Should you be concerned about what's inside your supplements?

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[00:00:09] **James Rowe:** Do you know what's in your supplements or are they really full of stuff you don't actually need? Welcome to this podcast from which, hello, I'm James Rowe, and on this special podcast series all about health and wellbeing. We're here to give you expert advice and recommendations to help you live your best life.

[00:00:26] **James Rowe:** Every day. And on this episode as they have been for the full series so far, we have public health nutritionist here at Witch She Lath. Hello again.

[00:00:34] **Shefalee Loth:** Hi. Nice to see you again.

[00:00:35] **James Rowe:** Likewise. And the founder of City Dietician, Sophie Medlin. Welcome back.

[00:00:39] **Shefalee Loth:** Hi. Thanks

[00:00:40] **Sophie Medlin:** for having me.

[00:00:40] **James Rowe:** Uh, great to have you both back with us.

[00:00:42] **James Rowe:** Now, today we're talking about what's really inside of your supplements on the couple of episodes we've talked about, um, so far on multivitamins and on magnesium. We've brought up the subject on of fillers and bulgars and things like that, and we'll get into this in great detail. But first of all, Sophie, for you, do you think people have an idea of kind of what actually makes up a supplement that people take?

[00:01:09] **Sophie Medlin:** I think that there are some things that people are maybe aware of and some things that they, they are really surprised of. Uh, and, and actually in this exercise we've been doing in reviewing the supplements, there's been a few ingredients there that I was even pretty shocked by. Wow. So I think it's something that perhaps is a good thing to shed light on because it's not necessarily something people are super aware of.

[00:01:28] **Sophie Medlin:** And.

[00:01:29] **James Rowe:** If they're not aware of it, I guess a lot of people, Ali, do you think aren't even reading a label? You know, when they pick something up, they might just think, I dunno, I like the color of the bottle. Maybe because it looks nice or it's cheap and they're not actually reading what's inside.

[00:01:42] **Shefalee Loth:** Yeah, absolutely.

[00:01:43] **Shefalee Loth:** And I have a confession to make here, because actually before Sophie and I started this, I'd never really thought about the additives or fillers and supplements. I just, as you say, picked up a brand that I trusted if I'd ever wanted a supplement and just thought, does it contain? The active ingredient, the nutrient that I need.

[00:02:01] **Shefalee Loth:** And if so, then I, I bought it, you know, I wasn't actually thinking about the other things that are in the ingredients list.

[00:02:07] **James Rowe:** And do you think more people have been falling into that, you know, a similar trap because of something we've touched on on a couple of the episodes already about this real big boom of supplements, especially on social media.

[00:02:18] **James Rowe:** People are getting these thing, you know, pushed onto their screens and people just maybe just click by, you know, on social media for example. And they haven't got a clue. They just. Buying it because it looks like it's a nice price. It's sort of, this has been hammered home, isn't it?

[00:02:31] **Shefalee Loth:** Yeah. And also I suppose on the other side of that, you know, you might have seen adverts saying, oh, our supplements are pure and there's no nasties in them.

[00:02:39] **Shefalee Loth:** And actually that's probably what prompted us to start thinking about actually. Does that matter? Are these extra ingredients, the non-active ingredients in your supplement, are they actually important and do you care? And you know, at the end of the day, we didn't find anything that was unsafe. Um, so really this is more of a preference thing.

[00:03:01] **Shefalee Loth:** I think if you are not bothered, then that's fine. Um, you know, whereas actually if you do care. There are reasons why you should care in some cases, then yeah, just pay a bit more attention to your ingredients list.

[00:03:14] **James Rowe:** So in terms of things that might be inside of a, a supplement, uh, there's a few words that jump out to me, which are bulgars, fillers and additives.

[00:03:23] **James Rowe:** Sophie, what do we actually mean by these three words?

[00:03:25] **Sophie Medlin:** So bulking agents are things that we use. Almost as the word implies to bulk out the supplement. So some nutrients like vitamin D for example, you just need 10 micrograms of vitamin D. That's, you know, you could barely see that on a teaspoon. And so you need something to fill up the rest of that capsule or to fill up to make it into a solid tablet.

