

Athletic Supplements: Fact vs. Fiction

The Truth About Athletic Supplements

Lots of people imagine that athletic supplements work like spinach did for Popeye or like a power-up in a video game. You imagine that they give you a boost of super-strength or super-stamina. Not really.

Yes, some supplements do have an effect on athletic performance. However, that effect is usually slight. Most supplements tend to benefit only a specific athlete in a specific situation.

Most people can get all the nutrients they need from a well-balanced diet. But supplements should be reserved for special situations -- such as when a stressed-out college athlete is exhausted at the end of a season but has to keep going and isn't able to get enough nutrients specifically from their nutrition program

Popular Sports Supplements

Here's a rundown on popular athletic supplements to help you sort fact from fiction.

- **Creatine** seems to help the muscles make energy quickly for intense activity. Studies have shown it can help people like sprinters, or strength athletes, but isn't a good choice for endurance athletes. In fact, it could cause them to gain weight and slow down.
- **Beta-alanine** is another amino acid that could benefit some athletes. It could help someone in stop-and-go sports like football or basketball. Studies seem to show that beta-alanine works best in highly trained athletes.
- **Whey protein** can help build muscle mass. It seems to work better than other types of protein, such as soy or casein. Athletes may take it right after a workout to help with muscle repair. Whey protein isn't an instant muscle builder. It only works along with rigorous training.
- **Caffeine** is a very common ingredient in sports supplements. Supplement manufacturers love caffeine because you feel it rev you up, that makes you buy more of it.

Caffeine does have some potential benefits for some athletes. It may help endurance athletes last longer, but it's easy to get too much caffeine. Adding a lot of caffeine to that natural buzz can push you over the edge into anxiety.

3 Risks of Athletic Supplements

1. They may not be what they seem. The government doesn't regulate supplements, so you can't be sure the bottle really contains the all ingredients listed on the label -- in the right doses. "
2. For pro athletes, tainted supplements could end a career. They can be contaminated with a banned substance -- like anabolic steroids -- that could show up on a drug test. That risk extends to anyone who gets drug-tested for work, such as police or firefighters.
3. Lab tests have found that some "natural" supplements actually contain drugs, like decongestants or other stimulants. They could pose a risk of interactions with other drugs.

How to Use Sports Supplements Safely

Here are some tips:

- **Talk to an expert.** There are too many supplements and too much bad information to sort it out on your own. Before you start taking a supplement, talk to a sports dietitian or your doctor.
- **Know why you're taking a supplement.** Never take a supplement for vague reasons -- like getting "more energy." Know exactly what it does, how it works, and why it will help you.
- **Look for good quality.** Good manufacturers pay to have their supplements tested by independent labs. Look for supplements certified by Consumer Lab, Informed Choice, or NSF International.
- **Don't take too much.** Even with high quality supplements, taking too much can be a waste of money. It can also be dangerous. High doses of some supplements can interact with drugs and harm your body.
- **Don't use supplements to make up for an unhealthy lifestyle.** If you have bad habits or aren't eating well, supplements won't atone for your sins.

Most people are probably better off working on the fundamentals, like eating a healthy diet and getting enough rest. This will do a lot more for your athletic performance than any supplement.