



Warning: Misleading Weight Loss Ads Flourish

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A recent review of weight loss ads by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) found that more than half the ads contained one or more false or unsubstantiated claims. The FTC warns that consumers trying to lose weight are spending billions of dollars on products and services that are not effective, and may even increase their health risks.

The FTC review covers over 300 ads from television, radio, magazines, newspapers, the Internet and direct mail. Of those ads, 57 percent included misleading claims for rapid weight loss. Many claimed that weight would be lost in just two days, or that people could lose eight to ten (or more) pounds a week. Experts say that such weight loss is unlikely to happen, but would be potentially harmful if it did. They generally consider a loss of one to two pounds a week a safe rate. Almost half the ads baldly suggested that no diet or exercise is needed, which completely contradicts sound research. The old phrase, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is," applies here.

Forty-one percent of the FTC-reviewed ads claimed that their product could produce permanent weight loss, but provided no scientific studies to substantiate these claims. Such a claim may be particularly appealing to the many people who have lost weight on various diets but then regained it. Permanent weight loss *is* hard to achieve. The National Weight Control Registry, which tracks people who have successfully maintained substantial weight loss, finds that key factors include continued changes in

eating habits and frequent physical activity. People who have lost and regained weight don't need special products to achieve permanent weight loss. They need eating and exercise changes they can really stick to.

Claims that a product is "clinically proven" or "doctor endorsed" are also misleading. If scientifically proven, the research should be found in scientific or medical journals that are peer-reviewed, assessed by scientists or others with established expertise on the subject. That is rarely the case. Also suspect are ads that do not disclose whether an "expert" endorsing the product has any financial interest in its promotion.

Money-back guarantees were included in 52 percent of the ads reviewed. But the FTC has had to pursue a number of companies who don't follow through on such promises.

Claims that a product is safe or "natural" are often made. But many don't list the ingredients so consumers can check on their safety. Some products with a safety claim list warnings that people who have high blood pressure or take heart medications should not use the product – but in small print. Some ads are misleading: 48 percent of products listing ephedra as an ingredient noted their products were "safe." But an analysis in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* examined 117 studies of ephedra and concluded that it significantly raises the risk of heart and other health problems.

A common strategy was the use of "before" and "after" photos. Experts reviewing ads for the FTC noted that these testimonials rarely portray realistic loss. Somewhere in the fine print the ads often note "individual results likely to differ." When the photos are examined closely, differences in posture, lighting, expression and photo quality make it difficult to make accurate judgments. And photos can be altered.

The FTC urges consumers trying to lose weight to be skeptical about ads and commercials promising a quick fix. To lose and maintain a healthy weight, experts like the American Institute for Cancer Research advise a combination of a diet rich in vegetables and fruit and portion control, plus regular exercise.

If you need help to improve your eating habits and prevent weight gain, *Shape Your Future...Your Weigh!*TM can help. Contact your local base Health and Wellness Center (HAWC) or Dietitian for more information.