

Tests show many supplements have quality problems

Continued from page C1

Administration approval. The FDA can act only after consumers get sick or a safety issue comes to light.

"We called it 'the body rule,'" said William Obermeyer, a chemist who left the FDA to found ConsumerLab.com with Cooperman. If a supplement was harmful, "we had to have so many adverse events before we could make a move on it. It was really like closing the barn door after all the animals left."

The law said the FDA could write quality control rules for products sold in the U.S. It took the FDA 13 years to adopt these, and they are just now taking effect. But the rules do not say what tests companies must do to prove what is in their products, and some tests can be fooled by subbing other ingredients. The rules also set no limits on toxins such as lead; nor do they change the fundamental way these products are sold to the public.

"It leaves the level of quality up to the manufacturer," Cooperman said.

In a written statement, FDA spokeswoman Susan Cruzan said the new rules contain what is "needed to ensure quality," and that products that contain contaminants or whose labels do not honestly describe their contents, are considered adulterated and subject to further action by the agency. But she conceded that the agency is spread thin.

"In that FDA has limited resources to analyze the composition of food products, including dietary supplements, it focuses these resources first on public health emergencies and products that may have caused injury or illness," she wrote.

Millions of Americans take vitamin, herbal or other dietary supplements. Annual sales exceed \$23 billion, and more than 40,000 products are on the market. Tens of thousands of supplement-related health problems are handled by U.S. poison control centers each year, according to a report in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in 2002.

Until last year, supplement makers were not required to report problems to the FDA, and even now they must report only serious ones. The agency estimates that more than 50,000 safety problems a year are related to supplement use.

The Institute of Medicine, an independent science panel that advises the government, studied the situation in 2005.

"The committee is concerned about the quality of dietary supplements in the United States. Product reliability is low," says its report, which urged amending the 1994 law to tighten consumer protections.

Trade associations say the FDA's new rules do that.

"We are FDA-regulated products," though not in the same way as prescription or over-the-counter drugs, said Steven Mister, president of the Council for Responsible Nutrition.

Although many people take supplements with no apparent ill effects, there have been many quality problems that a consumer might never realize because they don't always produce symptoms:

CONTAMINANTS

ConsumerLab.com found lead in at least one brand each of zinc, black cohosh and ginkgo products tested in recent years.

Lead can accumulate and cause many health problems, and the testing company wants a national limit of 0.5 micrograms per day — a level that in California requires a warning on the label.

A fungal toxin was found in four red yeast rice products in March 2008. And in 2007, federal officials warned about a liquid herbal supplement sold for colic and teething pain after finding cryptosporidium, a waterborne parasite that causes severe diarrhea.

Ayurvedics — popular herbals used in traditional medicines from India — often contain hazardous metals, studies in medical journals report. In 2004, researchers tested 70 ayurvedic remedies in the Boston area and found that one in five had potentially harmful levels of lead, mercury or arsenic. Tests in Houston, Chicago, San Francisco and New York City turned up similar results.

Metals naturally accumulate in certain herbs and come from the soil they are grown in. Many supplement ingredients come from Europe, India and China.

POTENCY PROBLEMS

In ConsumerLab.com testing last November, four out of seven supplements contained less ginkgo than claimed on their labels, and one failed to break apart



Dr. William Obermeyer of ConsumerLab.com preps supplement pills to be sent to labs for testing.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

properly to release its ingredients. Seven out of nine failed in tests in 2003, as did six out of 13 in 2005.

"It is now believed that ginkgo is among the most adulterated herbs," the company reports.

Tests by California scientists of two dozen ginseng supplements, reported in a nutrition journal in 2001, found that many differed from their labels. The concentrations of some ginseng compounds varied by up to 200-fold from product to product.

In ConsumerLab.com tests, six out of nine chondroitin supplements failed testing in April 2007. One had only 8 percent of what it claimed to contain, and one "maximum strength" product had none.

Vitamins and minerals had problems, too. A "high potency" iron supplement contained less than half the amount claimed. Of 23 top-selling vitamin C pills, one provided less than half the amount promised; the suggested dosages of some others were beyond recommended safe levels.

Last year, nearly 200

people were sickened by supplements containing up to 200 times the amount of selenium stated on the label.

HIDDEN DRUGS

The FDA has repeatedly warned about herbal pills found to contain versions of Viagra and similar drugs to help men get an erection. These can pose a heart hazard, especially when taken with certain medications.

In December, the FDA expanded warnings about dozens of brands of weight loss pills that contained prescription drugs not disclosed on labels.

DRUG INTERACTIONS

Ginkgo, vitamin K, garlic, ginseng and other herbals can cause bleeding or clotting problems if taken with certain medications or before surgery. St. John's wort, promoted for depression, affects metabolism of more than half of all prescription drugs and can undermine birth control pills.

Other supplements that can interfere with medicines include glucosamine, saw

palmetto, soy and valerian.

OTHER RISKS

Even "safe" supplements can be harmful. Beta-carotene takers still had increased rates of lung cancer six years after one study was stopped. These supplements "appear to increase rates of the disease, particularly among smokers," the National Cancer Institute warns.

In another study, men taking vitamin E were slightly more likely to get prostate cancer, and those taking selenium were a little more likely to develop diabetes. The results could have been due to chance, but federal officials stopped the study last October.

Other studies suggest that high doses of vitamin C may help shield cancer cells from treatments designed to kill the cancer.

"Antioxidants are not the magic bullets that the supplement industry would like consumers to believe," said David Schardt, a nutrition expert with the consumer advocacy group, the Center for Science in the Public Interest. "They're not even necessarily benign."

Tips on assessing capacity for change

Continued from page C1

● He demonstrates dishonesty in word, in deed, or both.

