

Sport nutrition products can contain banned substances

With 55 doping violations between April 2011 and June 2012 in South Africa, the trend is increasing according to recent statistics released by the SA Institute for Drug Free Sport. However, while some athletes use drugs to seek a competitive advantage, others including amateurs may inadvertently consume banned ingredients through sports nutrition products.



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This is according to Deon Lewis, MD of Cipla Nutrition, the recently launched sports supplement brand that is a brand extension of JSE-listed South African pharmaceutical company, Cipla Medpro.

"Doping in professional sport is not a new phenomenon and has been happening for a long time in many sports. Though it is not a criminal offence to take these substances, the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) bans them in professional sport, as they are seen as enhancing stimulants," says Lewis.

The problem of doping in sport is a complicated one and cannot be solved by merely punishing those who have doped. "This is because many athletes are unaware that they could be taking a banned substance, often found in their nutritional supplements. This is what happened to South African rugby players Bjorn Basson and Chiliboy Ralepelle in late 2010, who both tested positive for the banned stimulant methylhexaneamine while on an international rugby tour." Last year's Comrades winner, Ludwick Mamabolo, also tested positive for this banned substance, which sent waves of disappointment through the running community.

Unregulated facilities lead to contamination

He says compounding the problem is the fact that sports nutrition products are generally manufactured in facilities that are not regulated. "Products may be manufactured in facilities where both 'clean' substances and WADA-banned substances are found under one roof. Thus, when manufacturing takes place, both 'clean' and WADA-banned substances may have been used in sequential batch runs to manufacture different products in the same equipment, but the equipment may not be thoroughly cleaned or sterilized between batches, which increases the opportunity for cross-contamination between non-banned and banned substances.

"Often the supplier of the raw ingredients to the manufacturer may also not be reliable, which means the ingredient could be contaminated at source and thus taint the product. Some raw material (ingredients) are so sensitive that they could even be contaminated (with other raw material) in storage just from being placed next to each other on the same shelf. With no regulation or legislation in place in the manufacture of these supplements, there is very little guarantee that many sports nutrition products are not contaminated with WADA-banned substances."

Consumers therefore cannot be guaranteed of the safety and quality of ingredients that many sports nutrition products claim to possess. However, even though it is an unregulated industry, products that are manufactured in an approved Medicines Control Council (MCC) licensed facility that has also been certified for current Good Manufacturing Practice (cGMP), could potentially be much safer.

"The MCC in South Africa governs the medicines landscape to ensure that all medicines available to the public meet strict criteria. When a product is manufactured in a (MCC) licensed facility, it means that the product manufacturing complies with good quality and efficacy standards.

Better control on doping tests

"Better controls in terms of doping tests also need to be implemented locally. Although it is an expensive process to test athletes continually, the Biological Passport screening method, recently implemented in South Africa, could help curb this issue. This method, a DNA fingerprint, essentially monitors selected biological markers in athletes, whose abnormal variations could indicate doping. If inconsistencies are picked up, further tests can then be conducted to confirm whether the athlete is indeed doping. By building up a history of the athletes in a computerised system and testing various samples in relation to new ones, it is possible to effectively tackle the growing issue of doping.

"As a starting point, aspiring and professional athletes should ensure their sports nutrition products are manufactured in a MCC-licensed and cGMP-certified facility, supporting the manufacturing of high quality products in a controlled environment. This could potentially reduce the risk of consuming products contaminated with banned substances.

The problem is aggravated by an interest in stimulants and anabolic agents at an early age. "Amateur athletes that show potential in turning professional, often start taking the enhancers at an early age. Many athletes feel the competitive pressure at this early stage of their careers and take products irresponsibly."

He adds that sports nutrition products should also carry an age restriction and those products taken by promising young sports athletes should be supervised by their parents, guardians or coaches, to ensure that they use optimal and safe sports nutrition.

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