Is the FDA Trying to Take Away Your Vitamins?

By Deirdre Imus

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What began as a murmur last year about a possible ban on thousands of dietary supplements in the U.S. has reached cacophonous levels over the last few months, as the Food and Drug Administration indicated its intent to regulate “new dietary ingredients” in current and future products.

What does this mean? And, more importantly, how might it affect you and your health?

This past summer, the FDA issued a draft of guidelines for complying with the New Dietary Ingredient (NDI) notification protocols. Translation: Any company or individual wishing to sell or develop a supplement containing new ingredients would have to notify the FDA of their intent. A “new” ingredient is defined as one added after 1994, when Congress passed the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA). If the FDA deems a new ingredient unsafe or unscientific, the entire supplement can be removed from the market.

Just. Like. That.

Think about how many different conditions, serious or not, people treat or keep in check with vitamins, minerals, herbs or other alternative therapies. Arthritis? Yup. Headaches? Check. Menstrual cramps? Absolutely. Cancer? You bet. For almost every ache, pain or illness, there is a coordinating supplement that may not necessarily cure, but offers the possibility of relief, often in a much more natural form than Western medicine.

Even scarier, the FDA’s wide-reaching guidelines, which some critics claim are not exactly legal, could open up loopholes for pharmaceutical companies to swoop in and claim the natural supplement market for themselves.

According to those opposing the NDI guidelines, once certain supplements are banned, Big Pharma would likely begin developing and eventually patenting the formulas for those items. Since they, unlike independent manufacturers, are more than capable of footing the hefty bill associated with the regulatory testing process, soon enough the companies bringing you conventional medications would be the same ones offering alternative treatments. Consumers’ money would be going into one big pocket.

The NDI guidelines have yet to be officially imposed, but this debate affords us the opportunity to consider the role of supplements in our daily lives. Even people who are lucky enough to be in good overall health usually supplement their diets with a daily multi-vitamin, or an extra dose of vitamin D, or vitamin C, or fish oil. Pregnant women and new mothers are almost required to make sure there is enough folic acid in their bodies to aid in their baby’s development.

Innumerable provisions lining supermarket shelves—things like cereal, milk, protein drinks, yogurts, and so much more—claim to be “fortified” with vitamins—would these be made illegal, too?

So many of the foods we eat have been stripped of their nutritional value by the time they reach the store, or made wholly unhealthy by irresponsible cooking and packaging practices. The need to supplement a diet that should be rich in vitamins in minerals is not merely a luxury—it is a necessity.

With supplements, the possibilities to help heal or ease pain are endless, and constantly evolving. While reviewing and monitoring ingredients is undeniably important, outlawing their sale altogether could cost thousands of jobs and millions of dollars for hard-working, small business-owning Americans. This outrageous (but not surprising) attempt by the FDA to control our health cannot be taken lightly. There is too much to be lost by too many people, and at too great a cost to our collective wellness.

Voice your outrage, and sign a petition here.

Deirdre Imus, Founder of the site devoted to environmental health, dienviro.org, is President and Founder of The Deirdre Imus Environmental Health Center™ at Hackensack University Medical Center and Co-Founder/Director of the Imus Cattle Ranch for Kids with Cancer. She is a New York Times best-selling author and a frequent contributor to FoxNewsHealth.com, Fox Business Channel and Fox News Channel.