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FAQ: Supplements

Why are there risks of inadvertent doping due to supplements?

In many countries, the manufacturing of dietary supplements is not appropriately regulated by the government. This means that supplements can contain prohibited substances. For example, the ingredients on the inside of the bottle may not match those listed on the outside label or package. In some cases, the undeclared substances found in the supplement can include one that is prohibited under anti-doping regulations. Studies have shown that as many as 20 percent of supplements available to athletes can contain ingredients that are not declared on the label. A large number of positive doping results have been attributed to the mislabeling and contamination of supplements.

Do I need a supplement?

The decision to use supplements must be taken carefully and not in isolation. Unless it's clear that you need supplements, you should not take them. Consider whether you need to use a supplement by determining if you have other options such as changes to your diet or nutrition program.

If you believe that you need supplements you should first consult a competent sport science professional such as a sport nutritionist or a sports physician to ensure you are professionally advised as to whether your needs can first be met from normal foods. These professionals can be contacted through your sport organization or Canadian Sport Centre.

In 2003, the IOC Nutrition Working Group advised athletes:

"Athletes are cautioned against the indiscriminate use of dietary supplements. Supplements that provide essential nutrients may be of help where food intake or food choices are restricted, but this approach to achieving adequate nutrient intake is normally only a short term option. The use of supplements does not compensate for poor food choices and an inadequate diet. Athletes contemplating the use of supplements and sports foods should consider their efficacy, their cost, the risk to health and performance, and the potential for a positive doping test."

Where can I get advice about taking nutritional supplements?

Team physicians and sport nutritionists are excellent resources and can be contacted through your sport organization or Canadian Sport Centre. If these professionals are not available to you, you should seek advice from a pharmacist.

Always make sure the professional knows of the doping risks associated with supplement use and reviews the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) Prohibited List before providing advice. The CCES' Substance Classification Handbook applies the WADA list to the Canadian market, and can be downloaded at www.cces.ca/pdfs/CCES-PUB-SubstanceClassification-E.pdf.

If the professionals advise you to take supplements, they should be suitable for your nutrient needs and safe for your health. If you decide to take supplements you should take them with full knowledge and acceptance of the strict liability rule.

My teammates and other athletes use supplements. Why shouldn't I?

Never use a supplement just because a teammate or competitor is using it or recommends it. There is no substitute for qualified, professional advice. Just because your teammates and competitors are taking risks doesn't mean you should – always consult with a professional before taking a supplement.

Do some supplements have a higher risk of a positive doping test than others?

Supplements fall into a wide spectrum of types with the level of risk being lower at one end of the spectrum and higher at the other. Vitamins and minerals usually warrant less concern than those products that rely on claims related to performance benefits (e.g., building muscle, burning fat). Examples of substances that are prohibited and may appear in supplements from time to time are: DHEA, Ephedrine, Androstenedione/diol, Amphetamines, and Ma Huang.

Other general warnings:

- Supplements which advertise "muscle building" or "fat burning" capabilities are the most likely to contain a prohibited substances, such as anabolic agents or stimulants.
- The terms "herbal" and "natural" do not necessarily mean that the product is safe.
- Pure vitamins and minerals are not prohibited on their own but athletes are advised to use reputable brands and avoid those combined with other substances.
- Black market or unlabelled products are a particular concern; athletes should not use anything which has an unknown source even if it comes from a coach or fellow athlete.

In the end, taking a poorly labeled dietary supplement is not an adequate defense in a doping hearing. You must be aware of the dangers of potential contamination of supplements. Because you are strictly liable for what is found in your system, the manufacturer's error will not save you from an anti-doping rule violation, disqualification and suspension.

In 2000, the Athletes' Commission of the International Olympic Committee issued a similar statement saying:

"We would like to caution the athletes of the world that recent findings show that supplements may contain drugs that will cause the athletes to test positive for substances that are currently on the banned list. Moreover, we as a commission fully endorse that athletes must take complete responsibility for all drugs that are found in their bodies due to the use of nutritional supplements."

What is the safest source of supplements?

There is always an increased risk of doping when supplements are purchased through non-traditional means such as: over the internet, through magazines or directly from a non-licensed supplier. Products purchased from a trusted retailer or directly from a reputable manufacturer are likely to be associated with lower risk of inadvertent doping. If possible, determine if the manufacturer produces any products containing substances from the WADA Prohibited List – if so, there will be a higher risk of cross-contamination between products.

If you decide to use supplements, you should purchase your products from companies which have a good reputation and use good manufacturing practices, such as major multinational pharmaceutical companies.

Before making your purchase, you or preferably your physician should contact the manufacturer to determine if it is prepared to stand behind its products should they cause an anti-doping rule violation. Does the manufacturer offer any form of guarantee or compensation? What proof does the manufacturer require to qualify for that compensation? If the manufacturer does offer a guarantee, always obtain a letter of confirmation signed by a senior official from the company.

If I choose to use a supplement, what other steps can I take to minimize the risk of inadvertent doping?

Always follow the recommended dosage and route of administration as indicated on the product label. Be especially cautious of potential negative interactions if consuming more than one supplement product at a time. Use supplement products like you would any over-the-counter medication - for example, if the recommended dose is one tablet, two or more may be unhelpful, counter-productive or even dangerous.

I recognize that I am responsible for what is in my system. If I choose to use a supplement, is there anything I can do to be able to respond to a positive doping test?

Keep a log of your supplement use (like your training log), including the batch or lot numbers of the product and when they were consumed. Always keep some of the contents from each container of supplements in case a problem arises that requires the product to be investigated. Although keeping this information will not likely be a partial or even complete defense in the case of an anti-doping rule violation, it may provide you with sufficient evidence to seek compensation from the manufacturer.

What is the CCES doing to help make safe choices about supplements?

The CCES, in cooperation with WADA, the Canadian Olympic Committee and Sport Canada, recently held in Montreal a symposium to deal with the consequences of the use and misuse of dietary supplements by athletes.

Participants from within sport, anti-doping organizations, medical and scientific fields, industry and governments, together with elite athletes and coaches discussed and made specific recommendations for action in the short, medium, and longer term.

Those recommendations include:

- agreement on a common definition of "dietary supplements";
 - implementation of a coordinated research program to identify what supplements are being used and misused by athletes and why;
 - establishment of a global database on supplements to ensure that access to all current and reliable information on supplements is made available;
 - consideration of a product testing and certification program of supplements which could be supported by the industry;
 - agreement by industry to implement self-regulation programs to improve quality, minimize contamination and provide accurate labeling. Stringent standards and third party, independent auditing and monitoring would be important aspects of such a program;
 - enactment by governments of appropriate regulations on the industry because of their responsibilities for public health, for consumer protection, and for education;
 - organization of a follow-up symposium to occur later in 2004 to ensure that these and other recommendations turn into concrete and coordinated actions.
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What can I do to get more attention paid to supplements in sport issues by sport and anti-doping organizations?

Major events such as the Olympic/Paralympic Games are an excellent opportunity to advocate the necessity of safe supplement usage. When possible, use your experience at these events to speak to individuals in positions of influence about the importance of practical and concrete solutions to reduce the risks to athletes.

The CCES is an independent, national, non-profit organization. Our mission, to promote ethical conduct in all aspects of sport in Canada, is carried out through research, promotion, education, detection and deterrence, as well as through programs and partnerships with other organizations.

For further information, please contact Claire Buffone-Blair, Regional Manager, Sport System Development, at (613) 521-3340 x4444.