

Prospects

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The point of view

Are food supplements really making French people healthier?

Sixty-one percent of French people have taken food supplements at some point in the past 24 months, up from forty-six percent in 2018. This increase reflects a profound shift in both our eating habits and our relationship with health. But behind this enthusiasm lies a more nuanced reality. While some supplements can form part of a preventive approach backed up by solid scientific evidence, others are shored up by groundless claims underpinned by persuasive marketing. Worse still, some can pose health risks. It is therefore essential to adopt a critical perspective on these health allies, which are not always as innocuous as they seem.

A fast-growing market

Sixty-one percent of French people have taken food supplements at some point in the past 24 months, up from just forty-six percent in 2018. The trend is clear: **French people are increasingly taking supplements to support and safeguard their day-to-day health.**

The top sellers? Products aimed at boosting vitality, strengthening immunity, improving digestion and managing stress, which on their own account for nearly 70% of sales at pharmacies.

According to the most recent figures from Synadiet (the French national association for food supplements), the French market generated sales of nearly €2.9 billion in 2024, translating into robust year-on-year growth of 5.7%. The trend is even more pronounced at pharmacies, where sales were up 8.2% year on year. Moreover, **pharmacies continue to dominate sales**, accounting for 55% of sales by value in 2024. **This distribution channel benefits from consumer confidence and pharmacists who can provide expert advice on which products to choose.** However, other channels are gaining ground, including in particular direct sales and e-commerce, which grew by 7% and 6% respectively in 2024 as new start-ups launched digital native vertical brands (DNVBs) in an effort to tap into growth in the sector.

Growth potential still significant

Despite this strong growth, **France continues to lag far behind the United States**, where the market was worth \$53.6 billion in 2023 – which works out at an average spend of around \$160 per person, compared with just €54 in France. This significant difference suggests that there is still room for substantial growth in the French market. Moreover, **forecasts remain very optimistic, with growth expected to hit 5% a year out to 2028, buoyed by strong fundamentals related to the ageing population, growing interest in prevention and well-being, and the search for natural solutions to improve health.**

A market boosted by deficiencies in our modern diet

The undisputed stars of the pharmacy shelves are vitamins and minerals, which on their own account for nearly 30% of the market. The popularity of supplements based on vitamin C, vitamin D, omega-3, iron, magnesium and the like is no trivial matter and reflects an underlying malaise: **the amount of essential nutrients in our modern, increasingly processed diet has diminished over the years, resulting in**

severe nutrient deficiencies in the population. In France, 65% of men and 75% of women no longer consume the recommended intake of magnesium through their diet.

These deficiencies may result from a number of factors, including in particular (i) soil depletion caused by intensive farming, which reduces the mineral content of unprocessed foods, (ii) overconsumption of ultra-processed foods, which are often high in calories but lack essential nutrients, and (iii) unbalanced and restrictive diets.

Against this backdrop, the use of food supplements appears to be **a commonsense reflex to make up for the decline in food quality and plays a critical role in preventing metabolic and cardiovascular diseases**. This is particularly true of magnesium and omega-3s, the benefits of which have been highlighted by numerous clinical studies.

Some supplements have scientifically proven benefits

Magnesium, which is involved in over 300 enzymatic reactions in the body, **plays a key role in stress regulation, sleep quality and muscle function**. A meta-analysis of 40 clinical studies totalling over a million participants, published in BMC Medicine (2016), showed a strong correlation between higher magnesium intake and significantly lower risk of cardiovascular disease, type 2 diabetes, ischemic stroke and all-cause mortality.

Meanwhile, **omega-3s are essential to cardiovascular and cerebral health**. A meta-analysis of 13 clinical trials, published in the Journal of the American Heart Association in 2019, highlighted a positive correlation between supplementary marine omega-3 fatty acids and a reduction in the risk of some cardiac diseases.

Many food supplements make claims with no scientific backup

Not all food supplements are created equal. Some businesses in the sector promote purported health benefits for which there is currently no robust clinical evidence, mainly relying on persuasive marketing strategies. For example, some products claim to “strengthen your immunity” or “detoxify your body” even though **no rigorous studies have been done confirming such effects in humans**. These claims, which are often vague or extrapolated from in vitro or animal data, can mislead consumers. In the absence of controlled clinical evaluations, **the real effectiveness of such products remains a matter of speculation, and they could even have adverse health effects**.

