QUESTION OF THE MONTH

How Can I Help My Clients Sort Out the Conflicting and Confusing Information Regarding Dietary Supplements?

Last year's economic downturn didn't slow the sales of dietary supplements. Nutrition Business Journal estimates show that total US consumer sales of dietary supplements expanded to $25.2 billion (1). Although many Americans use dietary supplements, a 2009 report from the US Government Accountability Office stated that consumers are not well informed about the safety and efficacy of dietary supplements and have difficulty interpreting labels on these products (2). ADA's position paper on Nutrient Supplements states that it is the expertise of the registered dietitian to educate the consumer on safe and appropriate use of dietary supplements (3). So where do you start?

The first step is to assess exactly what supplements are taken. To help ascertain supplement usage you need to ask specific questions. The more in-depth information you can obtain the better you can help your client. The new online version of The Health Professional's Guide to Popular Dietary Supplements, Third Edition (4) lists a number of pertinent questions to ask.

A few examples are:

- What supplements do you use? (Be sure to explain that supplements include vitamins and minerals, herbs, amino acids, protein, fiber, fatty acids, etc.)
- What are your main reasons for taking this supplement? (Suggest reasons, such as to prevent a disease, to help treat a disease or condition, general health, energy, weight loss, pregnancy, mood, muscle-building, etc.)
- How much money do you spend on supplements? Does this cost make it hard to afford food?
- What other drugs do you take? (Ask about both prescription and over-the-counter medications.)

Once you know the supplements being used, the next step is to use reliable resources to evaluate the advantages or disadvantages of the supplement. A number of reliable resources are listed below.

If a supplement is not listed in a reliable resource, what is the next step? You can use publications or the Internet to find the exact ingredients in a supplement and then review the research using your critical-thinking skills to evaluate this information. “Sifting through the Research on Supplements” by Jennifer Mathieu, from the June 2007 Journal, can walk you through this critical thinking process to evaluate the research (5).

Knowing reliable resources and how to evaluate research regarding dietary supplements is essential for the registered dietitian. Listen to your client, evaluate, discuss, and give them the best up-to-date data in this ever changing field of supplements.

References

Government Resources
National Center of Complementary and Alternative Medicine http://nccam.nih.gov/health/

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