



CR'S GUIDE TO POPULAR SUPPLEMENTS

What improves sleep, strengthens immunity, boosts memory—and what doesn't. Plus, whether you should try CBD, and tips for smarter, safer shopping.

BY ASHLEY ABRAMSON • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JAMIE CHUNG

WHEN HER DAILY migraine medication wasn't cutting it, Aubree Wolber's doctor suggested a magnesium supplement. The 28-year-old from Ypsilanti, Mich., was skeptical: "I wasn't convinced it was going to work for headaches I had been having for 15 years."

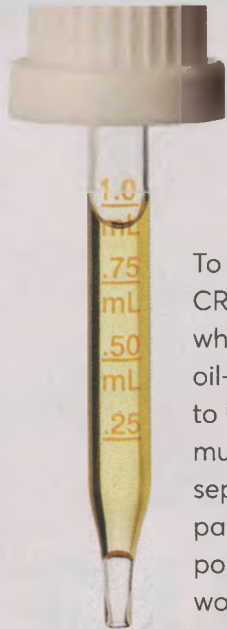
After a few months, her headaches did improve—but she's still not sure whether it's because of the magnesium or other changes she made, such as drinking more water.

Wolber is one of the millions of people who regularly take vitamins, minerals, and other supplements. Sixty percent of us, in fact, take

them daily, according to a summer 2022 nationally representative Consumer Reports survey of 3,070 U.S. adults.

But do all those pills actually make us feel better?

Like Wolber, many people turn to supplements when they are facing hard-to-treat issues. And sometimes they seem to help. But it's difficult to know for sure whether a given supplement is working, especially when other lifestyle or medication changes may be underway at the same time. What's more, our health can also improve (or worsen) without an obvious trigger.



To better understand how Americans use supplements, CR's survey asked respondents which ones they take and why. We found that a few—antioxidants, probiotics, fish oil—are popular for many reasons, while others tend to be used in more specific cases. (Vitamins, including multis, are used for almost everything, so they're covered separately in "Who Needs Vitamin Supplements?" on page 30.) Here's what our survey found to be the most popular supplements taken for each reason, plus what works, what might not, and the fixes you can try instead.

Bolstering Overall Health



FISH OIL

WHY IT'S USED: Fish oil—derived from oily fish such as tuna and herring—contains omega-3

fatty acids, which are anti-inflammatory. People take the supplements to guard against chronic inflammation, which is linked to a greater risk of cancer, heart disease, diabetes, and some other health problems.

THE EVIDENCE: Research has found that fish oil can indeed tamp down inflammation and may ease the symptoms of rheumatoid arthritis. Some healthcare providers even prescribe high doses of prescription-grade fish oil to help patients manage cholesterol levels, says Sara Bonnes, MD, an internal medicine physician and nutrition specialist at the Mayo

Clinic in Rochester, Minn. People with a history of heart disease may get a small benefit, but fish oil supplements have not been shown to reduce the risk of developing heart disease in those who don't yet have it.



CALCIUM

WHY IT'S USED: Calcium helps strengthen bones, and having low levels may raise the

risk of bone loss and fractures.

THE EVIDENCE: Calcium is indeed key for bone health, and supplementation could help reduce bone loss and the risk of fractures in older adults. But some research suggests that high levels may increase the risk of heart disease and pose some other risks. It's best to get calcium from foods such as sardines,

leafy greens, and dairy, says Robert Saper, MD, chair of the department of wellness and preventive medicine at the Cleveland Clinic in Lyndhurst, Ohio. If you can't, though, and your doctor is concerned about bone loss, supplements may help.



PROBIOTICS

WHY THEY'RE USED: The digestive

tract is home to trillions of microorganisms, including bacteria—your gut microbiome. Its diversity and balance can play a critical role in your health, and some people take bacteria in pill form—called probiotics—to alter their microbiome.

THE EVIDENCE: Studies of probiotic supplements have not found much evidence that they are helpful for improving overall health. Saper says they're most useful in treating diarrhea that develops after taking antibiotics, or the bloating symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome. But for most people, probiotic "food sources, such as fermented food, seem to be a better route," Bonnes says.

