Supplement labels and contents not always the same

By Anahad O'Connor, New York Times

Americans spend an estimated $5 billion a year on unproven herbal supplements that promise everything from fighting off colds to curbing hot flashes and boosting memory. But now there is a new reason for supplement buyers to beware: DNA tests show that many pills labeled as healing herbs are little more than powdered rice and weeds.

Using a test called DNA barcoding, a kind of genetic fingerprinting that has also been used to help uncover labeling fraud in the commercial seafood industry, Canadian researchers tested 44 bottles of popular supplements sold by 12 companies. They found that many were not what they claimed to be, and that pills labeled as popular herbs were often diluted – or replaced entirely – by cheap fillers like soybean, wheat and rice.

Consumer advocates and scientists say the research provides more evidence that the herbal supplement industry is riddled with questionable practices. Industry representatives argue that any problems are not widespread.

For the study, the researchers selected popular medicinal herbs, and then randomly bought different brands of those products from stores and outlets in Canada and the United States. To avoid singling out any company, they did not disclose any product names.

Among their findings were bottles of echinacea supplements, used by millions of Americans to prevent and treat colds, that contained ground up bitter weed, Parthenium hysterophorus, an invasive plant found in India and Australia that has been linked to rashes, nausea and flatulence.

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