

## **Youth Advocacy Story**

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My name is Pari Patel and I am a college student here to share my personal story about the dangers of over-the-counter diet pills and muscle-building supplements. Thinking back to my earlier years as a young teen battling new challenges in the world, a dreadful experience comes up. Over time, due to the pressure of something I dearly enjoyed, I became sucked into a whirlwind of unrelenting commitment to go beyond my limits and achieve what I desired. Being an athlete and playing at high levels in my adored sport of basketball, it soon occurred to me that I would fall behind physically in comparison to my teammates. This fear developed into a deep want for growth and maintaining a certain physique. My naïveté convinced me I would be practical and not take any ill actions. The small steps I took turned into large shifts in my lifestyle, which unknowingly proved detrimental to my long term health. This desire led me down a path of disordered eating. I became obsessed with counting my macronutrients and calories and turned to over-the-counter diet pills and muscle-building supplements as a way to see immediate results. It felt too late to turn back - the only way forward was to keep doing more.

I was exposed to supplements at the age of 14, and as a competitive athlete, I believed that they were necessary to enhance my performance and reach my goals. They became my sense of identity and falsely convinced me of healthy habits.

During this period of struggle, I went to my local grocery store and saw aisles and aisles of various types of supplements, from so-called performance-enhancing to weight loss and body detox powders. I decided to try a version of every supplement on the shelves. Unfortunately, no one was there to speak to me about the dangers of these products, and my friends, coaches, and teammates even recommended the use of these supplements. Was everyone sucked into this whirlwind of marketing hype and deception?

I began using these supplements alongside a severe and unhealthy caloric deficiency and spent about two hours at the gym daily after my basketball practices, along with extra training early in the morning. Because I expected good results, I couldn't see the damage I was doing to my own body.

With no prior experience in this realm, the only source of information I had was the internet which too was severely biased and exaggerated the benefits of supplements greatly. Finally through deep research, I eventually realized these supplements might be dangerous. But still, it was hard for me to believe because I so firmly trusted that our government would not let dangerous products like these be sold to me. I was convinced that our government would put a

stop to this if these supplements were truly bad. It took months of repeated introspection, inevitably forcing me to doubt myself amidst my new realization.

Malnourishment was engulfing me, snuck up and eventually, I even lost my menstrual periods at the age of 15. It took me over four years to overcome this and completely get over my disordered eating. And to think, it took me only about three weeks to develop a severe sickness from these supplements. My story is one of millions. If I didn't have the thought to look deeper into these supplements, who knows what would have happened? But this begs the question, how do we expect teens to understand the negative effects of these drugs? Are we going to let them get sucked into this whirlwind of deception too because in every case and scenario, the results are dreadful. It pains me to even think of the possibilities of another teen being deceived by these companies to unknowingly take risks with their health.

The under-regulated supplements industry is predatory, profiting off of youth insecurities and eating disorders. These products are marketed towards young people, who are often under immense pressure to perform and look a certain way. They prey on their vulnerabilities and insecurities, promising quick and easy results. However, these products are often dangerous and can lead to serious health consequences, as was the case with me. Letting these supplements go unregulated means taking away the immense potential in each of these individuals at an early age, setting them up for lifelong pain and difficulty. The consequences of using these supplements are not easy to recover from. Not only does it take a long time to overcome, but the damage stays with a person throughout their lifetime - serving as a constant reminder.

I was provided with misinformation by individuals and companies on the internet, promoting these products as a quick fix for achieving the results I desired. Now this was my story, someone inherently obsessed with finding the root meaning behind things - especially medicine. Not all teens, especially athletes with sheer dedication, have the time or motivation to look into what they consume. At the surface level, all of these products seem purely amazing.

It is time for our government to take action and ban the sale of dangerous over-the-counter diet pills to youth. We need legislation that will protect our youth from the predatory practices of the supplement industry. We must prioritize the health and well-being of our young people and ensure that they are not being misled and put at risk by these harmful products.