



FACTSHEET Food Supplements

🔍 What are they?

Pills, tablets, powder or capsules that are concentrated sources of nutrients, such as minerals and vitamins (i.e. food or dietary supplements) or plants (i.e. herbal supplements also called 'botanicals'). Food supplements usually carry promises of physiological benefits ranging from a memory boost to easier sleep or even weight loss.

About [20%](#) of European consumers report using herbal supplements. For food supplements in general, northern Europeans top the list, for example [64% of Danes take one](#). The market is growing fast, especially in eastern Europe.

According to a [study](#) from our member APC, in 2015 Romanian consumers spent 500 million euros on supplements.

🔍 Are they safe and efficient?

SAFETY

Because they are made from plants, botanicals sound like they are natural. And most of us tend to believe 'natural' means 'safe'. However, consumers should avoid mixing plant substances and conventional medicines. For instance, women taking hormonal contraception should avoid [St. John's wort](#) – sold to help overcome a gloomy mood – as it hinders birth control effectiveness.

Just because a product is 'natural' or has a long tradition of use does not mean it is safe

Our bodies certainly need vitamins and minerals to carry out physical activities. But excessive levels of those nutrients can damage our health. The problem is that there are **still no harmonised maximum levels for vitamins and minerals in supplements to prevent people from overdosing**. And less than half of the EU's countries have set maximum limits.

EFFICACY

Manufacturers have understood that alluring promises play a big part in consumers' purchasing choices. The problem is many claims found on botanicals are still waiting for the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) to assess how scientifically sound they are. In other words, unproven claims still appear on botanicals' packaging. The claims on other food supplements already go through a scientific assessment, so the same should apply to those on botanicals.



🗨️ BEUC demands?

- **Consumers deserve better safety information** on supplements' potential side effects and interactions with medicines. They should also be able to easily report such side effects.
- **EFSA must assess botanicals claims speedily** so consumers stop wasting their money on products with unproven health benefits. This evaluation has been at an unacceptable standstill since 2009.
- **EFSA must establish quickly minimum & maximum levels for vitamins & minerals.** Such limits would help protect consumers from ineffective products (too low content) and overdose adverse effects (too high content).
- **Stricter controls:**
 - **Needed crack-down on fraud:** a recent French [study](#) examined 160 herbal weight loss supplements labelled '100% natural' and found that 40% were tainted with non-natural substances.
 - **Only safe products should reach consumers:** there must be stricter rules and they must be enforced. When one supplement is banned, it should be banned both in the physical and the online world.
- **All consumers deserve the same level of protection.** While one EU country might classify a given herbal product as a food supplement, another country might treat it as a traditional herbal medicinal product or a medical device. In other words, whether you live in Sweden, Portugal or France the same supplement can be authorised and controlled in very different ways. A harmonised regulatory framework is therefore needed.

For further details, see [BEUC's position paper on food supplements](#)