

Popping a cocktail of supplements every day might be doing you more harm than good

Ruth Clegg, Health and wellbeing reporter

How to read this document: Difficult English words are followed by a small Urdu meaning and an English synonym in brackets, then the sentence continues normally.

I did not see myself as an avid شوقین (keen) supplement taker, but then I took a good look in my cupboard.

Without realising it, I had accumulated جمع کر لیا (gathered) several pouches of creatine, vitamin D, magnesium, collagen, an all-in-one green supplement, and some tablets designed to help with the ups and downs of perimenopause رہنمائی سے پہلے کا دور (pre-menopause).

I had thought I was immune محفوظ (resistant) to the constant ads on social media, but apparently not.

Comments like: “I can’t get over how these supplements have made me feel!” had clearly got under my (questionably) collagen-enhancing بہتر بنانا (improving) skin.

A recent survey by consumer group Which? found that 76% of those asked took at least one supplement regularly - that includes vitamins, minerals, omega-3, probiotics and herbal supplements - and nearly a fifth took four or more on a daily basis.

While supplements can play a vital role in enhancing our wellbeing when needed, some experts are warning we have become so eager بے تاب (keen) to optimise بہترین بنانا (maximize) our health, we are now at risk of endangering خطرے میں ڈالنا (jeopardizing) it.

They have told the BBC they are seeing a growing number of patients and clients with liver, kidney and gastrointestinal معدے اور آنتوں سے متعلق (digestive) issues which they say have been caused by people taking a growing number and range of supplements.

One nutritionist غذائیت کا ماہر (dietitian) tells me it's “insane انتہائی غیر معمولی (extreme)” how many supplements people are using.

“Some are beginning to think that taking a pill is better than eating food,” she says. “It is not.”

When Ginger Smith started taking supplements three years ago, she thought she was enhancing her health.

As a brand influencer, various boxes of complimentary مفت (free) products would regularly land on her doorstep in Seattle. The 30-year-old would take the pills, powders and gels, and then extol تعریف کرنا (praise) their benefits online.

“I was on high doses of vitamin C, vitamin D, turmeric, a special de-bloat supplement and I would regularly drink water with electrolytes برقیہ نمکیات (minerals) in,” Ginger explains.

For a couple of years, she says she felt healthy and energised توانا (invigorated). Little did she know she was putting her kidneys under immense بہت زیادہ (huge) strain دباؤ (stress).

After experiencing intense lower back pain, she went to her doctor, who ran a couple of blood tests. Within days, Ginger was told she needed an ultrasound الٹراساؤنڈ معائنہ (scan).

“I was a bit worried, but I did not expect to be told that I had a massive بہت بڑا (enormous) kidney stone. So big, they told me that they were going to have to operate to remove it.”

The kidney stone measured between two and three centimetres and had been caused, Ginger was told, by the cocktail ملاپ (mixture) of daily supplements she was taking.

“I never would have thought that by trying to improve my health, I would end up in such a bad way,” she says. “Luckily, I had insurance.

“It still cost me \$6,000 (£4,500) - but it would have been \$35,000 (£26,000).”

Gastroenterologist معدے کی بیماریوں کا ماہر (digestive specialist) Dr Pedro de Maria Pallares from the Hospital Universitario La Paz in Madrid, says increasing numbers of patients are coming to him with liver problems caused by herbal supplements.

“We ask the patient if they are on medication. ‘No’, they say.

“We then have to do a process of elimination اخراج (exclusion). Once we have ruled everything out, we ask again, and they say: ‘Oh well, I do take a number of different supplements.’”

Research in the US suggests that 20% of all cases of liver damage are caused by a mixture of herbal and dietary supplements.

Those which are particularly toxic زہریلا (poisonous) to the liver when taken in high doses include vitamin A, glutamine گلوٹامین (amino acid), ashwagandha اشوگنڈھا (herb) and green tea extract عرق (essence).

The liver can recover, but prolonged طویل مدتی (extended) use can cause chronic دائمی (long-lasting) conditions.

The British Liver Trust says although there is little data here in the UK, it is seeing cases of liver injury due to over-supplementation, and is asking people to consider “whether the potential benefits outweigh زیادہ بھاری ہونا (surpass) any possible risks”.

“Supplements can be positively life-changing,” Dr Karan Rajan, an NHS surgeon who makes health and science content for social media, says. “But every supplement deserves scepticism شک و شبہ (doubt) until proved otherwise.”

Over recent years, Rajan says he has become more open-minded about supplements - so much so he has launched his own brand of fibre supplement - and believes they can have a place in people's diets when used wisely.

“I've seen the evidence grow when it comes to different supplements,” he says. “We know our soil is not as nutrient dense as it was decades ago - so a carrot in the 1950s will be far more nutrient-rich than a 2026 carrot.”