WHAT ELSE TO TRY: Unfortunately, there's no real shortcut to better health. But eating a nutritious diet, exercising daily, managing stress, and maintaining social relationships can go a long way. "The impact of these individually and collectively are far greater than the impact of individual or multiple supplements," Saper says.



Strengthening Immunity



ZINC

WHY IT'S USED:

This mineral can help the immune system fight off pathogens, and getting too little is linked to an increased risk of infectious diseases.

THE EVIDENCE: In people who are zinc-deficient, supplementing may help prevent illness. In a small 200 study, older adults who took 10 mg of zinc daily had improved immune responses after seven weeks. But people who are generally healthy or eat a balanced diet probably do not need to bother, says Lothar Rink, PhD, a zinc researcher and director of the Institute of Immunology at RWTH Aachen University in Germany. What's more, high zinc intake can cause nausea and stomach upset, and taking too much can suppress the immune system, Rink says.



ANTIOXIDANTS

WHY THEY'RE USED:

Antioxidants protect cells against damage from free radicals, which increase inflammation and are believed to contribute to the development of disease. Antioxidant supplements are often a blend of vitamins, minerals, and herbal or botanical extracts.

THE EVIDENCE: Research

suggests that an antioxidant-rich diet can help promote a healthy immune response. But taking antioxidant supplements does not offer significant protection against disease, according to a National Institutes of Health analysis of studies involving thousands of people. In some cases, high doses can actually increase the risk of adverse health outcomes.



PROBIOTICS

WHY THEY'RE USED:

Probiotics were popular in CR's survey not only for promoting overall health but also for strengthening immunity. In theory, introducing more good bacteria to your gut could help your body fight off infection and prevent diseases. **THE EVIDENCE:** A 2018 review of the research suggests that probiotic supplements can temporarily increase good bacteria in the gut and improve immune system function. But scientists don't yet know whether the supplements create any long-term gut changes that would support the immune system.

WHAT ELSE TO TRY: Many of the habits that improve overall health also benefit the immune system. These include eating lots of fruits and vegetables, getting plenty of exercise, and managing your stress. But it's especially important to get enough sleep. Sleep is critical to proper immune function, and ongoing sleep loss is linked to immunodeficiency. "So many factors influence immunity, and a pill probably won't be the one thing that fixes everything," Bonnes says.



WHAT TO KNOW BEFORE YOU TAKE THAT SUPPLEMENT

ONE-THIRD OF AMERICANS say they believe supplements have been tested by the Food and Drug Administration for safety, according to CR's recent survey. But in reality, the FDA doesn't approve or test the safety or effectiveness of any supplement sold in the U.S. before it enters the market.

In fact, the FDA typically learns of problems with a product only after it's on store shelves. That's unlike prescription and over-the-counter drugs, which undergo multiple clinical trials as part of a lengthy FDA application process before they're approved for sale. To learn about potential problems with supplements, the agency relies on reports of injury or misleading marketing submitted by consumers or healthcare providers.

"The FDA can't ban risky supplements until they have some evidence or early signals that there's a safety problem," says CR's Chuck Bell, who advocates for better oversight of supplements.

Still, a vitamin, a mineral, or another supplement may sometimes be needed, such as iron for those with anemia. So knowing what to look for when choosing a product is key. Here are a few tips.

Look for the USP certification seal.

The U.S. Pharmacopeia sets the most widely accepted standards for dietary supplements, CR's experts say. (A list of USP-verified products can be found at quality-supplements.org.) You may also find seals from other valid third-party testers, including ConsumerLab.com, NSF International, and UL Solutions. But ignore unknown certifications, even if they look official.

Don't be fooled by "proprietary blends."

While companies that use that term must list the ingredients in their products, they don't

have to list the amounts of each one, Bell says.

"So you'll have no idea how little or how much a product has of any one of the ingredients," he says. That's especially a problem for compounds that can be hazardous at high doses, such as caffeine.

