

Diets and Weight Loss

**An information sheet from the Kentucky Council Against Health Fraud
www.kcahf.org**

Overview

With so many people interested in losing weight, it is not surprising that many companies are selling products that supposedly will help in weight loss. In addition, special diets (such as the Atkins) appear regularly. However, there is little or no scientific evidence in support of most of these products and diets. Some of them may produce harmful effects. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has been taking action against many marketers of products sold over the Internet because of their false and misleading claims.

Scientific assessment

Weight loss products:

Calorad - it seems likely that any benefits of this come from eliminating evening snacks in order to take it as directed (on an empty stomach).

Cellasene - mixture of herbs and other ingredients, claimed to reduce cellulite. The claim seems unlikely, and there is no published research in support.

Chitosan - a material that supposedly traps fat and keeps it from being digested. Controlled studies have found no benefit in weight loss. Possible side effects include allergic reactions (if you are allergic to shellfish) and interference with getting enough fat-soluble vitamins.

Chromium picolinate - supposedly increases metabolism and helps weight loss. A review published in 2004 concluded that it has not been shown to produce useful results.

Electrical muscle stimulation - these devices may be useful in exercising muscles of some patients, but there is no evidence that they can help in weight loss.

Hydroxycitrate - a compound found in certain fruits (such as *Garcinia cambogia*). Can interfere with an enzyme involved in fat metabolism, possibly affecting appetite. However, it has not yet been shown to be effective in causing weight loss.

Pyruvate - a natural chemical that is sold for weight loss and other claimed benefits. However, the studies showing effects on weight were using extremely large doses with obese individuals under medical supervision.

Starch blockers - these inhibit an enzyme involved in breaking down starch to sugar. These have not yet been shown to be effective in weight loss.

Danger! The FDA recently banned most products containing *ephedra* because of possible dangerous side effects. Some companies are now replacing ephedra with other ingredients such as *citrus aurantium* (bitter orange), but these may have similar dangers.

(over)

Atkins and other low carbohydrate diets:

These diets include large amounts of protein and fat with greatly restricted carbohydrates (going against the conventional recommendation to reduce fat). Recently several controlled studies have indicated that these diets may be effective in weight loss, at least in the short term, and that they did not lead to unfavorable changes in blood cholesterol. However, it is important to keep in mind several points:

- The diets have not yet been shown to be effective in *long term* weight loss. In some cases, more weight was lost than with a low-fat diet at 6 months but not at 12 months.
- The reason these diets may help lose weight is not due to any special effects on metabolism, but because people following them eat less.
- There are important potential side effects of these diets, including: inadequate nutrient intake (since fruits and vegetables may be restricted); constipation; ketosis; kidney stones and other kidney problems (due the high protein); decreased calcium and higher risk of bone loss; and increased risk of heart disease.

If you choose to follow one of these diets, be looking for new scientific information on their safety and effectiveness; there are certain to be many new studies in the next few years.

Other diets:

“Eat Right for Your Type” - proposes that people with different blood types should eat different diets. However, blood types are just one among many types of genetic differences among people; there is no evidence that they indicate that different types of foods would be best to eat. *Food Combining* - proposes that certain food combinations lead to incomplete digestion, loss of nutrients, and buildups of toxic wastes. There is no evidence for this.

For further information, see:

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/PhonyAds/weightlossfraud.html>

<http://www.dietfraud.com/>

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/cellulite.html>

<http://www.quackwatch.org/04ConsumerEducation/QA/chitosan.html>

http://www.fda.gov/fdac/features/2002/402_abs.html

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/DSH/hca.html>

<http://www.quackwatch.org/01QuackeryRelatedTopics/lcd.html>

Recommendations

Many people lose weight rapidly on a new diet but later gain it back. Programs that are effective in the long term involve changing your eating patterns (such as by reducing foods high in sugar and fat; switching to whole grain products; and choosing smaller portions) combined with increasing exercise. Consult your physician or a nutrition expert (such as a registered dietitian) to make sure that the diet you choose provides enough vitamins, minerals, and other nutrients.

Recommendations of KCAHF are based on our assessments of the scientific literature concerning unconventional approaches to health care. For specific recommendations concerning your medical condition, consult your physician.

For further information, contact KCAHF, 7605 Devondale Ct., Louisville, KY 40222 or send e-mail to: tjwheeler@louisville.edu