

Many Supplements Said to Contain Toxins, Make False Health Claims

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- WEDNESDAY, May 26 (HealthDay News) -- **A Congressional investigation of dietary herbal supplements has found trace amounts of lead, mercury and other heavy metals in nearly all products tested**, plus myriad illegal health claims made by supplement manufacturers, *The New York Times* reported Wednesday.

The levels of heavy metal contaminants did not exceed established limits, but investigators also discovered troubling and possibly unacceptable levels of pesticide residue in 16 of 40 supplements, the newspaper said.

One ginkgo biloba product had labeling claiming it could treat Alzheimer's disease (no effective treatment yet exists), while a product containing ginseng asserted that it can prevent both diabetes and cancer, the report said.

Steve Mister, president of the Council for Responsible Nutrition, a trade group that represents the dietary supplement industry, said it was not surprising that herbal supplements contained trace amounts of heavy metals, because they are routinely found in soil and plants. "I don't think this should be of concern to consumers," he told the *Times*.

The report findings were to be presented to the Senate on Wednesday, two weeks before discussion begins on a major food safety bill that will likely place more controls on food manufacturers, the *Times* said. The newspaper said it was given the report in advance of the Senate hearing. How tough the bill will be on supplement makers has been the subject of much lobbying, but the *Times* noted that some Congressional staff members doubt manufacturers will find it too burdensome.

At least nine misleading health claims were noted in the report, which was prepared by the Government Accountability Office (GAO). These claims included assurances that the products could cure diseases, such as diabetes, Alzheimer's disease and cancer, investigators said. In one instance, a salesperson claimed that a garlic supplement could replace blood pressure drugs, the *Times* reported. Products that purport to treat or relieve disease must go through strict reviews because they are considered drugs by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration.

The oversight of supplements has improved in recent years, said Sen. Herb Kohl (D-Wisconsin), who will preside over Wednesday's hearing. However, the FDA needs the authority and tools to ensure that dietary supplements are as safe and effective as is widely perceived by the Americans who take them, he told the *Times*.

One witness scheduled to testify, Dr. Tod Cooperman, president of ConsumerLab.com, said supplements with too little of the indicated ingredients and those contaminated with heavy metals are the major problems. In testing more than 2,000 dietary supplements from some 300 manufacturers, his lab has found that one in four has quality problems, the *Times* said.

According to the newspaper's account, the proposed food safety bill could require that supplement manufacturers register annually with the FDA and permit the agency to recall potentially dangerous supplements.

It's estimated that half of adult Americans take vitamin supplements regularly, and about a quarter take herbal supplements at least occasionally. Annual sales are about \$25 billion a year, the *Times* said.

More information

There's more on the oversight of dietary supplements at the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration](http://www.fda.gov).