[00:03:44] **Sophie Medlin:** And so they'll use a bulking agent and there are good bulking agents and less good bulking agents. Tcomm powder is actually a common bulking agent that's used in supplements, and it's not one that's gonna have any asbestos in it. One that's dangerous for you, potentially it's all very safe, but you might not want to take something that's 90% tcomm powder and 10% vitamin D.

[00:04:04] **Sophie Medlin:** So it's something to to think about. It's something for people to be aware of when they're looking at ingredients lists

[00:04:09] **James Rowe:** and manufacturers might use this to, I guess just make it a bit. Easier to take a supplement, otherwise it'll be so small you couldn't maybe even see it in the packet or even on your hand before you put it in your mouth.

[00:04:21] **James Rowe:** Is that fair to say?

[00:04:22] **Sophie Medlin:** Exactly. And you know, for some single uh, ingredient supplements, you probably do need some sort of bulking agent, but you know, it's about choosing one that you feel comfortable with. And another bulking agent people use as cellulose, which is just that the cells of plant cell walls, it's like fiber.

[00:04:37] **Sophie Medlin:** And that might be a more natural alternative, as it were to tcom powder

[00:04:41] **James Rowe:** and. With these examples then, are there actually any sort of concerns about what is actually being used? Because I think a lot of people might, even just immediately now as we talk, might think, oh, well I thought I was taking this, you know, this specific supplement.

[00:04:58] **James Rowe:** Why and Earth has it got all this other stuff in? Do I need to be concerned?

[00:05:03] **Sophie Medlin:** One of the things I would say is in the last couple of years there's been some guidance out, which has said that people are no longer allowed to consider a common supplement ingredient called titanium dioxide. It's no longer considered safe for human consumption, so supplement companies then had a year to get that out of all of their supplements, and now you don't see them on the shelves with that, that ingredient in them.

[00:05:23] **Sophie Medlin:** So I think. If anything suddenly becomes unsafe or more research is found to say that it's unsafe, they are quick to get it out of the, of the food chain, out of the supply chain. So I think ultimately it really is about you making a decision for yourself about whether you are bothered about having a bit of TAL powder in your food, in your supremacy, which is likely to be completely safe, or whether that's something you would rather.

[00:05:45] **Sophie Medlin:** Keep out of your daily diet as it were.

[00:05:47] **Shefalee Loth:** Yeah, because actually some of the supplements they would use things like rice starch, um, or so if you said cellulose, you know, plant-based bulkers, which are more natural, for example. Um, you know, one thing we noticed is when you are looking at. Supplements in gummy form.

[00:06:05] **Shefalee Loth:** Mm-hmm. You know, a lot of the additives there are then sugar-based. They might be glucose syrup. You know, we found supplements or gummies especially that have four or five different types of sugar in them. Now obviously gummies are essentially like a sweet, and what Sophie and I are looking at when we do our analysis is.

[00:06:26] **Shefalee Loth:** Is valuable space being taken up here in a supplement by ingredients that aren't necessary or things like sugar, whereas actually there should be more of the nutrient in there, which is what you are paying for.

[00:06:39] **James Rowe:** So you're talking about additives there, aren't you? Yeah. And this is kind of, is this kind of stuff that.

[00:06:44] **James Rowe:** Maybe just improves the color and the taste of a supplement.

[00:06:48] **Sophie Medlin:** Yeah, exactly. So sometimes even in a capsule or a tablet type supplement, there were several colorings, different colors that people are using. There sometimes is sugar and things like that. Also on, on some of the capsules, they use PVA, like PVA glue.

[00:07:04] **Sophie Medlin:** To help them to slide down the throat more easily. Now, that was a revelation to me. I, it was a long chemical name and I was like, is that the same thing as PVA glue? And sure enough, it is. Were you concerned when you saw that? It did make me think, hang on a minute. Yeah. And, and at that level, you know, it's such a small amount.

