

Dietary supplements: How to avoid fake products

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You probably have bought some type of supplement—maybe vitamins, herbs or probiotics—online or at a store. Maybe the doctor recommended it or maybe you heard that it's good for you.

But how can you tell what you're buying, especially online, is the real thing? Not too long ago, Amazon alerted consumers who had purchased Align [nutritional supplements](#) from a certain seller that the product was most likely counterfeit and that they needed to stop using it, as reported by Wired.

Align is a Procter & Gamble brand but a third-party merchant was selling counterfeit Align products on Amazon. Amazon pulled the product and is now selling only the genuine supplements, according to Wired.

There are a few things you can do to avoid fakes, and buy high quality supplements. One of them is a verification seal by the 200-year-old US Pharmacopeia, or USP. Also, when shopping online check who's selling the product. On Amazon, for instance, the seller's name is listed after the name of the product you're looking to purchase.

Unlike medications, supplements aren't subject to rigorous testing and federal regulations. But a few organizations, including USP, try to fill that gap by testing and verifying products.

John Atwater, senior director of verification program at USP, explained

how the nonprofit works and what consumers should do to avoid dupes.

SO HOW DO YOU DEFINE SUPPLEMENTS?

Dietary supplements contain dietary ingredients and are ingested. A [dietary ingredient](#) is defined as a vitamin, mineral, it could be a botanical, it could almost be anything under the sun. You might think of them as being more like a drug product rather than a food, but they are classified as a special form of food.

HOW ARE SUPPLEMENTS REGULATED?

Dietary supplements fall under a set of regulations that are different from the conventional food and drug products.

Dietary supplements are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition, under the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994, or DSHEA, which classifies dietary supplements as a special category of food.

Under DSHEA, supplement manufacturers and distributors are responsible for substantiating the quality and the safety of the dietary ingredients they use. They are responsible for ensuring that product labeling meets all the requirements. However, dietary supplement manufacturers are not required to get FDA approval before producing or selling dietary supplements, nor are they required to demonstrate clinical efficacy as required for drug products.

SO HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT WHAT YOU'RE BUYING IS THE REAL THING?

The best way for consumers to protect themselves is to ensure that they're purchasing a quality [supplement](#) that has a verified mark like

USP. And that's really important given the size and diversity of the products and ingredients and the rapid pace with which new dietary supplements are introduced into the market.

It's also advisable for consumers to purchase the supplements from reputable outlets, whether it's a retail store or the Internet. Because if you're dealing with a reputable retailer, they're going to be taking the necessary precautions to ensure that the products that they're selling on their shelves are of good quality.

And use your common sense. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Just don't take things at face value. Always double check our website for a listing of products that are approved to carry the USP mark.

Remember, there's no low barrier of entry into the marketplace for supplements, unlike drugs. There are products out there that claim to be dietary supplements but they aren't.

WHAT DOES IT TAKE FOR USP TO GIVE ITS SEAL OF APPROVAL TO A SUPPLEMENT?

We're a nonprofit scientific organization, and our standards are created based solely on science. Our primary mission is to establish standards of quality for drug products and dietary supplements and food ingredients.

We have scientific experts and the standards that we use for dietary supplements go through the same rigorous process that quality standards for drugs that are created by USP go through. The only difference is that it's mandatory for pharmaceutical drug companies to follow USP standards. In the case of dietary supplements, it's optional.

In our program, companies have to validate testing methods to establish all of their claims on the label, not only for determining remedy but also

the stability of those ingredients throughout the shelf life of the product.

We test the products for full specifications, for potency of ingredients, contaminants and performance of the products. We also review the product quality control and manufacturing documentation, which makes our program unique.

If companies pass all the tests and correct citations, we award them the right to use the USP mark. And then we enter the surveillance phase and go through the same tests on an annual basis.

WHAT PERCENTAGE OF THE SUPPLEMENTS OUT THERE HAVE A SEAL LIKE USP?

Unfortunately, a very small percentage. But we've verified hundreds of products and the verification program is getting more recognition in the marketplace, so we've got more demand for the program, so hopefully that number will eventually grow into thousands.

Check your supplements:

—USP: [dietary-supplements-herbal-medicines](http://www.usp.org/dietary-supplements-herbal-medicines)"
target="_blank">www.usp.org/dietary-supplements-herbal-medicines
and www.quality-supplements.org/

—Dietary Supplement Label Database: dsld.nlm.nih.gov/dsld

—Labdoor: labdoor.com

—Consumer Labs: www.consumerlab.com

—Examine: examine.com

—Dietary Supplement Quality Collaborative: www.dsqqcollaborative.org

—LegitScript: www.legitscript.com

—Fight the Fakes: fightthefakes.org/

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