Skip products with claims that are too good to be true.

Supplement makers can't say that their products treat or cure a disease or other health condition, according to the FDA. Also watch out for any supplement that's purported to be a scientific breakthrough, a miracle cure, or an ancient remedy, as well as any product that has a secret

ingredient or whose label has fancy phrases such as "molecule multiplicity," "insulin receptor sites," "glucose metabolism," or "thermogenesis."

Don't rely on "organic," "natural," or "whole foods" labeling.

Products with an "organic" label must be grown and produced without certain chemicals, but that does not guarantee the dosage or purity of a supplement's key ingredients. And the term "natural" has no official FDA meaning. Finally, even if a pill contains real fruits or vegetables, products labeled "whole foods" aren't substitutes for the real thing. —Lisa L. Gill

Getting Better Sleep



MELATONIN

WHY IT'S USED:

Your body runs on an internal clock called the circadian rhythm. Melatonin, a naturally occurring hormone, helps signal to your brain that it's bedtime. A melatonin supplement might make it easier to fall asleep.

THE EVIDENCE: Taking melatonin can help people fall asleep about 7 minutes faster, on average, and studies show that it's useful for people with jet lag or a sleep disorder called delayed sleep phase syndrome. But to avoid interfering with your body's natural production, high doses should not be taken long-term, says Selena Chan, DO, a psychiatrist and interim director of clinical programs at the University of California San Francisco Osher Center for Integrative Health.



CBD

WHY IT'S USED:

Some people use this compound, a nonpsychoactive derivative of hemp

or marijuana, to relieve anxiety and promote sleep.

THE EVIDENCE: A 2017 paper suggests that CBD may be

a reasonable treatment for insomnia, but the scientists say that such research is in its infancy and that more long-term studies are needed. As long as you're practicing good sleep habits and not taking other medications at the same time, Chan says CBD may be beneficial before bedtime—just check with your doctor first. (See "How to Shop Safely for CBD," on page 32.)



MAGNESIUM

WHY IT'S USED:

The mineral magnesium may help reduce stress and relax

the body before bed.

Magnesium supplements can be taken as pills or as a powder added to drinks.

THE EVIDENCE: Research in this area is scarce. While some studies link magnesium with better sleep quality, it's unclear whether supplementing helps with sleep disorders such as insomnia and restless leg syndrome. (Be sure to avoid types called magnesium oxide or citrate for sleep use because these forms are more commonly used as laxatives.)

WHAT ELSE TO TRY: A consistent sleep routine can help signal bedtime to your body. Relax without screens, whether you journal, read, or take a bath, Chan says. Try to limit alcohol, and don't consume caffeine after lunchtime. For sleep disorders, medication or a form of psychotherapy called cognitive behavioral therapy for insomnia (CBT-I) can also be effective.



SUPPLEMENTS TO ALWAYS AVOID

HERE ARE 10 RISKY SUPPLEMENTS that CR, with the help of a panel of doctors and researchers, says you should steer clear of. In general, risk increases the larger the dosage and the longer they're taken. Also beware of illegal or unapproved drug ingredients, such as tianeptine, methylsynephrine, and phenibut. —L.L.G.



Improving Memory



NOOTROPICS

WHY THEY'RE USED:

Nootropics is an umbrella term for substances that can affect your neurological state, says Chan at the Osher Center for Integrative Health. They include familiar things such as caffeine, herbs such as Ginkgo biloba, and amino acids such as L-theanine.

Nootropics are often marketed as a quick fix to improve cognitive function. **THE EVIDENCE:** Years of evidence have shown that in low doses, natural caffeine can sometimes improve mental performance. But other nootropics are generally not well-studied, and some may contain unsafe, unapproved drugs.



FISH OIL

WHY IT'S USED:

The idea here is that because fish oil can make cell membranes more fluid, it might reduce inflammation in the brain and improve your cognitive processes. **THE EVIDENCE:** While some research links higher omega-3 levels with better brain health, one study found that taking fish oil supplements did not lead to improved cognition.

