

# A look at the most popular supplements

Here are some of the most popular supplements and what scientific studies show regarding their safety and effectiveness:

	SOURCE	HEALTH CLAIM	DOES IT WORK?	SIDE EFFECTS
 <p><b>Fish oil, omega-3 fatty acids</b></p>	Fatty fish, such as bluefish, halibut, mackerel provide 2 of 3 fatty acids; the third comes from walnuts, olive oil and flaxseed oil.	Mainly prevention of heart disease and related problems.	Several studies offer evidence fish oil reduces heart disease. Evidence is mostly lacking for treatment or prevention of numerous other conditions, such as cancer, mental decline and dementia and arthritis relief. Children should not take fish oil capsules.	Minimal to none. However, high doses can cause bleeding, especially if used with aspirin and warfarin.
 <p><b>Echinacea</b></p>	<b>Coneflower (pictured)</b>	Mostly to treat or prevent colds.	Two government studies found it didn't work for treating colds in children or adults. Some other studies suggested possible benefit. Most studies show echinacea doesn't prevent colds.	Usually none, but there can be stomach problems, rashes, increased asthma. People with ragweed and similar allergies can have allergic reactions.
 <p><b>Flaxseed oil</b></p>	Flaxseed, also known as linseed.	Usually as a laxative. Also for hot flashes and breast pain, high cholesterol, cancer prevention.	Flaxseed contains soluble fiber and is an effective laxative. Its effectiveness at preventing heart disease and cancer are unproven. Study results are mixed on whether flaxseed might reduce hot flashes.	Flaxseed should be taken with plenty of water or it may worsen constipation or, in rare cases, even cause intestinal blockage. Flaxseed may lower your ability to absorb oral medications.
 <p><b>Ginseng</b></p>	Root of Asian or American ginseng. It is used in tablets, capsules, extracts, teas, as well as creams.	Immune system booster, improvement of stamina, physical and mental performance; lowering blood sugar and blood pressure.	There is no convincing evidence ginseng works for anything. One study suggested it helped cancer patients relieve fatigue, but the ginseng used in the study was powdered American ginseng root whose purity was verified by the scientists. Some studies suggest ginseng may lower blood sugar.	Usually none. Most common are headaches and sleep and gastrointestinal problems; some reports of breast tenderness, menstrual irregularities and high blood pressure. Ginseng may lower levels of blood sugar, so diabetics should be extra cautious.
 <p><b>Ginkgo, or ginkgo biloba</b></p>	Leaves of the ginkgo tree are used to make tablets, capsules or teas.	Memory improvement, dementia or Alzheimer's disease treatment.	A large study of the elderly over six years found it ineffective at preventing dementia and Alzheimer's. A short-term study showed it didn't improve memory in people over 60.	May increase bleeding risk. People using blood thinners or who have bleeding disorders, or have scheduled surgery or dental procedures should consult a doctor. Uncooked ginkgo seeds – not the leaf extract – contain a chemical that can cause seizures.
 <p><b>Garlic</b></p>	Garlic cloves. They can be eaten raw or cooked, used to make extracts or dried to produce a powder or capsules.	Lowering cholesterol, preventing heart disease, high blood pressure. Prevention of stomach and colon cancers.	A government-funded study found it had no effect at lowering cholesterol. Another study on the long-term use of garlic supplements to prevent stomach cancer found no effect. Some research suggests garlic may slow hardening of the arteries and lower risk of some cancers.	Garlic appears safe for most adults. However, it can cause breath and body odor and upset stomach. It can thin the blood so it should be avoided for at least a week before surgery. It can interfere with the effectiveness of saquinavir, a drug used to treat HIV infection.
 <p><b>Glucosamine and Chondroitin sulfate</b></p>	Glucosamine is usually obtained from the <b>shells of shrimp, crabs and lobster</b> . Chondroitin sulfate is from the cartilage of sharks and cattle.	Arthritis pain, usually in the knees.	Not for most people with mild pain who took part in the government's largest study of these supplements. The supplements did help some people with moderate to severe pain, but researchers said the group was too small to be convincing.	Minor, sometimes upset stomach during the six-month study.  Source material: • Agency for Healthcare Research & Quality and NIH Medline Plus • National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine • American Society of Clinical Oncology