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Sports drinks, supplements, sneakers may do little to help performance

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Try to Be like Mike if you want. But if you're chasing protein supplements with sports drinks while wearing expensive running shoes, you're likely just wasting your money.

With the London Olympics set to roll across the world's airwaves starting July 27, the Games will float an armada of ads for such products into homes around the globe.

But a series of papers and reports published online by the prestigious [British Medical Journal](#) Thursday say there's little evidence such products carry any of the benefits their commercials might claim.

Researchers at Oxford University, for instance, looked at 431 advertised claims tied to 104 different sports drink, protein shake and running shoe products.

And they found "a striking lack of evidence" for any of the performance enhancement or injury prevention benefits the products — including some of the world's biggest brands — had touted.

In the absence of such evidence, researchers said that it was "virtually impossible for the public to make informed choices about the benefits and harms of advertised sports products."

One of the products investigated was [Lucozade](#) — the best selling sports drink in the U.K.

A request from the drink's [manufacturer GlaxoSmithKline](#) resulted in a "data dump" of four decades worth of studies on the drink's benefits, according to the BBC, which participated in the journal's investigation.

Of the 176 papers provided by the pharmaceutical giant, researchers identified 101 trials of the drink's enhancing abilities, none of which proved persuasive.

"In this case, the quality of the evidence is poor, the size of the effect is often minuscule and it certainly doesn't apply to the population at large who are buying these products," said Dr. Carl Heneghan of the Oxford University Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine.

"Basically, when you look at the evidence in the general population, it does not say that exercise is improved (or that) performance is improved by (the) drinks."

Such products also included [Powerade](#) — "Go Stronger for Longer" — which is manufactured by Coca Cola, the official drink of the London Olympics. It is sold extensively in Canada.

And while the research was based in the U.K, there's no reason to believe it doesn't apply to similar products being sold in the Canadian market, says [Greg Wells](#), a high-performance sports expert at the University of Toronto.

"In general, the sports drink concept is a Western concept: Western Europe, North America, it's fairly consistent," Wells says.



Researchers at Oxford University have found little evidence for the benefits of sports drinks.

BOB FILA/KRT

"I think the research and what has been written is consistent for the Canadian audience."

But Wells also says that people have complex and differing bodies and that some may benefit from sports drinks or protein products, both of which he recommends to his athletes under certain circumstances.

"To say that a sports drink universally solves all of our exercise problems is obviously not true," Wells says.

"But there are some aspects to sports drinks that are helpful."

For example, Wells says that compelling research has shown that sports drinks that include glucose in a water solution can increase endurance.

Likewise, he says, there is established scientific evidence showing protein supplements can help both strength and endurance athletes speed recovery after training.

"But obviously when companies advertise products, they're going to push the boundaries of what has been written in scientific papers," he says.

"So I guess the message here is to take everything (advertised) with a grain of salt."

Wells does agree with the researchers' conclusions that shoes don't significantly help ward off injuries and that many top-flight runners are now recognizing this.

"There's been quite a bit of research that's come out in the last several years about physical challenges associated with shoes that have large amounts of cushioning, large amounts of support," he says.

Such research has spawned a "minimalist" movement among some runners, who have opted for footwear that provides as little support as possible.

However, this shift from more traditional to minimalist shoes is causing injuries, Wells says.