Chaparral

ALSO CALLED: creosote bush, greasewood, *Larrea divaricata*, *Larrea tridentata*, *larreastat*. **CLAIMED BENEFITS:** weight loss; eases inflammation; treats colds, infections, rashes, and cancers. **POTENTIAL HARMS:** kidney problems, liver damage.

Coltsfoot

ALSO CALLED: coughwort, *Farfarae folium leaf*, *foalswort*, *Tussilago farfara*. **CLAIMED BENEFITS:** relieves cough, sore throat, laryngitis, bronchitis, asthma. **POTENTIAL HARMS:** liver damage, possible carcinogen.

Comfrey

ALSO CALLED: blackwort, bruisewort, slippery root, *Symphytum officinale*. **CLAIMED BENEFITS:** relieves cough, heavy menstrual periods, stomach problems, chest pain; treats cancer. **POTENTIAL HARMS:** liver damage, cancer.

Germander

ALSO CALLED: *Teucrium chamaedrys*, *Teucrium viscidum*. **CLAIMED BENEFITS:** weight loss; alleviates fever, arthritis, gout, stomach problems. **POTENTIAL HARMS:** liver damage, hepatitis.

Greater Celandine

ALSO CALLED: celandine, *Chelidonium majus*. **CLAIMED BENEFIT:** alleviates stomachache. **POTENTIAL HARM:** liver damage.

Kava

ALSO CALLED: ava pepper, *kava kava*, *Piper methysticum*. **CLAIMED BENEFITS:** eases anxiety, helps sleep. **POTENTIAL HARMS:** liver damage, exacerbates Parkinson's disease and depression, impairs driving.

Lobelia

ALSO CALLED: asthma weed, *Lobelia inflata*, vomit wort, wild tobacco.

CLAIMED BENEFITS: helps respiratory problems, smoking cessation. **POTENTIAL HARMS:** nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, tremors, rapid heartbeat, confusion, seizures, hypothermia, coma.

Pennyroyal Oil

ALSO CALLED: *Hedeoma pulegioides*, *Mentha pulegium*. **CLAIMED BENEFITS:** improves breathing problems, digestive disorders. **POTENTIAL HARMS:** liver and kidney failure, nerve damage, convulsions.

Usnic Acid

ALSO CALLED: beard moss,

tree moss, usnea. **CLAIMED BENEFITS:** weight loss, pain relief. **POTENTIAL HARM:** liver injury.

Yohimbe

ALSO CALLED: *Johimbi*, *Pausinystalia yohimbe*, *yohimbine*, *Corynanthe johimbi*. **CLAIMED BENEFITS:** treats low libido and erectile dysfunction, depression, obesity. **POTENTIAL HARMS:** raises blood pressure; causes rapid heart rate, headaches, seizures, liver and kidney problems, heart problems, panic attacks.



ANTIOXIDANTS

WHY THEY'RE USED:

Oxidative stress from free radicals

may harm the brain, speeding memory loss. Antioxidants can protect against oxidative stress and its effects, which could protect brain function.

THE EVIDENCE: An antioxidant-rich diet—with plenty of produce like berries, squash, carrots, and cruciferous vegetables—may promote brain health. And one 1997 study in older adults found

a link between higher levels of certain antioxidants and better performance on memory tests. But antioxidant-rich foods contain lots of other helpful nutrients, too, and Bonnes at the Mayo Clinic says more research is needed to see whether supplements on their own can improve memory or cognition.

WHAT ELSE TO TRY: Make sure your diet is rich in anti-inflammatory foods, such as fruits, vegetables,

and fatty fish, all of which promote brain health and function over time. The Mediterranean diet, for example, is a go-to, says Chan at the Osher Center. Stress-reduction techniques, such as meditation, can also help promote better cognition. And staying engaged and learning new things as you age can keep memory sharp, too.

Nourishing Skin, Nails, or Hair



BIOTIN

WHY IT'S USED:

Biotin, or vitamin B7, helps the body

grow healthy hair and nails.

