

# Letter to the Editor: The Pundit Speaks

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## “Joint Pain and Memory Supplements No Better than Placebo”

Dietary supplements do not undergo adequate safety testing or quality control but still sales have exploded into a \$32 billion annual business. People are willing to try anything, even if there is no scientific support for many supplements available. About half of Americans use one or more of the 55,000 available dietary supplements. Supplements typically carry no information about side effects. The uninformed public buys them because they have been misled to believe that these products are “miracle cures” that orthodox medicine wants to hide from them. When it comes to joint pain, a new randomized controlled trial (RCT) has found that oral glucosamine has no more effect than placebo on joint pain. Even sub-groups, such as patients with obesity or high inflammation, found no benefit with the supplements. The Osteoarthritis Research Society International and the US National Institute for Health and Care Excellence recently issued guidance about the lack of evidence for glucosamine as a cure for joint pain. Overall, the effects of glucosamine and the placebo on pain and physical functioning didn't differ, either in the short-term or at one or two years. The supplement was also no better than placebo among subgroups based on pain severity, severity of osteoarthritis, age, body mass index, gender or signs of inflammation. Researchers wrote, “Consumers should be cautious about spending money on unproven treatments.” Also, side effects of glucosamine include heartburn, drowsiness, headaches, allergic reactions, weight gain, diarrhea and abdominal pain. When it comes to memory loss, another popular supplement, testosterone gel treatments did not improve older men's memory or mental function in the latest results from landmark government research that challenges the anti-aging claims of popular supplements. The study's goal was to see if rubbing testosterone gel on the skin daily for 1 year could treat problems linked with low levels of the male hormone. Results published a year ago from the same research linked testosterone with mostly modest improvement in sexual performance, walking strength and mood. But, testosterone had no effect on memory or mental function, based on tests given before, halfway and at the end of treatment to nearly 500 men with age-related memory decline. Of additional concern, among almost 140 men who underwent heart artery imaging tests, those who used testosterone had more plaque buildup and narrower arteries after a year than the fake gel group. However, among about 200 men given bone imaging tests before and after treatment, those on testosterone showed increases in bone density and strength, especially in the spine and men with anemia showed substantial improvement.

In the America that I love, we are reminded that there are no magic pills. Be cautious with supplement ads and Dr. Oz.

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