

Medicine through the back door

Stronger, more focussed, more productive – many people take food supplements to “optimise” their own health. In most cases, this is unnecessary, sometimes even risky, because sometimes they work like drugs.



Red yeast rice, for example. Used in Asia for centuries, it is said to have various positive properties. It supposedly helps to treat heart and vascular diseases, among other things, and lower cholesterol levels. This is helpful for marketing, but not for those who take it as a food supplement. For the substance it contains, monacolin K, has the same effect as the drug lovastatin. The crucial difference is that drugs containing lovastatin are available only on prescription and are only prescribed after a medical examination to determine whether their use is acceptable in terms of health. Food supplements containing red yeast rice, on the other hand, are usually bought and consumed on a person's own initiative. Most people are often unaware of possible adverse effects, which can range from nausea to damage to the skeletal muscles. According to the European Food Safety Authority (EFSA), the current data available are not sufficient to specify a maximum dose that is still considered safe.

Plant power to fight menopausal symptoms?

Some food supplements contain isolated or enriched isoflavones. These are substances occurring in plants such as soya or red clover, which may have a weak effect in the body similar to that of the hormone estrogen. It is purported that they can be used by women to relieve menopausal symptoms. Health claims of this sort regarding isoflavones have so far been rejected by EFSA.

Scientific evidence on the safety of isolated isoflavones, especially with respect to long-term use, is currently still inadequate. It is therefore not recommended that women who have previously suffered or are currently suffering from estrogen-dependent disease (cancer) of the mammary gland or uterus take food supplements containing isoflavones.

Food or medicine?

Food supplements do not require official approval for the German market. They are subject to food law. Manufacturers are responsible for their safety and must inform the Federal Office of Consumer Protection and Food Safety (BVL) before they place their products on the market. Medicines are subject to stricter provisions; quality, efficacy and safety must be proven for their approval.

Not only does this difference sometimes appear complicated for the population, but questions about the general necessity of food supplements often arise. The BfR recommends not to use them uncritically. The best way to clarify whether a food supplement might be useful in certain cases is to seek medical advice. ■

More information:
www.bfr.bund.de/en > A-Z Index: food supplements