

Immune System Supplements: Buyer Beware

There are an abundance of supplements on the market that claim to boost, enhance, or support the immune system and its ability to protect the body. Although many products make these claims, there is an obligation, as consumers and healthcare practitioners, to dig a little deeper and determine what is in the product and how it affects the body. Differences between the types of products on the market should be identified and regulations set in place for claims regarding the products.

Identifying the Differences between Immune Products

The immune system is a complex integration of synergistic segments that are constantly bombarded by stimuli from internal and external sources.¹ It's composed of lymph nodes, bone marrow, and organs such as the spleen and thymus, all of which contribute to the support of specific immune cells.² These different elements of the immune system work together to ultimately protect the body and support a healthy system – which means that finding a product to support immune health begins with knowing which components of the system you are looking to address. Most often, traditional herbs and extracts found in immune system supplements provide beneficial mechanisms of actions for specific components of the immune system rather than affecting the whole system.³ Some supplements contain herbs and extracts that stimulate cell-mediated immune mechanisms (immunostimulatory), while others inhibit mediators of physiologic cascades (immunosuppressing).¹ When selecting an immune supplement, first identify the component of the immune system you are trying to support, and then select the product containing herbs that have been found to effectively support it. One example, published by the Journal of Microscopy and Ultrastructure, provides more information on the modulation of dendritic cell immune functions by plant components.⁴

Regulations and Label Claims

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulates label claims on products to prevent manufacturing companies from using false or misleading statements.⁵ Although these standards are put in place, there are still products that over-promise, or make unsubstantiated claims regarding the benefits that one may experience by using the product. Using established, well-known supplement brands is one way to avoid these.

The Dynamic Environment of Product Labeling

If the language around dietary supplement claims seems a bit unwieldy at times, it is helpful to understand that the regulatory environment surrounding supplement labeling is a dynamic one. It is first dictated by law, but also challenges to the law, precedence, and evolves as companies attempt to add new label claims regularly. Additionally, other governmental agencies, legal action against particular, competitive, or noncompetitive companies can influence how a company describes the benefits of their products.

Dietary supplements, according to the Dietary Supplement Act of 1994 (DSHEA), cannot be marketed as a product to treat, prevent, cure, or diagnose disease – those claims are limited only to drugs.

Often times, dietary supplements which include vitamins, minerals, herbs and botanical extracts, and other components like amino acids and fatty acids, are sold alongside homeopathic drugs and over-the-counter (OTC) medications. Homeopathic drugs follow a slightly different and, in many ways, more descriptive set of guidelines. The label may denote an indication for a specific symptom or condition whereas a dietary supplement would not. Label claims are not designed to distinguish efficacy (or how well a product works). OTC medications are able to use even more descriptive language often indicating disease states or symptoms. When a consumer is seeking the best support of their immune system, product labels from different categories may be the greatest red herring in the decision process. Practitioners need to be especially aware of labeling restrictions as it pertains to helping an individual choose a product.

Practitioners can also pass along to patients the following tips (suggested by the FDA):

- Ask yourself if the claim seem exaggerated or unrealistic
- Search for supplements using reliable sources such as professional brand supplements only available through healthcare practitioners
- Ask your healthcare provider to help distinguish between reliable and questionable information
- Check with the manufacturer for information to support the claims of the product (but be mindful that supplement manufacturers are legally obligated to uphold all regulations set forth by DSHEA and the subsequent regulatory environment. If you have specific questions regarding the benefits or usage/recommendations of the supplement it is best to discuss with your healthcare practitioner.)

These tips can also be found in a [customizable immune system supplement patient download](#).

Know the Drug-Nutrient Interactions

As with many products on the market, drug and nutrient interactions can affect immune support supplement recommendations. Use a [drug-nutrient interaction database](#) to find drug and/or a nutrient and/or an herb and drug interactions including both documented and theoretical interactions. This database can be used for a variety of supplement recommendations, including for the immune system.

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