

What's in Those Supplements?

By Anahad O'Connor, New York Times

Terry's Bottom Line:

Four out of five supplements in the mass market did not contain the herb listed on the label. Another reason to buy only from a) knowledgeable retailers who are committed to natural health and b) companies that have a track record of clinical efficacy and quality.

Target's "Up and Up" brand of St. Johns Wort and Valerian root contained none of those ingredients. Credit Yana Paskova for The New York Times

The New York State attorney general's office accused four national retailers on Monday of selling dietary supplements that were fraudulent and in many cases contaminated with unlisted ingredients.

The authorities said they had run tests on popular store brands of herbal supplements at the retailers — Walmart, Walgreens, Target and GNC — which showed that roughly four out of five of the products contained none of the herbs listed on their labels. In many cases, the authorities said, the supplements contained little more than cheap fillers like rice and house plants, or substances that could be hazardous to people with food allergies.

At GNC, for example, the agency found that five out of six samples from the company's signature "Herbal Plus" brand of supplements "were either unrecognizable or a substance other than what they claimed to be." In pills labeled ginkgo biloba, the agency found only rice, asparagus and spruce, an ornamental plant commonly used for Christmas decorations.

At Target, the agency tested six herbal products from its popular "Up and Up" store brand of supplements. Three out of six — including ginkgo biloba, St. John's wort and valerian root, a sleep aid — tested negative for the herbs listed on their labels. But the agency did find that the pills contained powdered rice, beans, peas and wild carrots.

Here are the products that were analyzed by the attorney general, along with the test results that were described in cease-and-desist letters that the agency sent to the four retailers.

From GNC, Herbal Plus brand:

Ginkgo Biloba:

- No ginkgo biloba found
- Did detect allium (garlic), rice, spruce and asparagus

St. John's Wort

- No St. John's Wort found
- Did detect allium (garlic), rice and dracaena (a tropical houseplant)

Ginseng

- No ginseng found
- Did detect rice, dracaena, pine, wheat/grass and citrus

Garlic

- Contained garlic

Echinacea

- No echinacea found
- Did detect rice in some samples

Saw Palmetto

- One sample contained the clear presence of palmetto
- Other samples contained a variety of ingredients, including asparagus, rice and primrose

From Target, Up & Up brand

Ginkgo Biloba

- No ginkgo biloba found
- Found garlic, rice and mung/French bean

St. John's Wort

- No St. John's Wort found
- Found garlic, rice and dracaena (houseplant)

Garlic

- Contained garlic

- One test identified no DNA

Echinacea

- Most but not all tests detected Echinacea
- One test identified rice

Saw Palmetto

- Most tests detected saw palmetto
- Some tests found no plant DNA

Valerian Root

- No valerian root found
- Found allium, bean, asparagus, pea family, rice, wild carrot and saw palmetto

From Walgreens, Finest Nutrition brand

Ginkgo Biloba

- No ginkgo biloba found
- Did detect rice

St. John's Wort

- No St. John's Wort found
- Detected garlic, rice and dracaena

Ginseng

- No ginseng found
- Detected garlic and rice

Garlic

- No garlic found
- Detected palm, dracaena, wheat and rice

Echinacea

- No echinacea found
- Identified garlic, rice and daisy

Saw Palmetto

- Contained saw palmetto

From Walmart, Spring Valley brand

Ginkgo Biloba

- No ginkgo biloba found
- Found rice, dracaena, mustard, wheat and radish

St. John's Wort

- No St. John's Wort found
- Detected garlic, rice and cassava

Ginseng

- No ginseng found
- Found rice, dracaena, pine, wheat/grass and citrus

Garlic

- One sample showed small amounts of garlic
- Found rice, pine, palm, dracaena and wheat

Echinacea

- No echinacea or plant material found

Saw Palmetto

- Some samples contained small amounts of saw palmetto
- Also found garlic and rice

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