

Many multivitamins don't have nutrients claimed in label

Out of 38 tested, 13 had too much or too little of the ingredients listed or were improperly labeled

By Linda Carroll msnbc.com contributor updated 6/17/2011 8:35:36 AM ET

A new review of popular multivitamins found that one in three did not contain the amount of nutrients claimed in their labels or improperly listed ingredients.

After testing 38 multivitamins for a new report published online this week, researchers at ConsumerLab.com discovered that eight contained too little of specific nutrients, two contained more nutrient than claimed and three improperly listed ingredients. The good news: some of the best **vitamins** were also the cheapest.

"We found a wide range in the quality of multivitamins," said Dr. Tod Cooperman, president of the company. "Interestingly, the more expensive products didn't fare any better than those that are just a few cents a day."

While medications are closely overseen by the federal **Food and Drug Administration**, supplements like vitamins don't get regular testing by any government agency. So there's no way of knowing — outside of independent testing — whether a bottle of supplements contains what it's supposed to.

The problems with quality control found by ConsumerLab don't surprise Dan Hurley, a medical journalist and author of "Natural Causes," a book on the supplement industry.

"That's really pretty average for supplements. It's a real crapshoot," Hurley said. If a drug company had these kinds of lapses, it would be shut down, he said.

Although low levels of certain nutrients can be a problem, doses that exceed recommendations are especially worrisome. Several products evaluated by ConsumerLab, including some designed for children, had this issue.

ConsumerLab is a Westchester, N.Y., company that independently evaluates hundreds of **health** and nutrition products and periodically publishes reviews. For this test, ConsumerLab purchased a selection of multivitamins and sent them, without labels to a lab for testing. If a problem was found, the product was sent to a second lab for confirmation.

ConsumerLab focused on some of the more important ingredients, such as folic acid, calcium, vitamin A (retinol and beta-carotene), zinc, and iron. Cooperman and his colleagues also looked to see how quickly vitamin tablets broke down in liquid. If a pill doesn't break down fast enough, the body won't be able to absorb as much of the various nutrients.

Among the supplements that had too little of a particular **nutrient** were Trader Joe's Vitamin Crusade (just 59 percent of the vitamin A advertised on the label), Melaleuca Vitality Multivitamin & Mineral (just 42 percent of the touted vitamin A) and All One Active Seniors (less than 2 percent of the beta-carotene, 73 percent of the retinol and 49 percent of the vitamin A listed on the label).

Centrum Chewables had the opposite problem, with 173 percent of the vitamin A listed on the label. This is of particular concern because too much vitamin A can spell trouble.

“If you get too much vitamin A it can be toxic to your liver,” explained Dr. Michael Cirigliano, an associate professor of medicine at the Perelman School of Medicine at the University of Pennsylvania. “People don’t realize that everything they put in their mouths is bioactive. Whether it’s baby aspirin or food, it has an effect on the body. People think that if you can get it without a prescription it’s safe — that’s baloney.”

One product, Alpha Betic, took twice as long as it should have to break apart in solution, found ConsumerLab. The supplement also contained less vitamin A than it should have.

Particularly worrisome were high levels of certain nutrients in some of the children’s multivitamins. For example, Hero Nutritionals Yummi Bears, if given to children at the suggested dose, would exceed recommendations for Vitamin A in youngsters aged 1 to 3. Higher levels of the nutrient in kids have been linked to liver abnormalities, bone weakening, and problems with the nervous system, Cooperman noted.

ConsumerLab found almost no connection between price and quality. Many of the cheaper pills (prices ranging between \$0.03 and \$0.14 per day) passed all the tests, while some of the most expensive ones (priced as high as \$1 per day) failed.

Among the supplements that passed testing were several very inexpensive options, such as Equate Mature Multivitamin, at \$0.03/day, Kirkland Signature Mature Multivitamins and Minerals Adult 50+ at \$0.03/day and Flintstones Plus Bone Building Support at \$0.14/day.

ConsumerLab also tested several pet supplements, one of which, Pet-Tabs Complete Daily Vitamin Mineral Supplement for Dogs contained lead at unhealthy levels.

Ultimately the new report is a strong argument for more regulation of the supplement industry, both Cirigliano and Hurley said.

“People are using these products more and more,” Cirigliano explained. “There needs to be more regulation.”