

A softgel can look simple from the outside: a smooth, flexible shell filled with oil or another liquid. But that shell may be made with gelatin, and the fill may contain ingredients from fish, bees, sheep, or other animals. “Plant-based” on the front of a bottle is a useful clue, not a complete ingredient check.

To assess a softgel, look at the shell and the fill separately, check the full ingredient list, and find out what the company means by its vegan claim. If the label leaves you guessing, ask the brand directly. As someone who has spent years reading supplement labels, I always check the capsule shell before the active ingredients—and I keep a running note of ingredients that sound vegan but may not be.

Start With the Softgel Shell

Traditional softgels are commonly made with gelatin, a protein derived from animal collagen. Manufacturers may source it from cattle, pigs, or fish. The word “gelatin” on a label does not always identify the animal source, so it is not enough to know that a product contains gelatin; you would need the company to confirm its origin. If you avoid animal-derived ingredients, the safest assumption is that an unspecified gelatin shell is not vegan.

Softgels also contain other shell components. Glycerin, for example, helps keep the shell flexible. It can be made from plant oils or animal fats, and the ingredient name alone may not tell you which. Water and colors may also be part of the shell. A label that lists “softgel” or “capsule” without identifying the shell materials leaves an important question unanswered.

Look for Capsule Shell Alternatives

Plant-based softgel shells can use materials such as modified starch, carrageenan, or other plant-derived gelling agents. Some products use combinations of ingredients to achieve a flexible shell. The exact formulation varies, so “vegetarian capsule” or “plant capsule” does not automatically explain every component—or prove that the finished product meets your vegan standard.

Not every alternative shell material works for every formula. Oils, moisture sensitivity, manufacturing needs, and stability can influence the choice. That is one reason a plant-based softgel may have a different texture or appearance from a conventional gelatin softgel. The practical point: check the listed shell ingredients rather than assuming that all softgels are made alike.

Read the Ingredient List for the Shell

Find the complete “Other Ingredients” or “Inactive Ingredients” section. Look for wording that identifies the shell, such as “softgel capsule,” “capsule shell,” or a list of materials in parentheses. If the label only says “softgel,” it does not give you enough information to identify the shell’s source.

Search the ingredient list shell details for both familiar and less obvious animal-derived ingredients. These may appear in the shell, the filling, or a colorant. A plant-based shell does not make an animal-derived fill vegan, and a plant-sourced active ingredient does not make a gelatin shell plant-based.

Animal-Derived Ingredients That May Be Easy to Miss

- **Gelatin:** Often made from animal collagen; the source may be cattle, pigs, or fish.
- **Glycerin:** Can be plant- or animal-derived. Ask the manufacturer if the source is not stated.

- **Fish oil:** A common source of omega-3s in softgels. Algal oil is a possible non-fish alternative, but confirm the full product formulation.
- **Vitamin D3:** Some D3 is derived from lanolin, a substance associated with sheep's wool. Vegan D3 can be made from other sources, such as lichen.
- **Beeswax, honey, or propolis:** These are animal-derived and are not considered vegan by many vegan standards.
- **Shellac or carmine:** These may be used as coatings or colorants and are not vegan.
- **Unspecified flavors or colors:** The source may not be clear from the label. "Natural flavors" is not a guarantee of plant origin.

Those examples are reasons to investigate—not proof that every product with one of these ingredient names is animal-derived. Some ingredients have multiple possible sources. When the label does not specify, email or call the company and ask for a direct answer about the ingredient's source and the finished product's status.

Understand What “Vegan” Does—and Does Not—Tell You

In the United States, consumers should not assume there is one universal legal definition that every supplement company applies when it uses the word “vegan.” A brand's claim may refer to the active ingredient, the capsule shell, or the entire finished product. It may also reflect a company policy rather than an independent review.

That does not mean a vegan claim is meaningless. It means you should find out what it covers. Ask whether the claim applies to the shell and every ingredient in the fill, including excipients, flavors, colors, and processing aids where relevant. Ask whether the manufacturer checks supplier documentation and whether it has a written standard for the claim.

Also keep “organic” and “vegan” separate. Organic describes how certain agricultural ingredients are produced and certified under applicable standards; it does not mean that a product contains no animal-derived ingredients. Conversely, a vegan product is not necessarily organic.