[00:07:18] **Sophie Medlin:** It's, it's safe, it's fine. But it's another one of those things where people might think, actually, do I really want that going into my body every day or not? So sweeteners. Uh, color colorings, all sorts of different things go in, even if it's not a gummy supplement, but gummies are often the worst culprit for these kind of, um, extra fillers and additives and things like that, because they have to make them into a physical suite that you can then chew and that tastes okay, and things like that.

[00:07:42] **James Rowe:** I feel like I've had maybe even ibuprofen where it's got like a sugar coat on the outside. Yeah. Is that a similar example?

[00:07:47] **Sophie Medlin:** Exactly. Yeah.

[00:07:48] **James Rowe:** Uh, what about fillers then? I do. Have we touched on fillers yet, or is it, is it sort of a bit of a big

[00:07:52] **Shefalee Loth:** ball? I guess that's a catchall term, isn't it? You know, not all fillers or additives are bad.

[00:07:58] **Shefalee Loth:** Some are there for a reason, so you might need things that might bind the ingredients to make a tablet. You might need things that stop are antica or make sure that the tablet can get formed properly in a machine. And you know, they all have valid purposes. But again, when we are looking at it, we are looking at actually.

[00:08:20] **Shefalee Loth:** Is there a better alternative? And how many of these are in there? You know, some supplements, especially in the multivitamins, they had 23 nutrients, but also 16 additives and bulkers and fillers, and that just seems quite excessive really. So it's not that all fillers and additives are bad, but actually you want to think about.

[00:08:41] **Shefalee Loth:** What the purpose is and what role they're fulfilling in your supplement. Mm-hmm. And

[00:08:46] **Sophie Medlin:** as someone who works in the supplement industry as well, thinking about thoughtfully about what extras are there is really important. And I do think this with sort of having this revolution of clean supplements in inverted commas, which is not a term that Shafai and I particularly like, but you know, there is this awareness now that people don't want to be taking all this extra stuff.

[00:09:06] **Sophie Medlin:** Especially, you know, when we looked at the magnesium, one of the brands had. Maybe 10 different fillers or bulking agents or additives for a single ingredient supplement, and you don't need that. It's not necessary. So what do we really need and can we get it as the most natural alternative is my sort of go-to when I'm formulating supplements.

[00:09:25] **James Rowe:** So in that case then, do you think people who are taking supplements already. Or have listened to some of these podcasts and have found they might wanna be taking supplements. Do you think they're actually taking supplements and taking something within the supplement that they don't want to be taken because they haven't necessarily checked out exactly what's in there?

[00:09:46] **Shefalee Loth:** I'm sure that's the case, um, because how many of us read the ingredients lists on products that we buy? So, you know, my take home message here is look at the results. We've done the work for you. So if you do have access to which have a look at our tables because we have ranked supplements and given them a rating.

[00:10:06] **Shefalee Loth:** For the amount of additives. So actually if we see a supplement that has minimal additives, it gets a high score. So if this is something, if these are things you want to avoid, then actually. You know, choose a supplement with a, a high additive score, which means it has very few additives in.

[00:10:25] **James Rowe:** And don't forget which members you can look at those tables, look at all those results on our website.

[00:10:30] **James Rowe:** We'll pop some links in the show notes for you to find out. If you're not already a member, you can get 50% off the first year of, uh, which membership bag. Going to wich.co uk slash podcast offer. Speaking about the label as well, though. I guess for any supplement it will be, I'm gonna use the word clearly labeled, should it be clearly labeled, everything that's in there, even if we don't necessarily know what it all means.

[00:10:55] **Shefalee Loth:** Yeah, the ingredients will be listed there. Yeah. So actually, if you are interested and worried, you can look them up to see what these products actually are. And there are some that are very harmless and we don't really penalize brands for those. Um, for example. In vitamin D, if it's in an oil form in a capsule, you'll need an antioxidant in there so that the oil doesn't go rancid and it will improve the shelf life of your product.

