

Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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“Supplements for Male Sexual Enhancement Questioned”

There is the old adage that "sex sells" and that is certainly true for dietary supplements promising an enhanced and vigorous sexual life, i.e., "Herbal Viagra." The underlying concern is for their effectiveness and their safety. Repeatedly, I have cautioned you to disregard wild claims made by supplement advertisements (and Dr. Oz). Male sexual enhancement products have been promoted throughout history and both erectile dysfunction and reduced libido are not a condition limited to modern civilization. The Ebers Papyrus, dating back to around 1,600 BC, recommended topical application of baby crocodile hearts mixed with wood oil. A Sanskrit text written six centuries earlier suggested a man could visit 100 women after consuming a mixture of goat testes boiled in milk, sesame seeds, and the lard of a porpoise. Erectile dysfunction affects an estimated 18 million men in the United States and prevalence increases with age. The dietary supplement industry markets hundreds of products for reversing impotence and enhancing male sexual performance. Legally, dietary supplement labels cannot make medical claims, such as "for treatment of erectile dysfunction"; however, such claims as "to enhance sexual function" are permissible. Yet, websites offer such products for purchase, along with glowing testimonials. Many of these products have been studied only in male rats, but the few studies in men have been small or poorly designed, limiting conclusions about efficacy and safety. Of the dietary supplement products recalled by the FDA between 2007-2012, sexual enhancement products were the most commonly recalled (40%), followed by bodybuilding (31%) and weight-loss products (27%). Of the 1,560 Health Safety Alerts for dietary supplements issued by the FDA MedWatch and Health Canada between 2005 and 2013, 33% were for sexual enhancement products. Another study of 150 sexual enhancement products (e.g., Evil Root, Herbal Stud, Magic Sex, ULTRASize) found 61% of the products were adulterated with PDE5 inhibitors: 27% with sildenafil, tadalafil, or vardenafil, and 34% with similar structural analogues. Although dietary supplements are marketed as "all natural" with implied safety, the available research suggests caution. A recent survey indicates that cardiac symptoms were a frequent cause of emergency department visits among men aged 20-39 years taking sexual enhancement products. Common adverse effects include flushing, lightheadedness, dyspepsia, and changes in vision, hypoglycemia and decreases in blood pressure. As one expert said, "In summary, advise patients that dietary supplements for sexual enhancement fall into one of two categories: those that might be safe but do not work, and those that might work but are not safe."

In the America that I love, there are no magical pills for quick fixes. Supplement manufacturers can falsely claim almost anything, by avoiding the words, "cure, treat, diagnose or prevent." Be safe, not sorry and consult your doctor.

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