The effectiveness of a food supplement depends on its ability to be absorbed without excess

A fundamental question is whether, once you take a supplement, **it is actually absorbed by the body in sufficient quantities**. **Bioavailability**, or the extent to which a nutrient can be absorbed and used by the body, varies considerably depending on a supplement's molecular weight, form and formulation. For example, are collagen supplements really bioavailable and able to reach our skin to improve its elasticity, as some brands promise? Does the actual quantity of active ingredient in the capsule match the advertised quantity?

Conversely, **some food supplements could, when taken in excessive doses and in certain conditions, have undesirable health effects**. This is true of commonly used vitamins such as vitamin B6 and vitamin C.

Vitamin B6 is crucial to the metabolism of amino acids and the functioning of the nervous system. However, studies have shown that high doses in excess of 500 mg a day can, in some specific cases, trigger peripheral neuropathy, characterised by numbness, tingling, pain and balance issues. These symptoms can become irreversible if excessive supplement intake continues.

Vitamin C is renowned for its antioxidant properties and its role in supporting the immune system. However, excessive consumption, particularly in excess of 2,000 mg a day, can lead to gastrointestinal disorders such as nausea, diarrhoea and abdominal pain. Furthermore, very high doses can increase the risk of kidney stones, particularly in susceptible individuals.

Some supplements can also interact with medication, potentially reducing its effectiveness or increasing the risk of side-effects

This risk of drug interaction is of particular concern for patients with chronic illnesses on specific long-term treatments. Hypericum, used for its antidepressant properties, can interfere with oral contraceptives, anticoagulants and immunosuppressants. Similarly, vitamin K supplements can reduce the effectiveness of anticoagulants like warfarin, notably taken by those with heart problems.

Even more worryingly, some supplements can contain potentially toxic substances

This was recently the case for food supplements based on **garcinia cambogia**, a small tropical fruit that is very popular as a weight loss aid because of the hydroxycitric acid (HCA) it contains. In March this year, ANSES, the French agency for food and environmental and occupational health and safety, issued a warning after severe adverse effects were reported. The same can be said of **red rice yeast**, used to lower cholesterol: it is suspected that the statin-like substances it contains may in some cases be linked to muscular or hepatic side-effects.

These are not isolated examples. In 2024, ANSES received around **500 reports of adverse effects linked to the use of food supplements**. Around 20 of these were considered to be of sufficient concern for ANSES to publish official warnings on its website.

Is market regulation too flexible?

ANSES plays a key role in regulating the market for food supplements. It is responsible for assessing risks and issuing safety opinions and recommendations. It also issues warnings on products that are non-compliant or dangerous to consumer health.

However, ANSES's role only kicks in once a supplement is already on the market: unlike medication, food supplements do not require marketing authorisation. Like other categories of foodstuffs, they must be declared to the Directorate-General for Food (Direction générale de l'Alimentation/DGAL), which may examine their composition and carry out tests. While this more flexible regulation means products can be brought to market more quickly, it raises questions about their long-term safety and effectiveness.

The importance using supplements sensibly, ideally under medical supervision

All these identified risks underscore the importance of using food supplements sensibly, ideally under medical supervision. Common supplements like magnesium, vitamin D and omega-3s remain worthwhile options for addressing specific nutritional deficiencies linked to lifestyle or boosting immunity over winter, provided they are of high quality and used wisely. It is reassuring to note that **French people remain attached to their pharmacies and to major brands; this helps mitigate many of these risks.** Pharmacists play a crucial role in advising consumers and guiding them towards products suited to their specific needs.

While food supplements can play a part in an overall health and well-being strategy, **they should not be seen as either a silver bullet or a substitute for a balanced diet. The best approach remains to eat a varied and balanced diet** rich in fruit, vegetables, whole grains and high-quality protein.

Food supplements should be used in a targeted way, on the advice of a health professional, to respond to specific needs or make up for known deficiencies. The food supplements industry must continue to invest in research and development to improve the effectiveness and safety of its products. **Greater transparency on the composition of supplements, the source of ingredients and clinical studies** undertaken would also help boost confidence among consumers and health professionals and potentially accelerate the use of supplements as part of a personalised preventive medicine plan. ■

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