[00:11:23] **Shefalee Loth:** Now, obviously we don't want people buying supplements and throwing them away, so that's got a very valid reason to be in the product, whereas others, as we've said, if you've got 16 additives in a product, they're probably not all necessary.

[00:11:38] **Sophie Medlin:** One of the things I think is tricky for the consumer is that the names of vitamins are pretty alien in the same way as the names of these bulking agents and fillers and things are.

[00:11:47] **Sophie Medlin:** So vitamin D will be listed as colic calciferol, which doesn't sound like vitamin D at all, and and so it's quite hard for people to look at a label and know whether something's an active ingredient. Or a bulking agent or a filler. Now they do have better labeling and often it will say it's a bulking agent, and you'll know it's a coloring, for example, 'cause it'll have perhaps an E number or something attached to it.

[00:12:06] **Sophie Medlin:** But you know, even some of the names of sugars are complicated and difficult and difficult for people to spot, and that's why they use four different forms of sugar so that people aren't saying, oh, this is basically just sugar.

[00:12:17] **James Rowe:** Do you think it should be easier for people and consumers to actually pick up a, a supplement and, you know, at a, at a glance understand what's actually in there?

[00:12:25] **James Rowe:** Because the, some of those words you mentioned there, I wouldn't even know how to spell it. Never know what, you know, mind what it is. It should be a bit easier for consumers,

[00:12:31] **Sophie Medlin:** I think so I think it needs to be, obviously ingredients, lists have to be listed by the highest. Amount by gram of ingredient first.

[00:12:39] **Sophie Medlin:** So a, a good guide is if the first ingredient is a bulking agent, then you know, you're in a space where perhaps it's not ideal. But, um, in an ideal world, perhaps they'll be classified by active ingredients and non-active ingredients.

[00:12:51] **James Rowe:** And in your day-to-day job, are you speaking to more people who are weak up to the amount of additives that might be in a supplement?

[00:13:00] **James Rowe:** I guess a few years ago they might not have known or even cared, but now are they becoming a bit more aware?

[00:13:06] **Sophie Medlin:** Yeah. And really interestingly, I think this has come alongside our conversations about ultra processed foods upf. Mm-hmm. And how supplements could be in that category, or they could be better quality and maybe not in that category, or maybe they are in that category.

[00:13:20] **Sophie Medlin:** But ultimately, I think that conversation about additives, UPS has sort of bled into the supplement industry, as it were. And I think that's, that's one of the reasons why the general public are becoming more interested in this stuff.

[00:13:31] **James Rowe:** Yeah, do, do you agree with ASFA as well? I do.

[00:13:33] **Sophie Medlin:** I think

[00:13:34] **Shefalee Loth:** it is totally because of the UPF conversation.

[00:13:37] **James Rowe:** So we've talked about our reviews, of course, that are on our website, where you can find some of the, the best supplements that are on the market. What about then buying them? Because I feel like people are gonna be considering where they should actually be buying them from. You know, supermarkets are good.

[00:13:53] **James Rowe:** Chemists are good. What about buying online? Is that, is this a bit of a cautious area?

[00:13:58] **Shefalee Loth:** It is, um, because there are good products online and there are bad products online. So my advice would be buy from a trusted retailer. Um, so if you are buying your supplements from an online marketplace such as Amazon, you know, check the brand and check where it's coming from, because actually there are lots of brands on there that are essentially own label and you don't really know about the quality of ingredients.

[00:14:26] **Shefalee Loth:** Whereas if you buy from a shop. On the high street, you know, that shop has a responsibility, um, to you as a consumer to make sure that that product is safe for sale. And the same doesn't necessarily apply online. Um, that said, there are more niche supplement brands, some really good. Smaller brands that are really doing good work in the supplement space.

[00:14:49] **Shefalee Loth:** So don't rule out every online, but just do a bit more research, I'd say. Mm-hmm.

