Abstract

Participants at the non-elite level of road running often take up the sport for purposes of health, as a way of taking responsibility for their own well-being. Often, these runners use dietary supplements as a way to improve health and to potentially enhance running performance. Supplements are distinct from banned performance enhancing drugs (PEDs), as they are legal and widely available, though very loosely regulated. Research demonstrates that the line between supplements and banned PEDs is increasingly blurry as cases of cross-contaminated and mislabeled supplements continue to be found. Such products may pose health risks to unsuspecting consumers. Despite anti-doping agencies acknowledge of and warnings to elite runners of these risks, non-elite runners are rarely told by any sport or anti-doping body to be wary of supplements. They are, however, inundated with media coverage of doping scandals usually involving only a few of the substances banned in sport. In short, these runners are often left to navigate supplement use on their own and many conflate supplement availability with safety. This article explores these routine dietary supplement practices among non-elite runners. Drawing from interviews with 28 non-elite runners in New York City, I discuss the perceptions and understandings of doping and dietary supplement use within the context of health culture. Interview data reveal that the social acceptance of dietary supplements and their widespread use among the broader public reinforce the notion among non-elite runners that such products are objectively safe and healthy. I argue that based on their assumptions of supplement safety, non-elite runners view dietary supplements as distinctly different from PEDs and that this difference encourages their use as health and performance aids.