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USA WEEKEND

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4 USA WEEKEND • March 12-14, 2004

Health

Investigating supplements

By TEDD MITCHELL, M.D.



The Food and Drug Administration finally said enough is enough: In a few weeks, dangerous ephedra can't be legally sold. The supplement industry complains that this FDA "interference" will lead to restrictions on safe, effective products. But doctors are applauding. In fact, a 2003 editorial in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* suggested that if a substance has "biological activity," treat it as a drug. If it doesn't, don't allow health claims.

For now, it's up to you to become a dietary supplement detective. I have three recommendations:

First, understand that labels legally can make claims not backed up by science. The label may say a product will regrow

your hair, but research may disagree.

Next, discuss supplements with a doctor who knows your health. Most doctors have had no formal training in supplements, and some dismiss them. But we're learning. Many of us recommend glucosamine and chondroitin for joint aches, but we tell diabetics to be cautious because, despite a recent reassuring study, these supplements might hurt blood sugar. Your physician can work with you. Any doctor who is unapproachable about this is unapproachable about other topics, too, so it's time to make a change. Your doctor should be open to having a two-way conversation on any health topic.

Finally, bone up. Research before you buy. Ignore hype; focus on ingredients. A good resource is 2003's *Physicians' Desk Reference for Non-prescription Drugs*

If it sounds too good to be true ...

and Dietary Supplements. Also, try the American Botanical Council (herbalgram.org).

Supplements include vitamins, minerals, herbs, amino acids and much more. Often my patients take something simply because a friend said it would be a good idea. Please don't.

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