[00:14:54] **Sophie Medlin:** Yeah, I agree. And I think, you know, there are lots of high street brands that are also not doing such a great job as well. And some of the brands that you can buy, you know, we've mentioned in previous podcasts are big, big, high street brands that everyone would've heard of that aren't doing such good work.

[00:15:08] **Sophie Medlin:** So. It, it really is the wild West and it's really hard to help people to make sensible decisions without having long form conversations with them, either one-to-one or in platforms like this. And I

[00:15:19] **Shefalee Loth:** think that's why we are doing the work that we are doing really because it is a minefield for consumers.

[00:15:25] **Shefalee Loth:** It's really hard to know what to buy. Um, so we are just trying to make that journey a bit easier for them.

[00:15:31] **James Rowe:** And thanks to you two, 'cause you doing an incredible job. And thanks for coming here. To sort of explain to our listeners as well about how important it is to look for the right things, uh, including the dosage as well.

[00:15:41] **James Rowe:** Should we touch on that? Because we have touched on this on a couple of the other episodes, but that is a really crucial element to look at when you are buying a supplement, isn't it?

[00:15:51] **Shefalee Loth:** It is because if you are spending your money on a supplement, you want it to give you the ingredient that you need. And I suppose Sophie and I have also been considering, well actually, if a product has loads of unnecessary fillers in it, is that taking up valuable space of an active ingredient?

[00:16:09] **Shefalee Loth:** And you know, we will penalize a product if we think that that's the case. So. My tip for dose is have a look on the back of the pack of the label and it will tell you what the recommended daily dose is and how much of your daily need that that will provide.

[00:16:26] **James Rowe:** And while we've been having this conversation, I've been thinking about people who might not necessarily be able to take a a, a supplement.

[00:16:32] **James Rowe:** Are there actually any other options for the, those types of people who might want to be getting those kind of supplements and nutrients in that in a different way?

[00:16:40] **Sophie Medlin:** Yeah, so obviously gummies are an option, but we've mentioned that they're really full of additives and sugars and colorings and all sorts of things that you probably don't want to be having every single day.

[00:16:49] **Sophie Medlin:** Another good option is a mouth spray, and there are some really good mouth sprays on the, on the market with very few ingredients without many, you know, any ultrapro type ingredients or, or fillers and additives and things like that. The other thing that's now on the market as well as tinctures, so like drops that you would do in the mouth and that they're a good option too, as long as you're, again, checking the ingredients list to make sure there's not too much in there that you don't want.

[00:17:09] **James Rowe:** Some very solid advice as usual. Uh, we'll probably wrap up in a second, but just any final thoughts, anything you wanna reiterate or anything we haven't touched on already, uh, that you think is worth, uh, mention? You go first.

[00:17:21] **Shefalee Loth:** Um, mine would be, whilst you might not want these additives in there, um, you know, there's nothing that's unsafe in any of the supplements that we looked at.

[00:17:31] **Shefalee Loth:** So don't be scared and we are not fear-mongering here. It's a choice thing. It's not a safety thing.

[00:17:37] **James Rowe:** Sophie.

[00:17:38] **Sophie Medlin:** Yeah. And I think the key thing is, again, reading those labels and looking at what the first few ingredients are and if they're all additives or bulking agents, think about a different product.

[00:17:47] **James Rowe:** Lovely stuff. Well, thanks again for joining us, uh, on this podcast series Shale. Thank you very much. Thank

[00:17:52] **Sophie Medlin:** you. And

[00:17:52] **James Rowe:** Sophie. Thank you.

[00:17:53] **Sophie Medlin:** Thank you for having me.

[00:18:03] **James Rowe:** Thanks for listening to this podcast from Witch, the UK's consumer champion. You can find plenty more advice about what we discuss today in the show notes. There. You'll also find a link to become a witch member for 50% off the usual price. An offer exclusively available to you are podcast listeners joining, which will not only give you access to all of our product reviews, our app, one-to-one, personalized buying advice, and every issue of which magazine across the air.

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[00:18:49] **James Rowe:** See you next time.