year? Is there a clear expiration date on the vitamins? If the vitamins (minerals, herbs whatever) are produced in exactly the amounts that are listed on the label, in a short period of time the label will be inaccurate because the nutrients will break down. A good company will put more of each ingredient into a capsule or tablet so that the label claims will be true in one or even two years.

Are the formulations good: Is there research and clinical evidence to support the use of a given supplement? Is it a reasonable formulation for the desired outcome? Is there support information that is reasonable and credible? Has the company designed a product that will get results? Many times companies jump on bandwagons and aggressively market substances that really don't work the way consumers think they will. We can help you know the difference between marketing and science.

Basically you have to trust your manufacturer. Biotics Research welcomes doctors to come and inspect their manufacturing facility. They are proud of it because it is second to none. Results matter and good quality yields good results. The people at Biotics Research have understood that since the company's inception.

There's a lot to know when buying supplements and herbs. Health care is complex. The next best thing to learning about product selection and manufacture is to have a company that you can trust absolutely. You can also rely on a health care professional who has looked into this issue. Quality is important, because we are talking about the health and quality of life of you and your patients. Patients need to learn that self-treatment with bargain basement supplements is not a good idea.

It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men.

Frederick Douglass

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WHAT IS BIOAVAILABILITY?

Herbs, vitamins and minerals are meant to be utilized by the body, to help with physiology and biochemistry. Think of wine or ice cream. The only physiologic concern with these products is taste, but what a difference between the quality of a cheap product and a good one. Compare the taste of a premium ice cream to the cheap store brand; the difference is considerable. Compare inexpensive wine to Laffite Rothschild. It should be obvious that the difference between the quality of vitamins and herbs should be at least as great.

You need to realize that supplements are molecules that promote physiologic activity in the body. Just as a good ice cream gets a favorable response from your taste buds, a good supplement creates chemical reactions that are favorable to the body. Quality and bioavailability are important.

Bioavailability is a difficult concept for some patients to grasp. It has to do with how well the supplement is utilized by the body. There is gasoline in coal, you just can't run your car on it. Similarly, there are ingredients listed on a supplement's label that are as useless to your body as coal is to your automobile.

Let's talk about something as basic as calcium, for example. Some companies use calcium carbonate as their calcium source because it is cheap. Calcium carbonate is limestone, and it is not absorbed by the body very well. Also, some studies have shown that calcium carbonate can be a source of lead, which is very toxic.