

What You Should Know About Unapproved Food Additives and Supplements

By Nikki Peterson, Food Program Manager, RiverStone Health

Over the last year, across Yellowstone County, RiverStone Health's Food Safety Program has seen an increase in the sale of dietary supplements and products containing unapproved additives in food establishments. During routine food safety inspections, staff are increasingly encountering these products on shelves, many of which are marketed as "natural," plant-based, or dietary supplements. A common word you may see on labels is "botanicals," which simply means ingredients that come from plants. These products are often promoted as energy boosters, mood enhancers, or stress relievers.

It is important to understand that "natural" does not always mean safe, and that just because something comes from a plant, it does not mean it cannot cause harm. Some botanicals can affect the brain and body in powerful ways; they may be addictive, interact with prescription medications, or cause serious side effects.

One example is kratom. Kratom is a plant-based substance that acts on the same brain receptors as opioids, and can be sold in capsules, powders, drinks, and gummies. While some use it for pain or anxiety, kratom has been linked to addiction, overdose, and other serious health risks. It is not an approved food ingredient.

Under Montana's Food Code, kratom may not be prepared or sold in a licensed food establishment in the state. Food licenses are issued when food establishments and the food they serve meet federal and state safety standards. Because kratom does not meet those standards, we are working with operators to have these products removed from licensed establishments.

In addition to kratom, we are seeing products containing ingredients such as ashwagandha, kanna, kava, and GABA. Some dietary supplements may be legally sold if they comply with federal requirements under the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA) or contain ingredients recognized as safe, sometimes referred to as "GRAS" status. However, not all products on store shelves clearly meet these standards.

Many of these substances are not regulated like alcohol or tobacco, so children and teenagers might be able to buy them in food establishments since there are often no age restrictions. When products with stimulants or mood-altering effects are next to everyday food and drinks, it can create confusion about their safety, making it even more important for consumers to be informed.

So how can consumers recognize when a product may be a supplement rather than a typical food or beverage? Here are a few things to look for:

- **Check the label.** Dietary supplements usually include the words "dietary supplement" on the package.
- **Look for a "Supplement Facts" panel.** Foods have a "Nutrition Facts" label, while supplements use a "Supplement Facts" label.

- **Watch for certain claims.** Phrases like “boost energy,” “improve mood,” “enhance focus,” or “support relaxation” are common on supplement products.
- **Look at the ingredients.** Botanicals such as kratom, kava, kanna, or concentrated herbal extracts may indicate a supplement product.
- **Be cautious of unfamiliar drinks or gummies.** Some products that look like candy or energy drinks may contain concentrated herbal or stimulant ingredients.

As consumers, it is important to read labels carefully and look beyond words like “natural” or “botanical.” If you are unsure about a supplement, talk to your healthcare provider before using it.

Our goal is not to alarm or punish; it is to educate and protect public health. RiverStone Health is committed to working with local store owners and operators to ensure products sold in licensed food establishments meet food safety standards. When we identify unapproved additives, we work directly with businesses to have those products voluntarily removed.

Protecting public health requires partnership, education, and common sense. Staying informed and reading labels carefully are important steps you can take to protect yourself and your family.

If you have questions about a product in a food establishment, we encourage you to contact our office at 406-256-2770.