Transcript Details

This is a transcript of an educational program. Details about the program and additional media formats for the program are accessible by visiting: https://reachmd.com/programs/clinicians-roundtable/how-to-read-supplement-labels-and-assess-safety/54206/

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How to Interpret Supplement Labels, Assess Safety, and Advise Patients

Announcer:
Welcome to *Clinician's Roundtable* on ReachMD. On this episode, we'll learn how we can interpret supplement labels and assess safety with Dr. Gary Soffer. He's an Associate Professor of Pediatrics, the Associate Program Director of the Pediatric Residency Program at Yale School of Medicine, and the Director of the Integrative Medicine Program at Yale's Smilow Cancer Center. He also spoke about this topic at the 2026 American College of Allergy, Asthma, and Immunology Annual Meeting. Let's hear from Dr. Soffer now.

Dr. Soffer:
I think the biggest mistake that people make when they're looking at supplement labels is they're actually looking at the front of the bottle instead of the back of the bottle. Most of the information that you really need is on the back of the bottle, so despite what marketing or advertising you might see up front and how flashy it might be, it's completely irrelevant.

The first thing I always look for is whether or not the product has been independently verified by third-party testing and carries some sort of certification. The ones that I prefer are NSF or USP. Those are really good baseline third-party verifiers that you know you can trust. Regulation in the United States is such that oftentimes, we're finding that the ingredients that are advertised on the label aren't actually in the product that you're taking. So when you have those third-party verifications, you can be much more assured that what you're taking is what is being advertised.

Then I look carefully at the ingredients themselves and the dose. Oftentimes, something will advertise turmeric, but it will also have three or four other ingredients that you didn't anticipate. And then the dose really matters, too. Just like any medication that you take, you want to be mindful of how much you're taking.

Something I'm really cautious about is a term like proprietary blend, which you often see on mixed herbs or mixed supplements because you don't really know how much of what is in an ingredient; you might see 10 or 15 ingredients listed on a label without telling you exactly what's in it. So stay away from those proprietary blends or proprietary ingredients.

The biggest issue is safety and interactions with medications, other conditions, and other supplements they may be taking. Herbs are often marketed as natural, and plenty of them can be used safely. I know I use them personally and in my practice quite safely, but they have real physiologic effects. They can really impact our biology. That's why we take them; we believe that they're going to have an effect.

But if something is biologically active enough to potentially help you, it can also be biologically active enough to cause side effects or interact with other medications. So clinicians should be really mindful about any underlying conditions, pregnancy, upcoming surgery, and liver and kidney function because that has to do with how we process a medication and medication interactions.

I think before discussing the supplement itself, I try to understand the problem the patient is actually trying to solve before trying to figure out the supplement. So if they're taking something natural and that's what they want—they want to feel better naturally—maybe the conversation starts with things like food and nutrition, sleep, exercise, and other lifestyle interventions rather than a pill, whether it's a conventional pill, an integrative medicine supplement, or a natural pill. So if somebody's taking something for sleep, for example, I want to know why they're not sleeping. In allergy, a lot of times, something as basic as uncontrolled nasal obstruction is contributing to sleep issues, and that's really the point we need to manage.

My recommendation is to generally start with the problem that the patient's trying to solve and then try to work from there. Sometimes, supplements and natural products can be helpful, but there are also a lot of other options to start with.

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Announcer:
That was Dr. Gary Soffer talking about how we can interpret supplement labels and assess safety. To access this and other episodes in our series, visit *Clinician's Roundtable* on ReachMD.com, where you can Be Part of the Knowledge. Thanks for listening!

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