

DON'T BELIEVE THE HYPE

People are wasting money on unnecessary food supplements - and it's no wonder when some supplement manufacturers are making misleading claims on their products

The products pictured right show how some supplement manufacturers use clever language to imply unproven benefits, or use font sizes to exaggerate the effect some ingredients will have.

And they're not alone - the supplement aisles in supermarkets and health food shops are awash with hundreds of products claiming to prevent and treat a variety of ailments. So it's no surprise that even though a minority of people actually need supplements, in a Which? survey of UK adults a third told us they take them regularly. Last year the UK supplement industry was valued at £385m.

MISLEADING CLAIMS

For years manufacturers were able to make claims on their products without having to prove their effectiveness before marketing them. But over the past five years all companies making health claims on supplements (and food and drinks) have had to submit the evidence to the EU's European Food Safety Authority (EFSA). Of more than 44,000 claims submitted, only 248 have actually been authorised.

Since December 2012 it has been illegal to include health claims on packaging that are not approved by the EU. The exception is for certain probiotic strains and glucosamine which must be removed by January 2014 - EFSA has ruled that all health claims for these are not approved, due to insufficient evidence. But we've found that while most companies have removed rejected claims, some are still exaggerating claims and misleading consumers.

This is important to note because these products are still available and selling well - 18% of adults who take supplements in our survey said they take glucosamine supplements and 14% take probiotics drinks and tablets.

SUPPLE JOINTS

The EFSA panel rejected claims that glucosamine and chondroitin help support healthy joints, help support flexible joints and reduce inflammation in joints. As well as Seven Seas Jointcare Active (30p a day), right, we looked at Boots Joint Health Glucosamine Sulphate & Chondroitin Sulphate (82p a day), Vitabiotics Jointace Original (73p a day) Bioglan Glucosamine Plus Chondroitin and MSM (£1 a day) and Optima ActivJuice Juice for Joints (40p a day).

On the front of the Boots' pack, it says 'Joint Health Glucosamine Sulphate & Chondroitin Sulphate' in large font and then in smaller font: 'with vitamin C to support healthy cartilage function' and 'supports normal collagen formation'. On the back of the pack it simply states 'glucosamine and

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chondroitin are found naturally within the joints', leaving consumers to draw their own conclusions. It then explains 'this product also contains vitamin C which contributes to the healthy function of cartilage and helps maintain healthy bones'.

Similarly, Optima ActivJuice Juice for Joints states '...with glucosamine and vitamin C to maintain normal function of cartilage in joints, bone, skin, teeth and blood vessels'.

For all these products the active ingredients (the ones for which a health claim has been authorised) are the extra vitamins and minerals, vitamin C for example, which are also included in the supplement, and not the glucosamine or chondroitin.

We think this is confusing. Consumers are likely to think its benefits come from the ingredients heavily advertised on the packaging and that could lead to them

wasting money - glucosamine supplements cost 30p to £1 a day, while a multivitamin containing vitamins C, D, copper, manganese and zinc, all of which have joint care claims authorised by EFSA, costs between 3p and 16p a day.

By taking a multivitamin in place of a glucosamine supplement for joint health, people could save as much as 97p a day - a potential annual saving of up to £354.

HEALTHY DIGESTION

For years advertising has told us that probiotics help keep our digestive tracts moving and healthy, and for a while we were also told that probiotic drinks helped support our natural defences and kept our immune systems healthy. However, the EU rejected these claims, as well as all the

other health claims submitted by manufacturers on the benefits of prebiotic and probiotic tablets and drinks.

