Americans Support Requiring Supplement Makers to Tell FDA About Their Products

7 in 10 think the agency's current oversight cannot protect consumers

Four in 5 American adults report having used supplements, products that can include vitamins, minerals, plant and animal extracts, hormones, and amino acids. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) oversees the safety of supplements, and nearly all adults say the agency should have this responsibility. However, 7 in 10 think the FDA is unable to keep them safe from harmful products with the existing regulatory tools. Ninety-five percent support requiring manufacturers to inform the FDA about all the supplements they make and their ingredients.

These findings and the following data come from a nationally representative survey of Americans age 18 and older, conducted in May 2019 for The Pew Charitable Trusts.[1]

Figure 1

Most Adults Have Taken Supplements for Dietary Purposes

At least 1 in 5 have used products marketed for athletic performance or weight loss

Survey asked: Have you ever personally used/taken any ___ supplements?

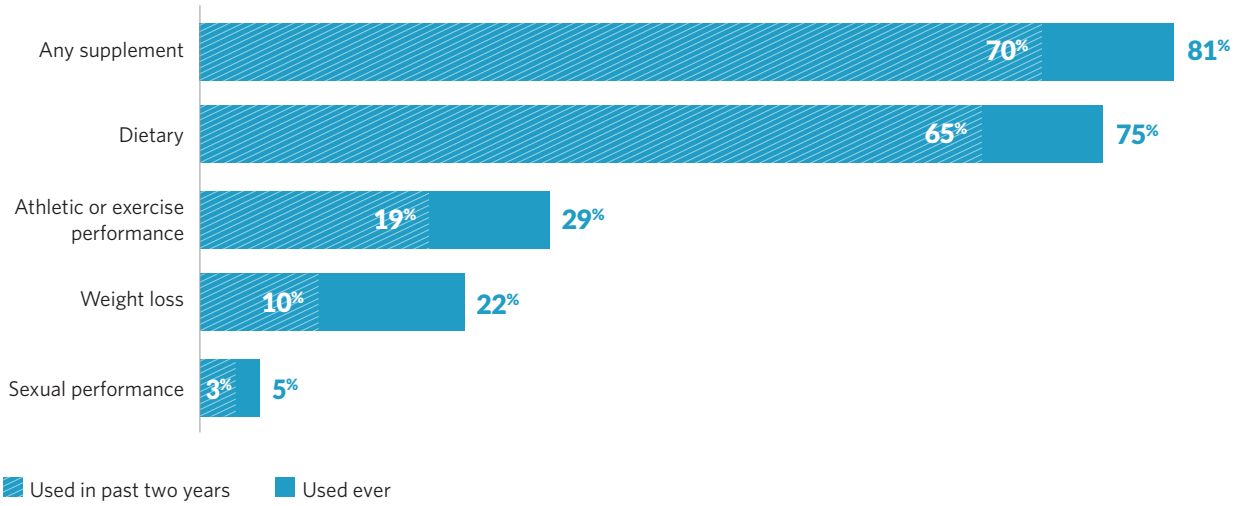


Figure 2

About Half of Adults Overestimate FDA Regulation of Supplements

Most users mistakenly think tests or proof of product safety is required

Survey asked: Which statement do you think correctly describes how the FDA currently regulates supplements?

