



Guidelines for Young Athletes: Responsible Use of Sports Nutrition Supplements



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Sports supplements are widely used by all types of athletes—male and female, young and old, novice and elite. Numerous products are available and include easily recognized extensions of normal nutrition practices that can be used safely without any special considerations, such as hydration drinks and energy bars. A few ingredients in some products may present safety issues for some segments of the population because of special age or health considerations. Clearly, all sports supplements are not for everyone, and oversight by parents, coaches, and trainers is needed to decide whether or how to use these products. Particular emphasis should be placed on proper use of sports supplements according to the products' dosage instructions and other directions for use. Proper supervision will also help athletes determine what products are acceptable to the governing bodies of their respective sports.



The concepts “green light”—normal nutritional support, “yellow light”—qualified use, and “red light”—not appropriate for young athletes provide a useful framework for guiding consumer use of sports supplements. All athletes should be guided by advice from a healthcare provider and the requirements of their supervising sports authority. Parents, guardians, and coaches must also provide guidance and supervision for the young athlete.

These guidelines were prepared by the staff of the Council for Responsible Nutrition (CRN) and approved by CRN's Board of Directors in September 2002. The preliminary draft was reviewed by participants in a conference jointly sponsored by CRN and the National Institutes of Health Office of Dietary Supplements (NIH/ODS) in January 2002.

The Council for Responsible Nutrition (CRN), founded in 1973, is one of the dietary supplement industry's leading trade associations representing ingredient suppliers and manufacturers. CRN members adhere to a strong code of ethics, comply with dosage limits and manufacture dietary supplements to high quality standards under good manufacturing practices.



Green Light—Normal Nutritional Support:

Many sports supplements provide additional normal nutrition and are safe to use, whether the athlete is young or old, elite or novice. Included are popular and common products such as beverages to replenish fluids and electrolytes, protein powders and energy bars used in the context of a normal diet as a source of protein and calories, and vitamins or minerals to ensure adequate intake. Young athletes, like other members of the population, are very likely to benefit from the regular use of dietary supplements such as multivitamins, calcium, and antioxidant nutrients, in addition to eating a balanced and varied diet.



Yellow Light—Qualified Use:

Some sports supplements contain ingredients that affect muscle function or recovery, such as creatine. Although there is no substantiated safety concern, use of these products should be carefully considered, as the long-term effects of such supplement use have not been sufficiently studied in younger athletes. Other products contain stimulant ingredients such as synephrine, yohimbine, caffeine or botanical sources of caffeine and related xanthine alkaloids, such as guarana and kola nut. All these sports supplement products should be used in accordance with label directions, and gatekeepers such as parents and coaches should closely monitor use by young athletes. All athletes should avoid dangerous levels of stimulation that could result from the combination of intense physical activity (which releases the natural stimulant epinephrine) and consumption of stimulants such as caffeine from beverages, certain analgesics, and dietary supplements that contain stimulant ingredients. Some competitive events, such as the Olympics, set a limit on caffeine use, which results in disqualification if exceeded.



Red Light—Not Appropriate for Young Athletes:

Individuals younger than 18 years should not use steroid hormone precursors and products containing ephedrine alkaloids. Because of incomplete sexual maturation, young persons may be more susceptible than adults to adverse effects of steroid hormone precursors such as "andro" (androstenedione), "19-nor" (19-norandrostenedione) and DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone).

Ephedrine alkaloids are contraindicated for certain subsets of the population, and little research has addressed the safety of these products for persons younger than 18. Because young people are sometimes more sensitive than adults to some substances, products containing ephedrine alkaloids should not be used by anyone under 18 years.

Product labels should caution against such use, and gatekeepers such as parents and coaches should actively monitor young athletes to ensure that such products are not used.

Additionally, the alkaloids ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, along with hormones such as androgens, are banned substances in most professional and nonprofessional competitive events, including the Olympics and college and high school athletics. Athletes who test positive for such products are automatically disqualified from competition. Steroid hormone precursors and botanical sources of ephedrine and related alkaloids, such as ephedra (ma huang), can cause athletes to test positive for banned substances.

Role of Industry and Other Stakeholders

The Council for Responsible Nutrition is issuing these guidelines for the responsible use of sports supplements by young athletes and is asking health professionals and sports authorities to join in support of the guidelines. The guidelines recognize that supplements intended to improve nutrient intake in the context of a normal diet are generally safe and are likely to be beneficial for all segments of the population. However, the guidelines specifically advise against use of hormone precursors and ephedrine-containing dietary supplements by persons younger than 18. Other products, such as stimulants and ingredients that affect muscle function, have not been well studied in young athletes and should be carefully considered before use. All sports supplement products should be used in accordance with label directions, and gatekeepers, such as parents and coaches, should closely monitor use by young athletes.

Responsible manufacturers and marketers of sports supplements:

Responsible companies that market sports supplements recognize that some ingredients are not to be recommended for use by young athletes. These companies are making a commitment to comply with the guidelines. Products of concern will not be promoted to persons younger than 18 through product labeling, advertising or other marketing activities, including appearances or endorsements by sports figures. Labels for the products identified in the guidelines as “not appropriate” for young athletes will include a prominent statement: “Not for use by persons younger than 18.” The companies will also support educational activities intended to help young people use dietary supplements responsibly and avoid products that may be unsafe for them or that may violate the rules of fair competition.

Parents, coaches, and trainers:

Sports authorities have been proactive in expressing their concerns about some dietary supplements (i.e., those in the “Red Light” category), but also recognize the role of safe and beneficial nutritional support in the context of a normal diet. Parents, coaches, and trainers will continue to advise young athletes against the use of inappropriate sports supplements. Gatekeepers will reinforce that guidance by imposing meaningful sanctions on persons who recommend or tacitly permit the use of such products and on young athletes who violate the rules set forth as conditions of their participation in sports activities. These gatekeepers, especially the parents, must work with young athletes to provide sound information and will seek support for appropriate enforcement of appropriate rules of conduct with regard to sports supplements of concern.

Health professionals:

Doctors (including those specializing in sports medicine), nurses, athletic trainers, pharmacists, nutritionists and dietitians are key sources of information about health, nutrition, and physical function for all interested groups—including manufacturers, coaches, young athletes and their parents. Health professionals also recognize the legitimate and safe uses of dietary supplements for nutritional support, and will continue to provide accurate and balanced information to help all parties distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate products and uses.



Council for Responsible Nutrition

Representing the Dietary Supplement Industry
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