Rajan takes vitamin D, a prebiotic, protein, fibre and creatine - in what he describes as a “supplement stack” - to target areas where he could have a deficiency کمی (shortage).

He says the balance works for him, but there are risks to mixing supplements and GPs are now regularly seeing patients taking multiple supplements who ask for advice about which to take.

“Patients may not realise they are duplicating دہرائی (repeating) ingredients, exceeding حد سے بڑھنا (surpassing) recommended amounts, or taking products that could interact اثر انداز ہونا (react) with prescribed تجویز کردہ (recommended) medicines,” says Prof Victoria Tzortziou Brown, president of the Royal College of GPs. “More is not always better.”

For example, taking a multivitamin, along with a vitamin B6 supplement could lead to a double dose - and too much vitamin B6 over a long period of time can result in nerve damage.

Taking a cocktail of iron, calcium and magnesium together can reduce absorption **بندب (uptake)** rates.

And some vitamins, like A, D, E and K, are fat soluble **حل پذير (dissolvable)** so the body stores them for longer, so it might not be necessary to take them on a daily basis.

“Social media is convincing people they need these supplements to achieve health,” says UK-based nutritionist Kristen Stavridis, who feels she is fighting a losing battle, “but more often than not, it’s just not true.”

For an adult with no underlying health conditions, she recommends a balanced diet, with vitamin D supplements in the winter months, and perhaps a multivitamin and fish oil if needed.

For some women, who are more likely to be iron deficient **کمی کا شکار (lacking)**, supplements can help, but they should only be taken over a short period of time until levels have bounced back.

Stavridis' main message is to prioritise **تریح دینا (favour)** food, and if you do think you are deficient in a certain nutrient, consult **مشورہ کرنا (ask)** a doctor, as you shouldn't assume a supplement will fix it.

Make sure you look at the recommended daily amounts (RDAs) on the label, she adds, and check your supplements are not clashing with any prescription medication.

It took several months for Ginger to recover from the operation to remove the kidney stone. She's feeling healthy again and is back at work.

“The funny thing is,” she says, “I feel just as energised and healthy as I did when I was taking all those different supplements.”

“Now I just take one multivitamin a day - and hopefully that's good enough.”

Summary

More people than ever are taking daily supplements, often encouraged by social media influencers, but doctors say this growing habit is causing real harm. Reporter Ruth Clegg discovers her own cupboard full of pills and powders, while influencer Ginger Smith developed a large kidney stone after years of taking high doses of vitamins and electrolytes. Doctors report rising cases of liver, kidney and digestive problems linked to over-supplementation, with herbal

products such as ashwagandha and green tea extract able to damage the liver in high doses. Experts including Dr Karan Rajan and Prof Victoria Tzortziou Brown say supplements can be useful when taken wisely, but warn that people often duplicate ingredients, exceed recommended amounts, or combine supplements in ways that reduce absorption or interact with medicines. Nutritionists recommend prioritising a balanced diet, checking recommended daily amounts, and consulting a doctor before assuming a supplement is needed. After recovering from surgery, Ginger now takes just one multivitamin a day and says she feels just as healthy as before.

Word Bank (in order of appearance)

avid — شوقین — keen

accumulated — جمع کر لیا — gathered

perimenopause — ریٹرنوٹی سے پہلے کا دور — pre-menopause

immune — محفوظ — resistant

enhancing — بہتر بنانا — improving

eager — بے تاب — keen

optimise — بہترین بنانا — maximize

endangering — خطرے میں ڈالنا — jeopardizing

gastrointestinal — معدے اور آنتوں سے متعلق — digestive

insane — انتہائی غیر معمولی — extreme

nutritionist — غذائیت کا ماہر — dietitian

complimentary — مفت — free

extol — تعریف کرنا — praise

electrolytes — برقیہ نمکیات — minerals

energised — توانا — invigorated

immense — بہت زیادہ — huge

strain — دباؤ — stress

ultrasound — الٹراساؤنڈ معائنہ — scan

massive — بہت بڑا — enormous

cocktail — ملاپ — mixture

gastroenterologist — معدے کی بیماریوں کا ماہر — digestive specialist

elimination — اخراج — exclusion

toxic — زہریلا — poisonous

glutamine — گلوٹامین — amino acid

ashwagandha — اشوگندھا — herb
extract — عرق — essence
chronic — دائمی — long-lasting
prolonged — طویل مدتی — extended
outweigh — زیادہ بھاری ہونا — surpass
scepticism — شک و شبہ — doubt
deficiency — کمی — shortage
duplicating — دہرانا — repeating
exceeding — حد سے بڑھنا — surpassing
interact — اثر انداز ہونا — react
prescribed — تجویز کردہ — recommended
absorption — جذب — uptake
soluble — حل پذیر — dissolvable
deficient — کمی کا شکار — lacking
prioritise — ترجیح دینا — favour
consult — مشورہ کرنا — ask