

Feature on Dangers of Dietary Supplements

By Jeff Louderback

From searching for details about news moments after it happens via the Internet to inhaling fast-food meals from a drive-thru, Americans crave instant gratification in today's fast-paced society. Since the number of overweight adults and children continues to increase – more than 60 percent of the American population is overweight or obese – perhaps it should be no surprise that many people are desperate for a quick fix to their weight problems.

Manufacturers of weight loss supplements have responded, pitching a myriad of products they claim will burn fat and even absorb fat, increase your energy and help you get the lean body you desire. Sold in stores, through infomercials and on the Internet, products like Metabolife, Hydroxycut and Xenadrine are becoming commonly known.

The prominence of these products has sparked debate among medical professionals about their safety and effectiveness. Federal legislation passed in 1994 deregulated the dietary supplement industry removing the products from the control of the Food and Drug Administration. Any dietary supplement can be marketed without advance testing.

Ephedra, an herbal stimulant that acts like an amphetamine (speed), has been linked to heart attacks, strokes and even deaths in studies and actual reported cases. Even proponents of supplements encourage you to use caution, become informed and even consult a physician before taking a weight loss product.

“Though they can help you lose weight when used in conjunction with regular exercise and a balanced diet, weight loss supplements are not for everyone, especially products with ephedra,” said Nathalie Chevreau, a registered dietitian who holds a doctorate in chemistry and serves as an advisor to the Scientific Advisory Board of SupplementWatch.com. “Like any drug, supplements have potential side effects.”

Last August, the United State Justice Department launched a criminal investigation about whether the makers of Metabolife, the nation's leading seller of ephedra products, made false statements about the existence of adverse health reports from taking Metabolife 356. In 1998, then Metabolife president Michael Ellis told the FDA that the San Diego-based company had never received a consumer complaint of adverse health effects from taking the pills, but court documents in San Diego suggested that the company had received reports of serious illnesses from users before Ellis made the statement. Later, Metabolife announced it was giving the FDA 13,000 reports from consumers about health-related problems linked to the product.

Marketers of weight loss supplements can suggest almost anything on their labels and in their commercials. In 2000, Enforma Natural Products Inc. was ordered to pay the Federal Trade Commission \$10 million to settle an FTC charge of deceptive advertising for the weight loss products “Fat Trapper” and “Exercise in a Bottle.” Among other

claims, infomercials told consumers they can enjoy high-fat foods like pizza, cheeseburgers and fried chicken without worrying about adding weight.” Fat Trapper,” the infomercial promises, will prevent the body’s absorption of all or most of all the fat you consume.

“You should turn the other way from any product that says you can lose weight without lowering your intake of calories and fat, and increasing your physical activity,” said Susan L. Burke, a registered dietitian who is director of nutrition services for eDiets.com, the world’s largest online subscription-based diet, fitness and counseling network.

The common ingredients in most popular weight loss supplements are what is called an ECA Stack – ephedra (or ma huang), caffeine (or guarana) and aspirin (or white willow bark). Ephedra contains several stimulants, including ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, which are active ingredients in over-the-counter cold and sinus drugs. It can interfere with prescription medicine and cause rapid or irregular heartbeats, heart attacks, strokes, seizures and high blood pressure among other health problems. Other ingredients used in many weight loss supplements – such as chromium, L-Carnitine, 5-hydroxytryptophan (5-HTP) and chitosan may help with weight loss reduction, but they also have a variety of potential side effects.

“If you do not have certain health concerns, like high blood pressure or heart problems, ephedra can promote significant weight loss in a short time,” said Allen Josephs, MD, a neurologist “It’s important to read the label closely (for ingredients and potential health risks and side effects) and take the appropriate dosage.

“If you’re just starting with ephedra, take a low dosage and see how you respond,” he added. “And don’t use it if you are taking prescription medicine.”

Whether they favor the use of weight loss supplements or despise them, medical professionals typically agree that the products should only be used on a short-term basis, and that supplements alone are not the long-term answer for a healthy body.

“If you lose weight solely from taking a weight loss supplement, you will regain the weight once you stop taking it,” Burke said. “Permanent weight loss happens when you make positive lifestyle changes that involve better eating and exercise habits.

“There is no magic elixir that will burn fat and shed pounds if you eat poorly and don’t exercise,” Burke added. “If that was the case, nobody would be overweight.”

SIDEBAR

Are you thinking about taking a weight loss supplement to help in your quest to shed pounds? If so, it’s important to learn about the ingredients commonly found in these products, and to know the potential side effects and health risks of using them.

The most popular weight loss supplements on the market – Metabolife, Xenadrine RFA-1, Hydroxycut, Stacker 2 and Stacker 3, and Twinlab Ripped Fuel – use a combination of ephedrine (or ma huang) and caffeine (or guarana), or what is known as an ECA Stack (a mixture of ephedrine, caffeine and aspirin (or white willow bark). Other typical ingredients are chromium, chitosan, L-Carnitine and green tea extract.

Designed to promote weight loss and increased energy by raising your body temperature and enhancing your metabolism, weight loss supplements should not be used if you have high blood pressure, heart or thyroid disease, seizure disorders, depression, diabetes, glaucoma or an enlarged prostate. Also avoid weight loss supplements containing ephedrine if you are taking prescription drugs or experiencing trouble urinating.

Since there have been numerous reports of adverse health effects related to taking ephedra products, consult a physician before taking weight loss supplements. Side effects and potential health risks include rapid or irregular heartbeat, heart attack, stroke, chest pain, shortness of breath, severe headaches, stomach aches, nausea, restlessness, and lightheadedness.

Remember, there is no such thing as a magic pill that will melt fat and shed weight without eating a balanced diet and regular exercise. If a product seems too good to be true, chances are it is.

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