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How to read a food supplement label

What the label really says, which numbers matter and which marketing tricks to recognise before you pay.

Donka Arabadzhova

Master of Pharmacy

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The front is marketing. The back carries the facts.

The supplement market is crowded, and the difference between a useful product and a well-advertised one is often in the small print. A label becomes much easier to assess when you know where to look. This is the same sequence I use when checking products at the pharmacy counter.

What must appear on the label

Under Directive 2002/46/EC and the general food-information rules in Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011, a compliant supplement sold in Bulgaria must provide the applicable information clearly. The exact presentation depends on the product.[1][2]

- The name “food supplement” and the list of ingredients, including applicable allergen information.
- The amounts of the relevant nutrients or other substances with a nutritional or physiological effect per recommended daily portion.
- For vitamins and minerals, the amount as a percentage of the nutrient reference value, shown as % NRV.
- The recommended daily portion and a warning not to exceed it.
- A statement that the product should not be used as a substitute for a varied diet.
- A statement that the product should be stored out of the reach of young children.
- The net quantity, durability date, lot identification and any special storage conditions.
- The name and address of the responsible food business operator.

> **A missing essential detail is a warning sign**
>
> Check the actual product and the applicable rules before buying. A label that hides the daily portion, active amounts or responsible operator does not give you enough information for a meaningful comparison.

1. The large number on the front

“Magnesium 400” may describe 400 mg of a magnesium compound rather than 400 mg of elemental magnesium. These are not interchangeable.
What to check: the nutrition or active-ingredient table on the back and the elemental amount per recommended daily portion. That is the figure needed for a valid comparison.

2. The form is hidden in the small print

Different salts and chemical forms contain different proportions of the active nutrient and can differ in absorption or tolerability. With magnesium, for example, the weight of the salt is not the same as the amount of elemental magnesium. A higher price or the word “chelated” does not automatically make a product the right choice for everyone.

What to check: first identify the exact nutrient and its form, then compare the active amount per daily portion. Ask a pharmacist which form and dose fit your needs rather than choosing only by the largest number.

3. A “proprietary blend” without individual amounts

Some imported products group ingredients under one blend name and show only the total blend weight. You cannot tell whether an expensive ingredient is present in a meaningful amount or appears mainly for marketing. EU rules require numerical declaration of relevant nutrients and substances with a nutritional or physiological effect per daily portion.[1]

What to check: a transparent label lists ingredients and their amounts clearly enough for comparison. If only a total blend weight is visible, you cannot assess the individual doses.

4. Mega-doses of 500% or 1000% NRV

A large percentage looks generous, but more is not automatically better. Fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E and K can accumulate. Water-soluble vitamins are not risk-free either: high doses can still cause adverse effects even when some of the excess is excreted.

What to check: consider your total intake from food, fortified products and other supplements. A dose around the reference value is not a target everyone must reach, and a high dose should have a specific reason and professional guidance.

> ### NRV is a comparison tool, not a personalised dose
>
> The nutrient reference value is used for labelling. It is not an individual prescription, a diagnosis of deficiency or proof that a higher percentage will produce a greater benefit.

5. Promises that the law does not allow

Food supplements must not be presented as preventing, treating or curing human disease. Health claims are separately regulated and must be authorised for use under the applicable conditions. A promise to cure arthritis, replace diabetes treatment or prevent cancer is not a lawful supplement claim.[1][3]

What to check: distinguish a permitted health claim from a disease-treatment promise. Treat dramatic before-and-after stories and “secret cure” language as warning signs, not evidence.

6. Comparing the price of the pack instead of the daily portion

A large, inexpensive pack can cost more per day than a smaller one when the recommended portions differ. With omega-3 products, compare the amounts of EPA and DHA per daily portion rather than only the total fish-oil weight.

What to check: compare products by price per recommended daily portion and by the actual amounts of the ingredients you need. This is a fairer comparison than capsule count alone.

The golden rules in one place

- The front is advertising. The ingredient and amount tables carry the facts.
- Identify the exact form, then read the active amount per daily portion.
- Read % NRV against the daily portion, not against one capsule unless they are the same.
- Do not treat a high dose as harmless simply because a vitamin is water-soluble.
- A food supplement is not a medicine and does not replace a varied diet or prescribed treatment.
- Compare price per daily portion and the actual active amounts.

Food supplements are not medicines

In the EU, food supplements are regulated as foods. This is not the same premarket assessment of quality, safety and efficacy applied to medicinal products. That distinction is why the label, the responsible operator and the lawfulness of the claims deserve careful attention.[1]

When to seek advice before taking a supplement

Ask a doctor or pharmacist during pregnancy and breastfeeding, when you have a chronic condition, take regular medicines or are preparing for surgery. Interactions and duplicate ingredients are easy to miss. The same applies to children: an adult product or dose is not made suitable simply by using less of it.

Bring a photograph of the full label, including the ingredients, amounts, daily portion and warnings. A photograph of only the front of the pack is not enough for a useful assessment.

> **Unsure about a particular label?**
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> On mom-pharma.com you will find the free “Ask Didi” chat, where I answer personally. Send the product composition and I will explain what I see. Registration is quick and free, and the answers use clear language.

Sources

[1] European Parliament and Council. (2002). *Directive 2002/46/EC on the approximation of the laws of the Member States relating to food supplements*.

[2] European Parliament and Council. (2011). *Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 on the provision of food information to consumers*.

[3] European Parliament and Council. (2006). *Regulation (EC) No 1924/2006 on nutrition and health claims made on foods*.

[4] European Commission. *Food supplements: Food safety, labelling and nutrition*.

This guide is for information only and does not replace advice from a doctor or pharmacist about your specific situation. Food supplements are not medicinal products and must not be presented as diagnosing, treating, curing or preventing disease.

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