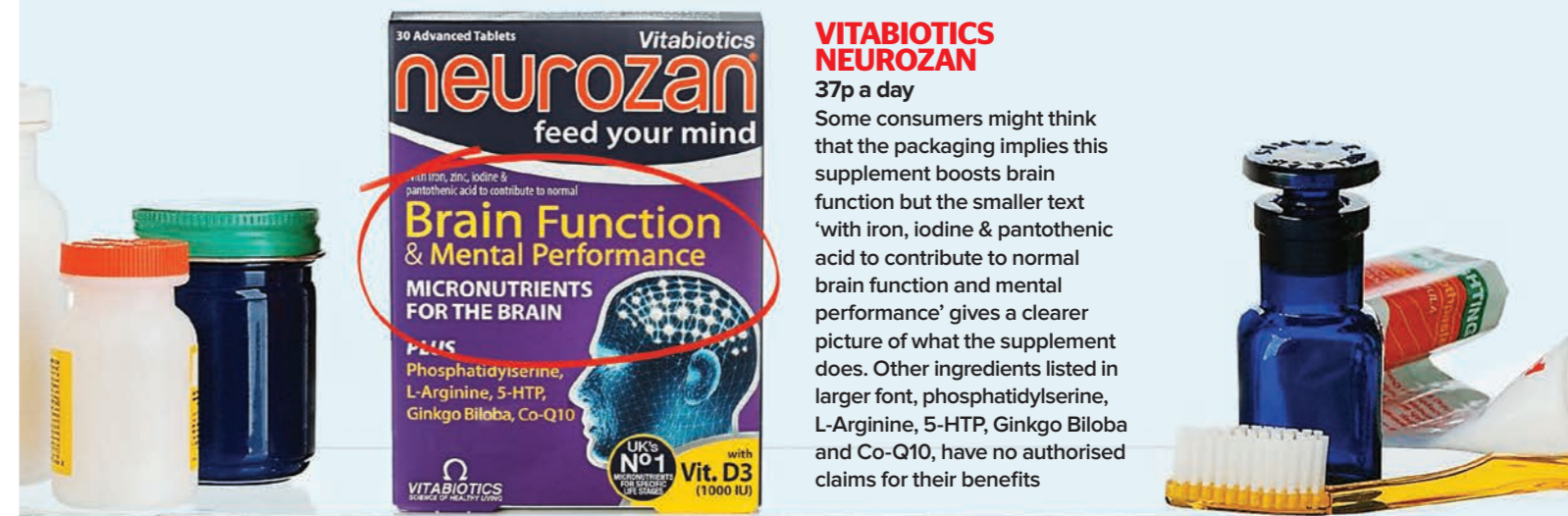
However, we still found a couple of examples. Bioglan Probiotic capsules (67p a day), right, and Bimuno Prebiotic Powder (33p a day) make unproven claims on their packaging relating to how they help maintain digestive health, such as 'helps maintain digestive balance'. These supplements don't contain any additional vitamins or minerals so don't actually have any approved health benefits.

Most probiotic products, such as Yakult and Danone Actimel and Activia, now refer to the number of bacteria they contain, but steer clear of any direct health claims. Instead they use vague slogans, such as Danone Activia which states: 'feeling good starts from within'.



SEVEN SEAS JOINTCARE

30p a day
The packaging implies all these ingredients are responsible for the benefits. But the benefits of glucosamine and omega-3 on muscles, bones and cartilage are not proven. The benefits of this supplement actually come from vitamins C, D, manganese and zinc



VITABIOTICS NEUROZAN

37p a day
Some consumers might think that the packaging implies this supplement boosts brain function but the smaller text 'with iron, iodine & pantothenic acid to contribute to normal brain function and mental performance' gives a clearer picture of what the supplement does. Other ingredients listed in larger font, phosphatidylserine, L-Arginine, 5-HTP, Ginkgo Biloba and Co-Q10, have no authorised claims for their benefits



BIOGLAN PROBIOTIC

67p a day
Claims for prebiotics and probiotics improving digestion and immunity are not founded. In fact, all health claims relating to prebiotics and probiotics are unproven

SEVEN SEAS CARDIOMAX

33p a day
Seven Seas' slogan 'for a healthy heart' is unproven. This could imply that the supplement has a benefit over and above the approved EU claim that certain omega-3 oils 'contribute to the normal function of the heart'



Supplement industry was worth £385m in 2012

EXPERT VIEW

Recommended levels

Shefalee Loth | Nutritionist and Which? food expert



The benefits of taking all supplements are not conclusive and in some cases have been shown to have a detrimental effect. The government recommends certain supplements with proven benefits; such as vitamin D for the over-65s, folic acid for women trying to conceive and in the first 12 weeks of pregnancy, and a multivitamin containing vitamins A, C and D for children aged six months to five years. For the general population, it advises following a varied and balanced diet to get all the nutrients you need.