THE EVIDENCE: In people with health conditions that cause a vitamin B deficiency or result in hair loss or brittle nails, limited research suggests that biotin supplements may help. But there is even less evidence that biotin helps people without such issues. Biotin can also interfere with certain common lab tests, which could cause misdiagnoses.



COLLAGEN

WHY IT'S USED:

Collagen gives skin its structure.

Over time, aging and sun damage can break collagen down, causing dark spots, blemishes, and wrinkling. People take collagen, usually derived from the connective tissue of cows and some other animals, to promote skin health.

THE EVIDENCE: Research is preliminary, but a 2019 review suggests that collagen supplements may improve skin hydration, elasticity, and



FISH OIL

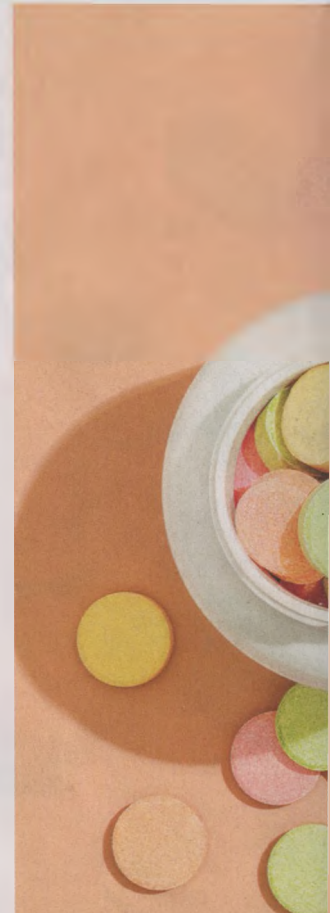
WHY IT'S USED:

People take fish oil not only for their general health and

cognition but also because the fatty acids in fish oil can help cells hold water. Hydrated skin cells could theoretically result in more supple, healthier-looking skin.

THE EVIDENCE: While this makes sense in theory and may even work in practice, so far there isn't sufficient evidence showing that taking fish oil pills helps hydrate the skin or improve its appearance, Abittan says.

WHAT ELSE TO TRY: Anemia, thyroid problems, and other medical issues can affect hair, skin, and nails. So if you notice changes in any of those, check with a healthcare provider. Once you rule those out, there are good treatments for hair loss, such as oral and topical minoxidil. Skin and hair health involves simple steps, not a special serum: Eat a healthy diet, reduce stress, drink water, use moisturizer, avoid too much sun exposure, and apply daily sunscreen with SPF (sun protection factor) 30 or higher.



WHO N

MULTIVITAMINS and single vitamins are some of the most popular supplements in the U.S. In CR's survey, about half of people said they take multivitamins and 42 percent said they take individual vitamins—for everything from improving general health and boosting immunity to preventing COVID-19 and building strength.

While experts agree that most Americans don't eat enough vitamin-rich food, research shows that vitamin supplements



DO YOU NEED VITAMIN SUPPLEMENTS?

might not be a great way to bridge the gap. And people who take higher doses of certain vitamin supplements actually have a higher risk of adverse health outcomes.

In the U.S., the days of widespread vitamin deficiencies causing conditions like scurvy and rickets are long gone. If you have a deficiency, a doctor may recommend a vitamin. But many ailments, including certain cancers, heart disease, and diabetes, stem from multiple

factors and don't seem to be prevented or treated with vitamins.

Unless you have certain medical conditions or a restrictive diet, vitamin supplements are generally not helpful, says Fang Fang Zhang, MD, chair of the division of nutrition epidemiology and data science at Tufts University in Boston. Still, there are some exceptions.

One key caution: If you take vitamins, avoid mega-dosing, Zhang says. That could

cause stomach upset or organ damage, or even increase cancer risk. "More isn't always better," Zhang says.

MULTIVITAMIN

WHAT IT DOES: A multivitamin makes sense in theory, but not in practice. In fact, researchers have for years been unable to tease out any way a specific daily multi might be helpful to the average American adult.

