

Message from Commissioner Byrne to EU citizens on food supplements

The European Commission has received a large number of letters from citizens who are concerned about the proposed Directive on food supplements. Those letters are of a similar, if not identical content and are published on the Internet as part of a campaign against the adoption of that Directive. Given the number of the letters received it is not possible to reply to all of them individually, hence this global reply is also published in the Internet.

The standardised contents of the letters are based on a misrepresentation of the reasons for proposing EU rules on the subject and the aims of the Directive. Further, the arguments used by those promoting the campaign are false and misleading. I would like, therefore, to explain our point of view.

The rules on food supplements existing today in the different countries of the European Union are very different. In many cases they are rather restrictive. As a result many consumers, who would like to buy food supplements, are simply not able to do so. In other cases the choice available is restricted. So one of the aims of the Directive is to allow consumers across the European Union to have a wide range of products from which to choose. The aim is not to ban food supplements, as some have alleged.

It is expected that as a result of the adoption of the Directive, many products that are currently sold as medicines in certain Member States will become available as food supplements. The implementation of the Directive will not sustain the marketing of these products as pharmaceuticals as claimed in the letter. Therefore we consider the assertion that the Directive serves the pharmaceutical industry's interests to be misleading and wrong.

But the most important aim of the Directive is to ensure a high level of protection for the consumer. To ensure that the food supplements that are placed on the market are safe. So that when you and other consumers buy them and use them, you can be sure of their safety and quality. There is no doubt that most of the products marketed today are safe and of the expected quality. The new rules will ensure that this is the case for all food supplements.

For that purpose the Directive sets specific rules concerning vitamins and minerals that are included in food supplements. Note that other substances present in the food supplements that you may be using today, such as essential fatty acids, fibre, plants, herbs and their extracts are not affected by the Directive. These substances will, for now, continue to be regulated under the laws of each Member State. So there are no changes regarding these substances because of the adoption of the Directive.

As far as vitamins and minerals are concerned, the Directive does two things. First, it establishes lists of the vitamins and minerals and their forms that can be used in the manufacture of food supplements. In order to make sure that what you take is safe and can be used by the human organism. The substances are put on those lists following the evaluation by the independent advisory scientific bodies of the European Union. Second, it foresees the setting of maximum levels for vitamins and minerals in food

supplements. This will be done in the next few years on the basis of the advice that we will get from the scientists and calculations of intakes from other food sources.

Finally the Directive lays down detailed rules for the labelling of food supplements. These include information on the vitamin and mineral content and on how to use the products. So that consumers themselves can decide which product is most suitable for them and use it in all safety.

I can assure you that your interests and those of consumers in general were at the top of our concerns when we proposed the Directive. I believe that you have every right to have a wide choice of safe and appropriately labelled food supplements available, to buy if you so wish. And I remain convinced that the Directive that will be shortly formally adopted by the European Parliament and the Council of Ministers will ensure that.

David Byrne