



AIS STATEMENT ON SUPPLEMENTS SOLD BY NETWORK MARKETING COMPANIES

Policy

We receive frequent contact from distributors of network marketing companies that sell nutritional supplements. Two issues are involved in our assessment: the supplements and the marketing process. These issues can't be separated.

The supplements generally fall into the following categories:

- Multivitamin/mineral preparations
- Antioxidant preparations containing larger doses of vitamins with antioxidant function
- Liquid meal supplements
- Herbal preparations (often also included in the other supplements)

The AIS recognises situations in which some of these supplements might be prescribed to athletes, and indeed in which they may help to promote optimal performance. Ideally, the use of supplements should be part of the athlete's overall nutrition plan, guided by a sports nutrition expert.

Our careful assessment of the supplement ranges provided by various network marketing companies is that the cost of the vitamin and mineral preparations is considerably higher than similar products found in pharmacies, health food shops and supermarkets. We consider that there is currently no evidence that the network marketed products are superior to over-the-counter products, or that other ingredients contained in the products (e.g. herbal ingredients) improve athletic performance.

The basis of network or multi-level marketing is that independent distributors sell products to their personal and professional contacts, and by recruiting other people to join their distribution "line", gain additional financial reward. In reality, this type of marketing often leads to people giving enthusiastic advice on areas of health and performance, which are outside their knowledge and expertise. We frequently hear claims that are unethical or illegal according to regulations concerning supplements in Australia. The systematic marketing strategies promoted by the companies involve personal testimonials and promises of financial gain. Clearly the financial gain underlying sales makes it difficult for advice to be objective. An association with the AIS would provide an individual distributor or the company with an obvious marketing advantage, explaining the frequency with which we are approached. We are aware of an alarming number of situations in which individual distributors have claimed an association with the AIS which is clearly untrue.

The sales messages of most companies are remarkably similar and are based on emotive ideas which are essentially "nutritional urban myths":

- There is no nutritional value in the present food supply,
- We live in a stressful, polluted, toxic world, or
- Overseas athletes are having great success due to these products, and Australian athletes will be left behind without this opportunity.

Journal articles describing functions of various nutrients or the ability of supplements to raise blood levels of nutrients are made available in the company “scientific literature”. By association, these articles lend credibility to supplements that contain these nutrients. However, we believe that studies which rigorously test the ability of a particular supplement to improve health or athletic performance are necessary to substantiate the claims made by supplement companies. Furthermore, these studies need to be examined by the peer-review process involved in scientific research, and to be published in appropriate journals. At this time, such studies are not available.

Currently, the main “proof” for the supplements is supplied in the form of testimonials from successful athletes and coaches, or people cured from previous ill health. It is important to realise the limitations of a testimonial, even when supplied by a person who seems independent. A case history provides inadequate proof of any observed outcomes, since it can’t control many of the factors that affect health or performance, or allow for the power of positive thinking. Most people who are excited and positive about a new product or change, will report beneficial effects in the short term.

The AIS finds no present justification for spending money on such supplements. We are unable to conduct simple “trials” on these products because of the possibility of becoming caught up in product advertising and unethical marketing. We do not have the resources to undertake the well-controlled research that is necessary to investigate various health and performance claims made about these products.

Therefore it is our recommendation that the AIS, its coaches, athletes and other staff members avoid contact with the distributors of these companies and their products. We will not accept products to test on our athletes. For individual staff members or athletes of the AIS to become distributors and sell supplements to our athletes and coaches is considered a serious conflict of interest. It is therefore forbidden. Additionally, no-one is entitled to use their position at the AIS or any connection with the AIS, in the sale or distribution of these or other unauthorised products.

We have made this decision after thorough investigation of the network marketed supplements, their costs, the claims made, and the marketing strategies. All enquiries from companies or distributors to the AIS or its staff must be referred to the Department of Sports Nutrition, preferably in writing, so that we can distribute this document. Further information about the background to these guidelines can be obtained from the Dept. However we are not prepared to spend further time and resources engaging in discussion with individual distributors.

Summary:

Network marketed supplements are:

- considerably more expensive than a similar “over the counter” product
- not scientifically supported to produce the health and performance benefits that are claimed
- not recommended or endorsed by the AIS

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