WHO MIGHT BENEFIT: People who have trouble

with nutrient absorption or who are on restrictive diets could consider a regimen of multivitamins recommended and supervised by a provider.

VITAMIN D

WHAT IT DOES: Obtained through sunlight and certain foods, including salmon and fortified milk, vitamin D promotes bone strength and immunity.

WHO MIGHT BENEFIT: People with a diagnosed vitamin D deficiency—due to being homebound, for example.

VITAMIN C

WHAT IT DOES:

This antioxidant supports immune system function. Most people get enough by eating produce.

WHO MIGHT BENEFIT:

Smokers or people exposed to secondhand smoke, people with renal disease, and others who have issues with vitamin absorption tend to have lower levels and may need a supplement.

B VITAMINS

WHAT THEY DO:

These vitamins (particularly B1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, and 12) help your body create energy from food and form red blood cells. They are in fish, meat, eggs, dairy, leafy greens, and beans.

WHO MIGHT BENEFIT:

People with autoimmune disorders, like rheumatoid arthritis, or those with alcoholism might need extra B vitamins. And during pregnancy, doctors recommend folic acid (vitamin B9) to help prevent birth defects.

VITAMIN E

WHAT IT DOES:

Another antioxidant, vitamin E helps the immune system fight off certain illnesses and infections. It's in vegetable oils, nuts, and green vegetables. Though most people don't get enough, supplementing hasn't proved to be beneficial in healthy people.

WHO MIGHT BENEFIT:

People with rare disorders that impede fat absorption, and premature infants under the care of a physician.

Boosting Mood



CBD

WHY IT'S USED: CBD is popular as a mood enhancer for the same reason it's used

for sleep. Taken in pill or liquid form, it is thought to soothe anxiety, perhaps by increasing serotonin, a chemical that helps regulate mood.

THE EVIDENCE: A 2019 analysis of 27 studies concluded that CBD may ease symptoms of certain mental illnesses, including anxiety, but more evidence is needed. So proceed with caution: CBD can slow the metabolism of other substances, says Chan at the Osher Center, and taking it with caffeine, for example, may leave you feeling more anxious.



MELATONIN

WHY IT'S USED: Melatonin is typically used for sleep, but

the chemical might also play a role in mood. People with depression and bipolar disorder often have lower melatonin levels, so some people use the supplements to try to improve mental health.

THE EVIDENCE: If your mood

is suffering because you're not sleeping well, melatonin could help, in theory, Chan says, though there's little hard evidence. One large analysis did find that people who took melatonin before surgery had lower levels of anxiety. But experts recommend talking to your medical team before trying something like this.



MAGNESIUM

WHY IT'S USED: Magnesium—found in leafy greens, legumes, and whole grains—

plays a critical role in many bodily functions, including mood regulation. So it's sometimes taken in an effort to improve mood and ease depression.

THE EVIDENCE: People who were given magnesium chloride supplements in a 2017 trial showed improvements in depression and anxiety within two weeks. But the study did not include a group given "dummy pills," so it's unclear whether the results were due to a physiological change or a placebo effect. Ask your provider about whether magnesium is worth trying.

WHAT ELSE TO TRY: If you are experiencing depression or anxiety, talk to a provider right away. Prioritizing sleep, exercise, and a healthy diet can improve symptoms of both. But that's not always enough, and prescription meds and therapy can help. Either way, experts suggest consulting with a doctor to rule out other conditions that can cause such symptoms or getting a referral to a mental health professional.



Increasing Physical Strength or Stamina



PROTEIN POWDERS

WHY THEY'RE USED: Consuming enough protein can help

build new muscle and aid in muscle recovery.

THE EVIDENCE: Research does show that people who do a lot of strength training and don't get enough protein in their diet

may benefit from supplements, at least in the short term. But most other people do not need them, and testing by CR in 2010, and more recently by the nonprofit Clean Label Project, has found concerning levels of lead and other contaminants in certain protein powders.



IRON

WHY IT'S USED: Adequate iron intake can promote

healthy levels of hemoglobin in your blood, which your body needs to carry oxygen throughout your body and could make exercise easier.