What to Ask the Company

If the label is vague, a concise question can save a lot of guesswork. For example:

- look for a specific response, not just a repeat of the front-label claim. If a company cannot confirm the shell material, that is useful information: you can choose a product with clearer disclosure instead. Brands such as Joy Organics may publish product and ingredient information, but the details still need to be checked for the specific product you are considering. A company's name or overall brand image cannot establish that every item it sells is vegan.

Third-party verification can offer more confidence than a company's unsupported claim. A certification program typically has criteria and a review process, although the exact requirements depend on the program. Look for the certifier's name or recognizable certification mark on the product or the <https://www.athleisuremag.com/the-latest/2026/10/12/the-plant-based-athletes-label-checklist> certifier's official directory, and check that the listing applies to the exact product.

Use a COA for the Right Questions

A certificate of analysis (COA) is a document that reports test results or specifications for a product, ingredient, or batch. It may cover identity, potency, microbial quality, heavy metals, or other contaminants. What it covers depends on the testing and the document, so the title “COA” alone does not guarantee that every relevant quality question has been answered.

Batch lab reports can help you assess whether a particular batch was tested for the attributes that matter to you. But a typical COA does not automatically prove that a softgel is plant-based. Unless the report specifically addresses ingredient origin or includes a suitable verification, it may say nothing about whether the glycerin came from plants or whether the shell contains gelatin.

When requesting a COA, ask for the report tied to the lot number on your bottle. For vegan questions, ask separately for ingredient-source documentation or third-party vegan verification. For competitive athletes, ask whether the product or batch has been screened under a sport-specific program. These are distinct checks, and one should not be treated as a substitute for another.

A Practical Label-Checking Routine

1. **Check the format.** Confirm that the product is a softgel and locate the complete ingredient panel.
2. **Identify the shell.** Look for gelatin or a clearly described plant-based shell. Note whether glycerin is listed and whether its source is specified.
3. **Review the fill.** Check the active ingredients, carriers, colors, flavors, and other inactive ingredients for possible animal sources.
4. **Evaluate the claim.** Find out whether “vegan” applies to the entire finished product, not just one ingredient.
5. **Check verification.** Confirm any certification for the exact product, rather than relying on a brand-wide impression.
6. **Request documentation.** Use batch lab reports and a COA to review testing, and ask for separate sourcing information when the concern is vegan status.
7. **Consider your sport needs.** If you are a tested athlete, look for appropriate sport-specific testing as well.

Label clue What it may tell you What to verify “Gelatin” The shell or another ingredient may be animal-derived Source, and whether the finished product meets your standard “Vegetarian capsule” The shell may avoid conventional animal gelatin Whether all shell materials and fill ingredients are vegan “Plant-based softgel” The company is making a plant-based claim Which parts of the product the claim covers and whether it is verified COA or batch lab report Some testing or specifications may be documented Which tests were performed; vegan status is not automatic

When the Label Still Leaves You Guessing

A clear label should identify the shell materials and provide enough information to evaluate the finished product. If it does not, contact the manufacturer and save its response. A useful answer should specify the shell composition and ingredient sources—not simply say “our products are clean” or “we use quality ingredients.” If you still cannot get a straight answer, consider a product with clearer disclosure or a relevant third-party certification.

Publications such as *Athleisure Mag* can help readers discover wellness products and trends, but a mention in an article is not the same as ingredient verification. Do your own label check, confirm claims against the manufacturer or certifier, and look for the documentation that matches your concern.

The Bottom Line

To tell whether a softgel is plant-based, start with the shell: traditional softgel gelatin is often animal-derived, while alternatives can use plant-based gelling materials. Then check the entire ingredient list for less obvious animal sources, especially glycerin, fish oil, certain forms of vitamin D3, and animal-derived colors or coatings. Treat “vegan” as a claim to understand, not a substitute for ingredient details.

Third-party vegan verification can add confidence, while a COA and batch lab reports can answer other quality questions when they include relevant testing. For athletes, sport-specific screening is another separate consideration. If the label does not clearly identify the shell, ask the brand. A softgel is only as transparent as the information behind its label.