

EVIDENCE REVIEW 03 • TESTING METHODS

What a "third-party tested" seal actually proves

Certification seals verify identity and screen for banned substances. They do not verify that a supplement works, or that an untested batch is clean.

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BOTTOM LINE

A third-party seal means a sample was screened against a banned-substance list and matched its label. It does not mean the product works, that the dose is useful, or that a batch nobody tested is clean. For a tested athlete a seal lowers risk. It never transfers responsibility.

KEY POINTS

- NSF Certified for Sport and Informed Sport verify label identity and screen against the WADA Prohibited List.
- Neither programme assesses whether a supplement is effective or whether its dose does anything useful.
- Batch certification covers the batch that was tested; an untested batch carries no assurance from it.
- Under anti-doping rules the athlete is responsible for what is in their sample, certified or not.

A seal on a tub is doing a specific, narrow job. The trouble is that it looks like a general endorsement, and shoppers read it as one.

Three separate questions get collapsed into that one badge: is this product what the label says it is, does it contain anything banned, and does it actually work? Certification programmes answer the first two. Nothing on the tub answers the third.

What the seals actually check

The two programmes most often seen on sports products are NSF Certified for Sport and Informed Sport. Both confirm that a product contains the ingredients its label declares, and both screen samples against substances prohibited in sport.

The screening lists are large. NSF describes testing for around 290 substances — stimulants, narcotics, steroids, diuretics, beta-2-agonists and masking agents among them. Informed Sport describes a comparable list of 285 or more.

That is a real service, and for anyone subject to drug testing it is the most useful assurance available. It is also the entire scope. A seal is a statement about what a laboratory looked for and did not find.

What they do not check

Neither programme evaluates whether the supplement does anything.

This is the gap that matters most to ordinary buyers, who are not being drug-tested and who read the seal as a quality mark. Certification does not assess efficacy. It does not establish that the dose in the product is the dose that had an effect in research. It does not rank one product against another on whether it works.

It is worth being precise about what “matches the label” means, too. Confirming that a declared ingredient is present is not the same as confirming it is present at a dose that does anything. A product can be honestly labelled, correctly certified, and still useless for the purpose you bought it for.

Why “batch tested” is narrower than it sounds

The strongest form of this assurance is batch testing, where each production lot is tested before release. It is also the most commonly misread.

Drug Free Sport New Zealand puts the limit plainly: a batch-tested supplement gives increased confidence in *that particular batch*. Take the same product from a batch that was not tested, and the earlier test tells you nothing about the tub in your hand. Programmes differ here — some test every certified batch, others test at a variable frequency — so two seals that look equivalent on a shelf may not be.

There is no such thing as a supplement approved by the World Anti-Doping Agency or by Drug Free Sport New Zealand. No agency issues that approval, so any product implying it is misrepresenting itself.

Where this leaves a New Zealand buyer

For a tested athlete, the rule is strict liability: you are responsible for what is found in your sample, even if you took it unknowingly, and even if the product was certified. A seal reduces the probability of a problem. It does not shift the consequence if one occurs. New Zealand’s anti-doping rules follow the World Anti-Doping Code, and both Drug Free Sport New Zealand and High Performance Sport New Zealand advise a food-first approach for exactly this reason — the risk you do not take is the only one you fully control.

For everyone else, the honest reading is narrower still. A seal is evidence about contamination and identity. It is not evidence about benefit. If the question is whether a product is worth buying, the seal cannot answer it, and the claims on the front of the pack are governed by a different set of rules — the ones set out in [what supplement labels are allowed to claim in New Zealand](/supplements/what-supplement-labels-can-claim-in-nz/) (/supplements/what-supplement-labels-can-claim-in-nz/).

Two related reviews sit alongside this one: [whether DNA barcoding can authenticate a herbal product \(/evidence/dna-barcoding-herbal-supplements/\)](#) covers a different verification method with a different blind spot, and [how supplements are regulated differently from medicines \(/evidence/supplement-regulation-vs-medicines/\)](#) explains why this verification gap exists at all.

What this review could not establish

Contamination rates are quoted widely and vary enormously by product category, country, testing method and the definition of “contaminated”. A single headline figure for how often supplements contain banned substances is not something this review can responsibly give, so it does not give one.

SOURCES

01. Certified for Sport Program

NSF

<https://www.nsf.org/consumer-resources/articles/certified-for-sport-program>

02. Supplements advice for athletes who may be tested

Drug Free Sport New Zealand

<https://drugfreesport.org.nz/for-athletes/information-for-athletes-that-may-be-tested/supplements-advice>

03. Supplements containing banned substances found in Consumer NZ investigation

Sport Integrity Commission Te Kahu Raunui

<https://sportintegrity.nz/news/supplements-containing-banned-substances-found-in-consumer-nz-investigation>

04. Choosing dietary supplements

High Performance Sport New Zealand

<https://hpsnz.org.nz/journal-entries/choosing-dietary-supplements/>

Medical note. General information only. Not personalised nutrition or medical advice. This review explains published research and cannot diagnose or treat a condition. Ask a qualified clinician or pharmacist about your own health, medicines and supplement use.

Source of record. The current version of this review, with working links, is at

<https://www.proteinnotes.com/evidence/third-party-tested-supplement-seals/>