



Sports Supplements: A Sensible Guide

What the evidence says, what to be careful of, and why food comes first

Sports supplements, also called ergogenic aids, are products used to support performance, recovery or general health. They come as powders, tablets, gels, bars and drinks. A few are genuinely useful. Many rely on clever marketing rather than strong evidence, and some carry real risks. This guide helps you tell the difference.

The most effective supplement is a good diet. Supplements add to sound nutrition, they never replace it. Get your everyday eating, training and sleep right first, then consider whether anything is worth adding.

Food first, but not always food only. A few tested supplements can be sensible where food genuinely cannot do the job, for example vitamin D in winter, creatine, or a carbohydrate gel mid-race.

When a supplement might help, and when it is probably not needed

It might help if

- You regularly cannot hit a nutrient target from food
- Training raises your needs beyond your diet
- There is good evidence it works
- It manages a known deficiency, ideally confirmed by a test

It is likely not needed if

- Your diet already meets your needs
- A simple food change would do the same job
- You are not sure why you are taking it
- The product is not third-party tested

The evidence, at a glance

Supplement	May support	Evidence
Creatine monohydrate	Strength, power, lean mass and recovery	Strong
Whey protein	Meeting daily protein targets	Strong
Caffeine	Focus, strength and endurance	Strong
Beta-alanine	Hard efforts lasting 1 to 10 minutes	Good
Sodium bicarbonate	Short, high-intensity efforts	Good
Dietary nitrates (beetroot)	Endurance and a lower oxygen cost of exercise	Good
Vitamin D	Muscle and bone health if low. NHS advises 10 mcg a day in autumn and winter	Good
Omega-3 (EPA/DHA)	Recovery and general health	Good
Collagen	Tendon, ligament and joint recovery	Good
Probiotics	Gut comfort for athletes prone to upset	Moderate
BCAAs	Only if protein is low or you are dieting	Limited
Fat burners, ketones, antioxidant megadoses	Marketed for fat loss or energy	Overstated

Doses used in research vary, and the right choice is individual. Get tailored advice before starting anything new rather than following a label or a social feed.

Know the risks

- **Wasted money** on products that do little or nothing.
- **Side effects**, and at high doses real harm, for example vitamin D toxicity.
- **Contamination.** Supplements can contain banned substances that are not on the label, which can cause a failed drugs test in sport.



- **More is not better.** Extra doses rarely add benefit and can cause problems.

Scope and honesty

Good practice means staying within professional limits and being open about any conflict of interest. As a nutrition practitioner I give evidence-based guidance, not medical advice or diagnosis, and I do not sell supplements or earn commission on them. A product that is unsafe or banned in sport should never be recommended. For clinical needs or anything involving medication, your GP or a registered dietitian is the right person to see.

Compete in sport? Choose only products batch-tested under a scheme such as Informed Sport, and check the current rules with your governing body. A food-first approach also lowers your contamination risk.

Trusted sources: the British Dietetic Association (BDA), the Sport and Exercise Nutrition register (SENr), the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) supplement framework, and Informed Sport for batch testing. Speak to your GP or a registered dietitian for medical or clinical needs.

This leaflet is general nutritional guidance for education only. It is not medical advice, diagnosis or treatment, and it does not replace advice from your GP or a registered dietitian. Always check with a qualified professional before starting any supplement, particularly if you have a health condition, are pregnant, or take medication.

Ready to take the next step? Book a free call or start your food diary analysis at performancenutritionlondon.co.uk