

THE RISKS OF SUPPLEMENT USE

What is a supplement?

Generally, supplements are manufactured products like pills, capsules, powders, gels, drinks and bars that contain nutrients, herbs, amino acids or other substances that can affect the body. These are typically available over-the-counter and meant to “supplement” the diet.

But be aware, supplements are one of the greatest causes of accidental doping. Often, what it says on the product label, is not exactly what is present in the supplement composition and it may contain banned substances in sport. They may also have negative effects on your performance, be harmful to your health, and may cause you to have a “positive” test.

There are no guarantees that supplements are free from prohibited substances. Athletes, Athlete Support Personnel and coaches must be aware of the associated risks of supplements use due to:

- Supplements could be contaminated with prohibited substances during its manufacturing process;
- The supplement ingredients listed on the label can be inaccurate;
- Some ingredients listed on the labels could be written differently as it shows in the WADA Prohibited List;
- Fake supplements could be available for sale, most of all through the internet;
- Some supplements may make false claims that they have been endorsed or certified by WADA or another Anti-Doping Organization;
- Some supplements may even say they are safe to use or that they do not contain banned substances.
- Not listing important cautionary information (e.g. side effects to health)

Athletes must assess the need, risks and consequences before making the decision of taking supplements.

The Code makes a provision for contaminated products so the athlete must prove that they took all the measures to manage risks associated with supplement use. It is extremely important to be clear to the athlete that if the athlete decides to take supplements, the athlete will be doing at their own risk.

Remember the principle of **Strict Liability** means that the athlete is responsible for every banned substance that is found in their body, regardless how it got there. Saying they did not know is not an excuse.

So what options are there other than taking a supplement?

A “**food first**” approach is recommended. Many people have the common misconception that supplements are a replacement for food or even superior to food. This is false. If one is eating well and getting the balance of nutrients and energy they need, it is likely that using supplements is unnecessary. With a food first approach, the majority of nutritional needs can be met with adjustments to diet.

1. **Food is fuel** – it is important to optimize your diet to meet the energy demands of training and provide the nutritional requirements. Having a better understanding of food and how it can aid performance in the same way that you understand other elements helping performance, such as effective training, physical conditioning, mental performance training, hydration and recovery strategies is important.

Food contains the macronutrients required for

- energy,
- growth and repair of your tissues,
- powering chemical reactions in your body,
- absorption of vitamins
- production of hormones
- building cell membranes

Your body also needs micronutrients - vitamins and minerals - that are needed in small amounts.

Choosing the right nutrient dense foods can optimize the way your body functions and aid recovery.

2. Ask for help from **a qualified sport dietician or medical professional**, and tell them that you are subject to Anti-doping Rules. They can help inform you about making food choices to get appropriate levels of nutrients. They can also help with meal planning around your training schedule, so you know what to bring to the gym, or what to eat leading up to a competition. They can help find options that work for you to meet your sport goals. Simple easy changes can often bring good results.

3. Have a **nutritional assessment** completed. A Medical Professional can help you make an informed decision about supplements by conducting a nutrition assessment, which should include a dietary evaluation, body composition analysis, biochemical testing, health and performance history, and nutrition-focused clinical exam. Use of a supplement should be based on a defined medical need, not because your friends say to take it.

4. If your diet is optimized and you still have deficiencies in your nutrition or are unable to meet the energy demands of training, the Medical Professional may recommend using a supplement for health purposes. If there is a medical or nutritional need for a supplement, the medical professional should talk to you about the risks associated with taking that supplement. Ensure you acknowledge the risk with supplements and **take steps to minimize these risks**

- conduct thorough research on any supplement you consider using – such as checking claims and ingredients;
- choose a batch-tested supplement that has the same manufacturing reference or label as the batch certificate (a batch-tested supplement cannot remove all risks associated with supplements, but it can significantly reduce them)
- check with the medical professional before using it to confirm the appropriate dose
- Monitor your health

And if you decide to use a supplement:

- Keep a small amount of the supplement product– if you test positive, you at least have the option of having your leftover sample scientifically tested to see if it was contaminated
- Keep the batch-test certificate
- Go with a reputable company – be wary of buying supplements over the Internet. Anti-Doping Organizations do not approve or endorse any supplement products and any other product claiming they are safe to take.
- Keep the proof of purchase (receipt)
- Keep a log of when and how much you take (some banned substances can stay in your system for a long time and by the time you are informed of a positive test, you may have forgotten what supplements you took, when and how much.

THERE IS NO WAY TO GUARANTEE that any supplement product (even batch-tested) is free from banned substances.

REMEMBER: If you test positive, you will have to prove that you have conducted significant research and that the supplement was contaminated. You must show that you took the necessary steps to show what you did to mitigate any risk, and you would still receive a sanction

References

UK Anti-Doping. Managing Supplement Risks. Available at:

<https://www.ukad.org.uk/athletes/managing-supplement-risks>. Access: April, 6th 2021.

WADA ADEL for International-level Athletes