

30% Of Supplements Are Not What They're Labeled

And that's just the beginning of the problem...

By Markham Heid

From Echinacea to Vit D3, herbal supplements are a \$60-billion business in the U.S., but most of the products you'll find at your local drug store or supermarket are mislabeled, contaminated or—in many cases—wholly without the herb you thought you were buying, shows a new study published in the journal BMC Medicine.

Researchers from Canada and India tested more than 90 different herbal products—including capsules, powders, and teas—from 12 of the industry's largest producers. Here's what they found: More than 30% of the supplements tested contained a substitution plant instead of the herb listed on the label, meaning the product contained none of the herb you thought you were buying. One-third contained “fillers”, usually grasses like rice or wheat, or contaminants not listed among the labeled contents. Just 16% of the supplements tested contained the right herbs without any contaminants, fillers, or substitutions. The researchers analyzed multiple samples of each product to ensure their results were accurate.

Obviously, this is a problem—and not just because you're being ripped off. Some of the fillers and contaminants discovered are toxic or known to react with the listed ingredients in dangerous ways. For example, one of the products tested, labeled St. John's Wort, actually contained an herb known to cause diarrhea, liver damage, and abdominal pain if ingested regularly, the researchers explain. Another additive they turned up has been shown to cause headaches, nausea, ulcers, and joint pain.

The problem is that there's very little regulation of these types of products. The Food and Drug Administration doesn't test or authenticate herbal supplements, so there's no one ensuring the label matches the contents, the study authors say.

How can you protect yourself? The researchers aren't releasing specifics on which brands passed or failed their analysis. But GNC, Solgar, and Spring Valley are three manufacturers that produce herbal supplements—including Echinacea, ginkgo biloba, and St. John's Wort—that are free of contaminants and contain the labeled amount of herbs, according to ConsumerLab.com, a company that independently tests health products.