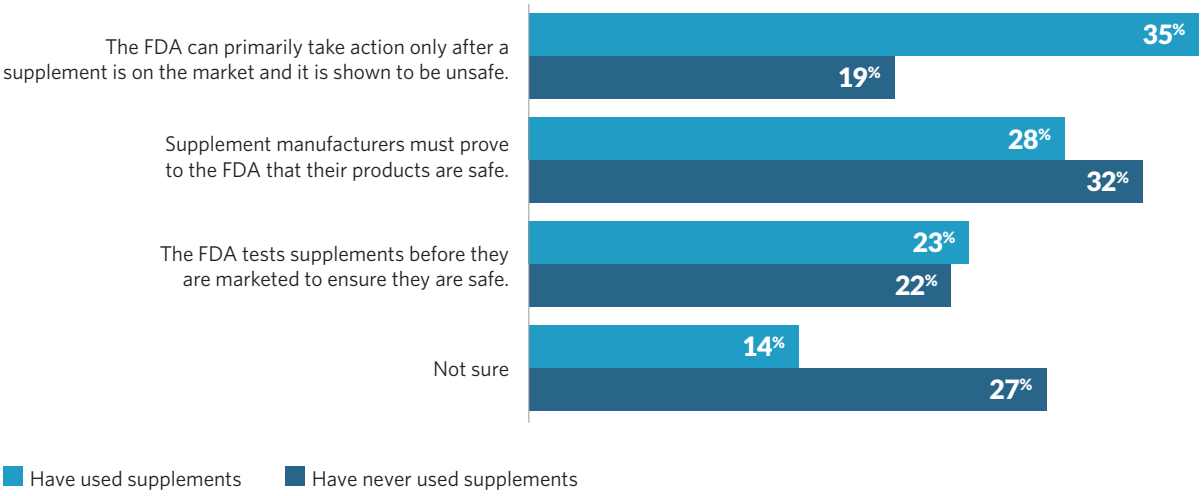
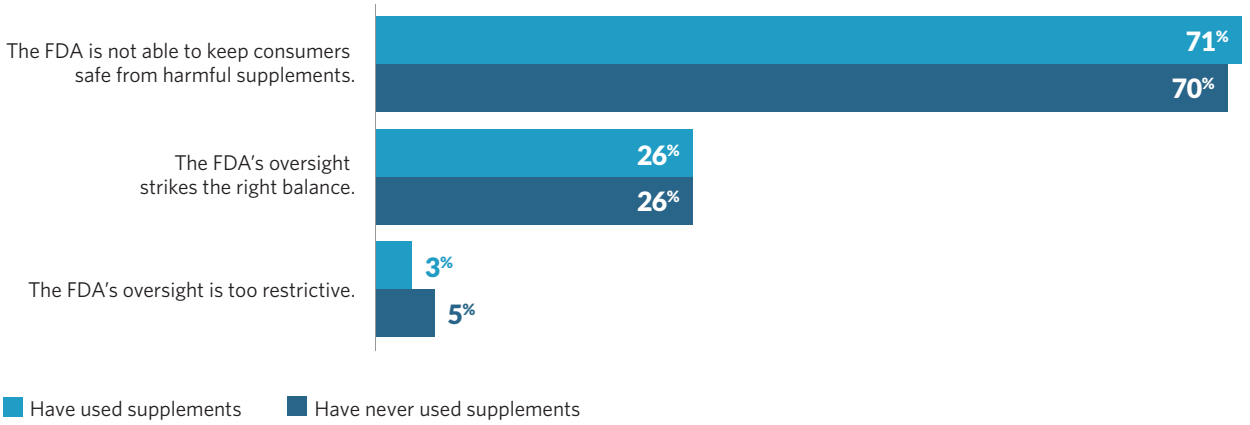


Figure 3

Most Adults Say FDA Cannot Protect Consumers From Harmful Supplements

Perceptions of agency oversight, by user history

Survey asked: Thinking about the FDA's current oversight of supplements, which comes closest to your viewpoint?



Note: Respondents read this oversight description with the question: "Under current law, the FDA does not test or approve supplements before they are made available to the public, and the FDA does not know which products are on the market and what they contain. The FDA is mainly limited to acting after a supplement product on the market has been shown to be harmful." Percentages may not total 100 percent because of rounding.

Table 1

1 in 8 Adults Say a Family Member Has Experienced Supplement Side Effects

Recent users were more likely to report incidents

Survey asked: Have you or has anyone in your immediate family ever experienced any serious side effects (such as increased heart rate, high blood pressure, kidney problems, or liver damage) as a result of taking any:

Supplements for:	All adults	Used any product in past two years
Weight loss	7%	9%
Dietary needs	5%	7%
Exercise or athletic performance	4%	4%
Sexual performance	2%	3%
Net (experiences from one or more categories)	**12%**	**16%**

Figure 4

Strong Support for Mandatory Supplement Product Listing With FDA

Most think manufacturers should help pay for enhanced oversight

Survey asked: How much do you support or oppose the following statement: ___?

In order for the FDA to know what supplement products are on the market, manufacturers should be required to give the agency a list of the products they make and their ingredients.

Congress should ensure that the FDA has adequate funding to oversee supplements and to take appropriate action against unsafe products.

If a mandatory product listing requirement is put into place, supplement manufacturers should pay a small fee to the FDA to help cover some of the costs of the listing database so that taxpayer dollars would not be needed to pay for it all.

Note: The "Democrats" and "Republicans" categories include respondents who identify with the party and those who lean toward it. Percentages may not total 100 percent because of rounding.

The benefits of a product listing requirement

The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act of 1994 governs the FDA's oversight of supplements and generally allows for review of a product's safety only after it is on the market and officials receive reports of potential health risks or consumer harm. Consequently, the agency knows little about the estimated 80,000 supplement products available to consumers.

Requiring manufacturers to provide the FDA with basic information about their supplement products, including their ingredients, would improve the agency's ability to safeguard public health with its existing regulatory tools. For example, if the agency learned of risks associated with a specific ingredient, it could easily pinpoint other products with the same component and take steps to alert manufacturers and consumers. Product lists published by the agency would also give retailers a mechanism to ensure that supplements they sell have been listed with the FDA.

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Endnote

1 SSRS, an independent research company, conducted the survey for Pew via an online probability panel. Interviews took place May 17-29, 2019, among a sample of 1,000 total respondents. The margin of error for the total sample is plus or minus 4.6 percentage points at the 95 percent confidence level, including the design effect. The margin of error is larger for subgroups. For full results and methodology, please visit: https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/articles/2019/10/01/most-supplement-users-back-enhanced-fda-oversight-of-these-products.

Editor's note: The headline on Figure 2 was updated May 19, 2021, to correct the share of adults who overestimated the Food and Drug Administration's regulation of supplement products.

For further information, please visit:
pewtrusts.org/healthcareproducts

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