

DHEA

Some advocates of DHEA call it the fountain of youth. Although the claim may be overblown, this hormone has shown promise in combating certain age-related diseases. More study is needed, however, to identify the exact effects of DHEA—as well as those who could benefit most from it.

COMMON USES

- *May lower risk of heart disease.*
- *Aids in glucose management in some people with diabetes.*
- *Boosts the immune system.*
- *Relieves some lupus symptoms.*
- *May help people with HIV/AIDS.*

FORMS

- Tablet
- Capsule
- Cream

CAUTION!

- DHEA is a hormone; as such it may be linked to the development of some cancers, such as breast or prostate. Anyone who has these cancers, or is at risk for them, should not use DHEA.
- **Reminder:** If you have a medical condition, talk to your doctor before taking supplements.

What it is

Known as the “mother of hormones,” DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone) is needed by the body to produce many types of hormones including estrogen and testosterone. DHEA is secreted by the adrenal glands—located on top of the kidneys—as well as by the skin, brain, testicles, and ovaries. Although women make less DHEA than men, in both sexes DHEA production declines dramatically with age; levels are 80% lower at age 70 than at age 30. The significance of these falling DHEA levels, however, has not been determined.

What it does

There has been plenty of hype surrounding DHEA, so it is difficult to separate wishful thinking from sound scientific evidence. DHEA has been said to stimulate weight loss, increase libido, enhance memory, and prevent osteoporosis—but these claims are unsupported. Studies do indicate, however, that DHEA may improve general well-being in older people (although just how isn't clear), reduce the risk of heart disease, ease symptoms of the autoimmune disease lupus, help manage diabetes, and bolster immunity.

MAJOR BENEFITS: Having blood levels of DHEA on the high end of normal may lower the risk of heart disease for older men. In one study, men with naturally high DHEA levels had less body fat and higher HDL (“good”) cholesterol levels than men with low DHEA levels. Those with high DHEA levels also did better on an exercise stress test, which measures the condition of the heart during physical exertion. These associations weren't seen in women, however. In fact, women taking DHEA seemed to have a slightly higher risk of heart disease. Other research suggests that DHEA may help “thin” the blood and so reduce the likelihood of blood clot formation and possible heart attack.



Some evidence of DHEA's immune-boosting action was noted in a study of older people who had received flu shots. Their immune response to the weakened flu virus in the injection was significantly increased after taking DHEA. Researchers are hopeful that DHEA can improve immune responses in people infected with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS.

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS: A small study of postmenopausal women indicated that those taking DHEA had lower levels of triglycerides (a blood fat related to cholesterol) and were able to use insulin more efficiently than women not given DHEA. This finding suggests a possible role for the supplement in the treatment of diabetes.

DHEA has also been reported to have beneficial effects on patients with lupus, an autoimmune disease. It relieved some symptoms and reduced the amount of medication needed.

How to take it

DOSAGE: DHEA supplements should be taken only to raise hormone levels to within a normal range—not to exceed those levels. Start with a low dose (5 mg for women; 10 mg for men) and slowly increase to achieve the desired effect. The maximum dose should not exceed 25 mg a day unless you are using it for a specific disorder, such as lupus or HIV. It's best to take DHEA in the morning. Healthy people under age 50 don't need the supplement at all.

GUIDELINES FOR USE: Although DHEA is readily available in health-food stores and vitamin shops, it is more potent than many other nutrients or herbs. The long-term effects of DHEA supplementation are simply not known. Most experts believe you should take DHEA only under the supervision of a doctor, so try to find a physician familiar with the use of this nutritional supplement (see page 31).

Before taking DHEA, make sure your doctor checks for prostate cancer (men) or breast cancer (women), because such cancers are influenced by hormone levels in the body. Then, have a blood test to determine your current DHEA levels and use this supplement only if your blood level of this hormone is low. After three weeks, have another blood test to assess whether your dosage needs adjustment. Once obtained, a satisfactory blood level can often be maintained with as little as 5 to 10 mg of DHEA a week.

Possible side effects

When used to excess, DHEA supplements can cause acne, extremely oily skin, hair growth in women, deepening of the voice, and mood changes. In addition, one animal study demonstrated an association between liver cancer and excessively high doses of DHEA.

SHOPPING HINTS

- The labels on wild yam products sometimes claim that the herb contains substances that are converted to DHEA or other hormones once within the body. In fact, this conversion can be achieved only in a laboratory, not by the human body.

LATEST FINDINGS

- Although there's no evidence that DHEA will lengthen your life, it may enhance your quality of life. In a recent study, older men and women taking DHEA reported increased feelings of well-being, improved sleep, more energy, and a greater ability to handle stress. More than 80% of the women and 67% of the men had a positive response to DHEA, compared with less than 10% of the people taking a placebo.