There are two types of vitamins – water-soluble and fat-soluble. Fat-soluble vitamins are A, D, E and K. We can store these in our bodies so don't need to eat them every day. On the other hand, water-soluble vitamins – B, C and folic acid – are not stored and so we need them more often.

HIGH DOSAGE PROBLEMS

If we consume more water-soluble vitamins than we need, our body excretes them in urine. However, this doesn't mean that there aren't risks of taking high-dose supplements. High doses of niacin (vitamin B3), can cause skin flushes and over a long period can cause liver damage. And high doses of vitamin C can lead to stomach pains and diarrhoea. Once you stop taking high doses the symptoms usually disappear.

It's not as straightforward with fat-soluble vitamins which our bodies can't excrete so easily. Too much vitamin A can lead to an increased risk of fractures in later life. Similarly excessive intakes of vitamin D can be harmful to the kidneys and can weaken bones.

The 2002 EU food supplements directive requires maximum levels to be set for the levels of nutrients in supplements, but it has never been put into law. The Department of Health has voluntary maximum levels of vitamins and minerals present in food supplements which take into account safe levels and intake from dietary sources. However, these are not mandatory and there are no current plans at an EU or UK level to enforce maximum levels of vitamins and minerals that supplements can contain.

If you regularly take supplements check the Department of Health's website for risks or look for advisory statements.

Boots Digestion Support Plus supplement (27-55p a day) promotes that it contains probiotics and prebiotics and then in smaller font says 'with calcium to support healthy digestion'. The back of the pack states 'this product contains probiotics, prebiotics and calcium which contributes to the normal function of digestive enzymes'. This health claim is authorised for calcium but not probiotics or prebiotics – but Which? thinks the packaging implies the benefit is from all the ingredients.

You could include calcium-rich foods in your diet, such as milk, instead of spending 27-55p per day and up to £200 a year on this supplement, which contains only 15% of your recommended daily allowance (RDA) of calcium.

POWER OF ADVERTISING

Despite thousands of health claims being unauthorised due to lack of evidence, years of powerful and abundant advertising by manufacturers have ingrained these messages in our minds. In our survey, 94% of those who take glucosamine supplements said they believe that it supports healthy joints and cartilage, and 86% who take probiotics agreed that they help maintain a healthy digestive system – even though both of these claims have been rejected by the EU.

Although 50% of respondents overall in our survey thought omega-3 could improve concentration, in actual fact the authorised claims for omega-3 oils are that they contribute to normal brain function, normal vision and normal function of the heart.

WHICH? SAYS

We want to see all supplement manufacturers comply with the EU Register of Health and Nutrition Claims that Which? campaigned for, and remove unauthorised claims from their packaging and websites.

We contacted the manufacturers. Bioglan told us it has changed its packaging to comply with the EU's decision and new packaging without claims is now filtering through into retailers. Seven Seas said it was in the process of redesigning CardioMax packaging and will review the healthy heart statement. Optima ActivJuice and Seven Seas JointCare Active state that their claims refer only to the specific ingredients that they are authorised for. Bimuno said it believes its claims are substantiated and will resubmit them to EFSA. Boots and Vitabiotics did not respond.

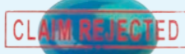
We want to see all confusing and exaggerated claims removed, for example, those made on the packaging of the Boots Digestion Support Plus probiotic and prebiotic supplement. And while we're pleased that rules on many claims have been tightened, we want the same approach extended to botanical supplements, such as echinacea, as claims EFSA has rejected are still allowed to be promoted on such products.

OUR RESEARCH

We assessed popular supplements and the claims they made on their packaging to see how they compared with the EU Register of Health and Nutrition claims. In July 2013 we surveyed 2,100 UK adults aged 18 and over online about their use of supplements and their understanding of the benefits.

Nutrients claimed to help joint health

GLUCOSAMINE
From £1 a day



VITAMIN C
From 3p a day



POTENTIAL ANNUAL SAVING
UP TO £354