

# Dietary supplements send 23,000 to hospitals each year in US

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Many claim to be natural, which may sound safe, but dietary supplements send 23,000 Americans to hospital emergency rooms each year, a new federal study estimates.

The riskiest ones are weight-loss and energy-boosting products, says the report, published in this week's *New England Journal of Medicine*. Here are some details:

## POPULAR PILLS

The market is flush with pills and powders. Supplement products have increased dramatically, from about 4,000 types in 1994 to more than 55,000 in 2012, the report says. Roughly half of all U.S. adults say they have used at least one in the past month, most commonly vitamins. Dietary supplements do not have to have federal Food and Drug Administration approval before they are sold, nor do they get the kind of testing prescription drugs do. The FDA can order a product off the market if it is found to be unsafe.

## THE STUDY

Reliable information on serious side effects from supplements is hard to come by. Researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and at the FDA studied emergency room records from 2004 through 2013 at 63 hospitals considered to be nationally representative. Based on 3,667 cases they found, they estimated there are about 23,000 ER visits

each year for health problems related to supplements, and that about 2,154 lead to hospitalization.

## BIGGEST TROUBLEMAKERS

Products for weight loss or increased energy accounted for the most ER visits. These products caused 72 percent of problems involving chest pain or irregular or too-fast heartbeats, and they were the culprits in more than half of visits among patients ages 5 to 34. Bodybuilding and sexual-enhancement products also led to cardiac symptoms in many seeking ER help.

## THE SUPPLEMENT INDUSTRY'S VIEW

"They sound like big numbers but they really aren't," Steve Mister, president of the trade group Council for Responsible Nutrition, said of the ER visits. "The risks are so, so small" when you consider the millions of people who use the products, he said.

## ADVICE

Ask your doctor before taking any supplements. Some can interfere with other medicines, and certain vitamins, especially in high doses, are known to be harmful, such as beta-carotene and vitamin A for smokers.

**More information:** Study:

[www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMsa1504267](http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMsa1504267)

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