

Supplement Series Part Four: What supplements should I avoid?

Now that you know supplements are [regulated post-market](#), you're probably aware that all supplements are not created equal. Some are manufactured in safe environments with high quality control standards and then tested and certified by independent certification companies. But others are manufactured in ways that allow for both accidental and intentional contamination. Even worse, you can't rely on that supplement label to know what's in your product because no regulatory body is evaluating the contents of all supplements before they reach athletes and other consumers.

While it's difficult to tell if a supplement is safe or potentially harmful, there are some red flags that you can always look out for when it comes to evaluating supplements and determining which ones to use and which ones to avoid.

Through this five-part series on supplements, you will find an [overview of the dietary supplement industry](#) so that you can decide if the potential benefits of dietary supplements outweigh the [risks](#). And, if you find you do need to use supplements, how you can better choose a low-risk product.

What types of products should I avoid?

In general, it's best to avoid supplements that are not certified by an independent certification company. The U.S. Anti-Doping Agency (USADA) provides [guidance on reducing your risk from supplements](#) by using NSF Certified for Sport supplements.

If you choose to use uncertified supplements despite the risks, avoid using products with red flags (see graphics below). However, you should always remember that even a thorough review for red flags is no guarantee.

USADA is aware of several dietary supplements that, on initial inspection, would not have exhibited any "red flags," but testing revealed that they were contaminated with experimental drugs! Because a supplement's label and contents are not checked by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or anyone else before a product is sold, it is completely up to the manufacturer to accurately list the ingredients and the amounts.



While there are many companies that make high-quality supplements and spend a lot of time ensuring the labeling on their products is accurate, there are also companies that are sloppy during manufacturing or deliberately spike their products with illegal ingredients that are not on the label. There have been many cases where seemingly safe or low-risk products ended up containing prohibited performance-enhancing drugs, even though there was nothing on the label that made the product appear unsafe.

How can you identify risky supplements?

Researching your supplements and recognizing red flags is one way to reduce your risk if you decide to use supplements. Before using any supplement, check to see if the product or manufacturer is on the USADA's [High Risk List](#) or the [FDA Tainted Supplements list](#). While these lists are not all inclusive, they do identify many supplements and manufacturers that are known to be risky for athletes and consumers.

You should also consider these red flags while evaluating and researching any supplement you might use.

HIGH RISK COMPANIES

HIGH RISK COMPANIES



The manufacturer or company has received FDA warning letters or has been subject to other enforcement actions. Search for the company or product name on [FDA.gov](https://www.fda.gov) or [FTC.gov](https://www.ftc.gov).



Products sold exclusively on the internet may raise a red flag. While there are some legitimate dietary supplement companies that only have an online presence, some companies deliberately avoid regulatory agencies by opening and closing websites quickly, or selling products online to the U.S. from other countries.

RISKY INGREDIENTS AND UNUSUAL USE INSTRUCTIONS

RISKY INGREDIENTS OR UNUSUAL USE INSTRUCTIONS

1

Product lists unrecognizable ingredients that seem out of place, or it lists ingredients by chemical names rather than common names.

2

The supplement label or advertising includes substances on the WADA Prohibited List, or in a general category of the WADA Prohibited List, such as anabolic agents or stimulants.

1

Uses Chemical Name | Unrecognizable Ingredients

2

WADA Prohibited Substances

3

andro -ol -diol -dione -stene -stane
17a 17b 17d epi epithio gonado

*any other number with the alpha & beta symbols or other greek symbols

4

Skin Patches | Injections | Drops

*any extra steps to swallowing

5

No Nutritional Value Listed

3

*Any of the following phrases or characters on a body building product label should be considered a red flag because they might indicate the presence of steroids:
andro, -ol, -diol, -dione, -stene or -stane, epi, epithio, gonado, or any ingredient that is listed as a chemical formula.*

4

Any product that is taken or applied to the body in a way other than simply eating it or swallowing it, such as skin patches, creams, injections, and drops. Also be wary of extra steps before swallowing, including placing the product under the tongue or swishing it around in your mouth.

5

Ingredients have no clear, well-documented nutritional value. If you've never heard of an ingredient, then you should stop and do research first.

RED FLAG MARKETING

RED FLAG MARKETING

Product claims to be "FDA Approved," "WADA Approved," or "USADA Approved." These organizations do not approve dietary supplements.



Advertising contains phrases like "newest scientific breakthrough," "secret formula," "money back guarantee," "quick fix," "used for thousands of years," or "what the experts don't want you to know."



Product claims to be an "alternative to prescription medication."



The supplement is advertised to be a thermogenic or stimulant-based weight loss or energy product, a sexual enhancement product, or as a hormonal or anabolic product. Companies often add stimulants, Viagra-like drugs, or steroids to their products so they "work," but they might not list those ingredients on the label.



Product claims to treat or prevent a disease, such as hormone imbalances, the common cold, flu, diabetes, and inflammation.





About TrueSport

TrueSport®, a movement powered by the experience and values of the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency, champions the positive values and life lessons learned through youth sport. [TrueSport](#) inspires athletes, coaches, parents, and administrators to change the culture of youth sport through active engagement and thoughtful curriculum based on cornerstone lessons of sportsmanship, character-building, and clean and healthy performance, while also creating leaders across communities through sport.

For more expert-driven articles and materials, visit TrueSport's comprehensive [LEARN](#) resource.

This content was reproduced in partnership with TrueSport. Any content copied or reproduced without TrueSport and the U.S. Anti-Doping Agency's express written permission would be in violation of our copyright, and subject to legal recourse. To learn more or request permission to reproduce content, click [here](#).

You can link back to the TrueSport article beginning July 1 at:
<https://truesport.org/dietary-supplements/supplement-series-supplements-avoid/>