With this new information, consider the following situations:

● Margo came in to see me at the behest of her adult daughter, Lindsay. Margo reported that there's nothing she wants more than a good relationship with her daughter. She then said, however, that she didn't believe their

■ Place your money on people who demonstrate that they're capable of change. If you do so, you're unlikely to be disappointed.

problems had anything to do with her. She proceeded to tell me about all of Lindsay's perceived shortcomings, and became defensive and angry when I suggested that in most relationships both parties bear some responsibility for problems that occur.

● Chet was very upset about a falling-out he had with his brother Rich. Rich accused Chet of being selfish, and of never considering the feelings of others.

Although Chet had never received this kind of feedback before, he valued the relationship with his brother, and was anxious to explore whether there was truth to his brother's remarks. Although he was hurt he resisted becoming defensive.

Using the criteria above, it is clear that Margo is far less likely to change for the better than is Rich.

Even if Chet has a short fuse, is impulsive, is depressed or anxious, or suffers from bad habits, his openness to constructive criticism and his willingness to take responsibility for his actions makes him a good candidate for positive change.

Life is short and we only have so much energy to put into our relationships. My suggestion is this: If you're a betting person, place your money on people who demonstrate that they're capable of change. If you do so you're unlikely to be disappointed.

Maud Purcell is a psychotherapist and corporate consultant based in Stamford.

High blood pressure on the rise among children

Continued from page C1

awareness, and we need to look at what are the barriers of physicians in recognizing high blood pressure in a clinical setting," said Dr. Tammy Brady, a pediatric nephrologist at the Johns Hopkins Children's Center and one of the study's authors.

Brady and other researchers found that black children with high blood pressure are more likely than other children to develop a thickening of the left chamber of the heart. Known as left ventricular hypertrophy, or LVH, the condition can lead to heart failure, rhythm abnormalities and death.

Of 139 hypertension patients ages 3 to 21 in the Hopkins study, 60 percent of the black subjects developed LVH, compared with 37 percent for those of other races.

"It's concerning that the prevalence is higher in the African-American population," said Dr. Cozume Pruetto, a kidney specialist at Hopkins Children's Center and the study's lead author. "Practitioners need to realize that and need to follow those children closely."

Researchers don't know why the disparity exists. Black children with LVH also tended to have higher cholesterol levels and a

higher body mass index, putting them at greater cardiovascular risk, Pruetto said. Since the study was among the first to look at racial differences and was done with a small sample, she said, more research is needed to understand why black children are especially vulnerable.

Still, Pruetto stresses that all children with untreated hypertension could be at risk. Even those with mild hypertension can develop LVH.

Doctors are still learning the intricacies of the illness in children.

"It's been recognized in adults for several decades, but I think that our attention to LVH in children has probably lagged," said Dr. Susan Mendley, assistant professor and director of pediatric nephrology at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

Brady, at Hopkins, recommends that when a doctor discovers one episode of elevated blood pressure, the child should be monitored and have further tests to determine if there are underlying causes of the hypertension. Children should have blood and urine tests to rule out kidney problems, which can cause hypertension. And doctors should do an eye exam to rule out eye problems that can trigger

hypertension.

In addition, children should also receive an ultrasound of the heart, known as an echocardiogram, to check for LVH, she said. "It's a mistake not to do it," she said.

But some pediatricians say the extensive ultrasound may not be necessary for every child with elevated blood pressure. First, parents should be advised to encourage their child to exercise and limit salty foods, which can cause high blood pressure, said Dr. Charles Shubin, director of pediatrics at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore.

"How much do you subject a larger population to get that if there is very low incidence of that problem?" he said. Of course, he said, if blood pressure is consistently high, doctors should order tests.

Brady says monitoring is critical because hypertension strikes some children who have no underlying health problems, making it difficult to detect without further tests. If the high blood pressure is severe, children can have symptoms such as bloody noses, headaches and shortness of breath.

"But often, hypertension is silent in kids," said Brady. "The kid looks fine; the kid seems healthy

and has no complaints."

Pediatricians tend to carefully screen obese children and those with a family history of hypertension.

But for other young patients, doctors may not do blood pressure readings at all, despite recommendations that screening begin at 3, said Brady, who has researched why doctors miss high blood pressure. And some doctors do not take proper blood pressure readings, which is admittedly a tough task with a squirming child; Brady recommends taking three blood pressure readings during a visit and averaging them.

A 2007 study by Harvard researchers found that doctors fail to diagnose high blood pressure in more than three-quarters of children with the problem.

It can be difficult to spot kids with hypertension. Healthy pressure depends on a child's age, gender and height, so that "normal" is often a moving target.

"To a pediatrician in a busy clinic, there are so many things they are expected to do in a visit, so sometimes, they eyeball it," Brady said.

Many parents believe high blood pressure is an adult problem, and they are often shocked to learn their children have hypertension,

Brady said.

Duvall's grandmother, Paula Duvall of Baltimore, had no idea children could struggle with high blood pressure. And when she learned of her grandson's diagnosis, she immediately began fretting about the child she has raised since he was a toddler.

She knows the risks of hypertension; she has the condition, and so does Duvall's grandfather. "That hurt me, because I know what it's like," she said.

Doctors detected Va'Sean Duvall's hypertension when he was admitted to the hospital this year for an asthma attack. Diagnosed with asthma at 2, he has had attacks so severe he has been to the intensive-care unit more than a dozen times, and he takes numerous medications to keep the asthma controlled.

His lung doctor referred him to Brady after noticing the youth's blood pressure was consistently high. Other tests showed swelling of his heart muscle, an indicator of LVH. Brady put him on adult medicine, one pill a day.

Va'Sean Duvall has taken the diagnosis in stride. His mind is set on studying math this fall at Coppin State University, with the ultimate goal of becoming a Broadway performer.