

FDA finds majority of herbal supplements at GNC, Walmart, Walgreens, and Target don't contain what they claim – instead cheap fillers like wheat and soy powder.



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The New York State Attorney General's Office is demanding that GNC, Walmart, Walgreens, and Target remove store brand herbal supplements from their shelves after the pills were found to be packed with a strange array of fraudulent—and in some cases hazardous—ingredients. Popular supplements such as ginseng, valerian root, and St. John's wort sold under store brand names at the four major retailers were found to contain powdered rice, asparagus, and even houseplants, while being completely void of any of the ingredients on the label.

It's fairly baffling as to how this situation came about, and came to be so widespread. But what we do know is that while supplements are exempt from the strict regulations imposed on prescription medications, manufacturers and retailers are required by the FDA to correctly label all ingredients. But using DNA bar coding, the FDA was able to determine that highly popular supplements sold at major retailers are in clear violation of these requirements.

Among that fraudulent supplements found at the retailers, the NYS Attorney General's office highlights several examples: At GNC, the agency found a number of unlisted fillers, including powdered legumes—a potentially significant hazard for those with peanut or soybean allergies.

At Target, ginkgo biloba, St. John's wort and valerian root contained none of the advertised ingredients, and instead were made up of powdered rice, beans, peas, and wild carrots. In other words, a fairly healthy diet if freshly cooked. At Walgreens, ginseng pills are quite simply powdered rice and garlic. At Walmart, ginkgo biloba was made up of powdered radish, houseplants, and wheat, while being labelled as wheat- and gluten-free.

The response from retailers has been varied; the New York Times reports that Walgreens is to pull the supplements from all stores nationwide, even though only NYS has demanded it. Walmart, meanwhile, claims to be working with its suppliers to fix the problem, Target has yet to respond, and GNC has stated it will cooperate, but maintains that “it tested all of its products using validated and widely used testing methods.”

Dr. Pieter Cohen, an assistant professor at Harvard Medical School and an expert on supplement safety, told the Times that it is possible that the manufacturing process had destroyed some of the DNA of the herbs, which could explain the very extreme results of the FDA's study. But, as the NYS AG's office emphasized “The absence of DNA does not explain the high percentage of contaminants found in these products... The burden is now with the industry to prove what is in these supplements.” In the meantime, you may start to see some of your regular supplements disappear from the shelves as New York pushes forward with its efforts to get fraudulent items off the shelves.