THE EVIDENCE: People with anemia sometimes need additional iron, Saper says. Supplements may also raise hemoglobin levels, at least in women, though they can also cause gastrointestinal discomfort, research suggests. And high doses can harm the liver. So in general, skip the pills unless you have received an iron-deficiency diagnosis.

HOW TO SHOP SAFELY FOR CBD





ANTIOXIDANTS

WHY THEY'RE USED:

Athletes may take them after their workouts in an effort to ease soreness and enhance recovery.

THE EVIDENCE: Don't bank on this benefit. A large 2017 review of the research did not find evidence that high-dose antioxidant supplementation significantly relieves muscle soreness. More worrisome: Some previous research suggests that antioxidants may actually hinder recovery.

WHAT ELSE TO TRY: Exercise itself, especially strength training, is one of the best ways to improve strength and stamina. And a diet rich in nutrient-dense foods that are high in protein can aid in muscle building and recovery.

Losing Weight



PROTEIN POWDERS

WHY THEY'RE USED:

Protein can curb hunger, so some

people use protein powder to aid weight loss.

THE EVIDENCE: At least one study suggests that high-protein diets can be more effective than other diets for maintaining weight loss. But as Finnish researchers wrote in a 2019 study, "there is a lack of knowledge about the long-term effects of high protein intake," and data on the efficacy of protein powder for weight loss are scant.



FIBER

WHY IT'S USED:

Fiber—found in fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains—can help you feel full, which could reduce calorie intake.

THE EVIDENCE: Overweight or obese people who consume fiber supplements lose more weight than those who don't, research suggests. As a bonus, fiber may also help manage cholesterol. But eating high-fiber whole foods is better than taking supplements, Saper says, because such foods often contain other nutrients that benefit overall health.



GREEN TEA

WHY IT'S USED:

Green tea extract, which contains compounds that some believe may increase metabolism, is marketed for weight loss.

THE EVIDENCE: Swapping out soda for green tea makes sense, says Bonnes at the Mayo Clinic. But there's little evidence that the extract helps with weight loss. And it can cause serious liver injuries.

WHAT ELSE TO TRY: Losing weight and keeping it off is hard, involving biological, psychological, and social factors. Saper suggests a plant-based diet with lean protein, healthy fats, and plenty of nutritious foods, such as legumes. Also aim to exercise for 30 minutes most days.

CBD, WHICH CAN COME from marijuana or hemp plants, is going mainstream: Twenty-eight percent of Americans have taken CBD at least once in the past two years, according to a nationally representative CR survey of 2,125 U.S. adults in July 2022.

So CR did a spot check of CBD gummies sold online from four companies: Keoni, Medterra, Royal, and Smilz.

The results were reassuring. CR did not find pesticides in any product, and all had no or very little THC, the component that can get users high. (Legally, CBD products must be less than 0.3 percent THC.) Gummies from Keoni and Smilz did have lead, though at very low levels. Keoni said the amounts found "reflect safe and commonplace levels" and are "not a cause for alarm." Smilz did not respond to a request for comment.

Previous research has found high THC and lead levels in certain CBD products. And cannabis may be susceptible to absorbing heavy metals from soil. So CR's experts say it's wise to always shop carefully for CBD products. Here's how.

Shop in a dispensary if you live in a state that has legalized marijuana.

"States with legal cannabis have enforcement protocols ironed out better," says Mitch Earleywine, PhD, a professor at the State University of New York at Albany.

Stick to websites that provide an address, a phone number, and an email address.

That gives you recourse in case you encounter a problem, says Martin A. Lee, director of Project CBD, a nonprofit that promotes research on CBD.

Find the product's Certificate of Analysis.

The COA shows results from third-party testing for THC, heavy metals, and more. A QR code on the product may link to the COA; if not, check the manufacturer's website or ask the retailer for the document.

Don't buy CBD at gas stations, delis, or convenience stores.

Stick with groceries, natural food stores, or pharmacies—where products may have been better vetted.

—L.L.G.