Athletes Often Misuse Protein Supplements

According to a recent study, protein supplements don't improve performance or recovery time and such supplements are inefficient for most athletes.

Martin Fréchette, a researcher and graduate of the Université de Montréal Department of Nutrition, said these supplements are often poorly used or unnecessary by both high-level athletes and amateurs.

Fréchette submitted questionnaires to 42 athletes as part of his thesis for the Masters degree. In the questionnaire, sportsmen were asked about their use of supplements while keeping a journal of their eating habits for three days and came from a variety of disciplines including biathlon, cycling, long-distance running, swimming, judo, skating, and volleyball. Nine out of 10 athletes reported food supplements on a regular basis and they consumed an average of 335 products: energy drinks, multi-vitamins, minerals, and powdered protein supplements. Fréchette found their knowledge of food supplements to be weak and remarked the role of proteins is particularly misunderstood and said only one out of four consumers could associate a valid reason, backed by scientific literature, for taking the product according.

Seventy percent of athletes in Fréchette's study didn't feel their performance would suffer if they stopped such consumption despite the widespread use of protein supplements and Fréchette said more than 66 percent of those who believed to have bad eating habits took supplements. For those who claimed to have 'good' or 'very good' eating habits that number climbs to 90 percent. He further stressed that supplements come with certain risks and contended that their purity and preparation aren't as controlled as prescription medication and sports supplements often contain other ingredients than those listed on the label and some athletes consume prohibited drugs without knowing.

No less than 81 percent of athletes taking supplements already had sufficient protein from their diet, Fréchette said and added that the use of multivitamins and minerals can make up for an insufficient intake of calcium, folate yet not for lack of potassium. Other studies have shown that 12 to 20 percent of products that are regularly used by athletes include prohibited substances and a particular interest by the athletes on the efficiency, legality, and safety of those drugs was observed by Fréchette. The researcher and graduate of the Université de Montréal Department of Nutrition also remarked that consumers of supplements had levels of sodium, magnesium, niacin, folate, vitamin A and iron that exceeded the acceptable norms, which makes them susceptible to health problems such as nausea, vision trouble, fatigue and liver anomalies.

In another study, Tim Byers, MD, MPH, professor of epidemiology at the Colorado School of Public Health and associate director for prevention and control at the University of Colorado Cancer Center, disclosed that Beta-carotene, selenium and folic acid have now been shown to increase the risk of developing a host of cancers. Byers added that we need to do a better job as a society in ensuring that the messages people get about value versus risk is accurate for nutritional supplements and also added that his conclusion is that taking high doses of any particular nutrient is more likely to be a bad thing than a good thing.