



Weight Loss Supplements

Over 50 billion dollars are spent annually in this country on weight loss products. Yet excess weight continues to climb in the U.S., increasing by more than 60% in the last 10 years. Nearly two-thirds of Americans are overweight or obese according to the latest statistics. Many people are searching for weight loss aids in the form of supplements. Pick up any weight loss supplement label and a whole list of mysterious ingredients and “proprietary blends” of herbs, nutrients and extracts can be found. The combinations are seemingly endless. But do they work? And if so, are they safe? Without knowledge, many people often throw away money on useless products or at worse, put themselves at risk.

Some supplements, while generally safe to use, simply don’t work. For example, Chitosan, a type of fiber made from the shells of crustaceans is touted as a weight loss aid because it binds to fat, making the fat unabsorbable by the body, but obesity researchers claim it doesn’t work. In addition, Chitosan may reduce the availability of important fat-soluble vitamins such as A, D, E, and K. Other ‘digestion inhibitors’ such as Glucomannan and Guggul as well as ‘starch blockers’ (bean pod), also lack sufficient evidence of their effectiveness.

Other supplements that have been tried for weight loss include 7-keto-DHEA, Pyruvate and Chromium. 7-keto-DHEA and Pyruvate are touted as a metabolism boosters but are not recommended due to a lack of reliable evidence and some safety concerns. Chromium is an essential nutrient many Americans don’t get enough of in their diet. It is reputed to aid in fat loss without harming muscle mass and yet whether used alone or added to an exercise program, it does not seem to help increase weight loss or decrease body fat in obese individuals.

Some supplements, while they work to promote weight loss are not safe to use even at recommended doses. Ephedra (Ma Huang), a common ingredient in weight loss aids, can cause severe life-threatening or disabling adverse effects in some people and was recently banned by the FDA. With its removal, many manufacturers are replacing it with other ephedrine or ephedrine-like sources such as bitter orange and country mallow. FDA is considering banning these as well. Products containing 5-HTP, Usnea and Aristolochia should also be avoided because of serious safety issues involving use of these products.

Finally, some supplements are effective at promoting weight loss and are relatively safe when used at the recommended dose levels. Guarana which contains high amounts of caffeine appears safe when consumed in the amounts that are typically found in foods, but may be unsafe when large amounts are used. Guarana is often found in combination with Ephedra, which makes the potential harm of Ephedra worse. Finally, L-Carnitine plays a central role in fatty acid metabolism but has not been shown to promote weight loss.

Remember these 3 facts about supplements: 1) when Congress passed the Dietary Supplement and Health Education Act of 1994, it placed the burden on the FDA to prove that a “supplement” is harmful before it can be removed from the market. 2) Products don’t have to undergo the rigorous testing required of medications. While warnings on the label are required, most people do not heed the warnings. 3) Claims do not need to be proven by manufacturers.

One thing is for sure, no supplement will magically promote weight loss by itself. It does indeed take effort and lifestyle change to lose weight and sustain the weight loss. The best strategy is to discuss the use of supplements with your physician and ask to see a Registered Dietitian for nutrition counseling. In addition, the following organizations can help you research weight loss supplements:

Office of Dietary Supplements <http://dietary-supplements.info.ni.gov>

American Botanical Council www.herbalgram.org

Herb Research Foundation www.herbs.org

For more information on weight control, *Shape Your Future... Your Weigh!*[™] can help. Contact your base HAWC or Dietitian for more information or visit the *Shape Your Future... Your Weigh!*[™] community website at <http://airforcemedicine.afms.mil/shapeyourfuture>.

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