Diet Pills

Fat-Burning or Risk-Taking?

Companies market diet pills as a quick fix to a long-term problem. Claims such as “lose weight without dieting or exercise” make the pills sound like the perfect solution. But should you believe these claims? It can’t be that simple, and it’s not! Before you decide to purchase diet pills, stop and ask yourself these important questions:

1. Are these products regulated so I know what I’m getting?
2. What are the ingredients and how do they work?
3. What are the side effects or potential drug interactions?
4. Do they promote safe and long-term weight loss?

Here’s a head start with the answers…

Product Regulation and Safety
The 1994 Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act allowed companies to make and market diet pills without any government regulations. This means that THERE IS NO GUARANTEE that the product will do what it is marketed to do or contain the ingredients listed on the side of the bottle. In fact, several studies have shown that up to 30% of bottles are inaccurately labeled, and another study showed that one particular product did not contain ANY of the active ingredients listed on the bottle. Some products are tainted with steroids or chemicals like lead and mercury, which should NEVER be unknowingly consumed. Bottom-line: You can’t trust what is written on the bottle.

The Ingredients
Three main ingredients make up the majority of diet pills on the market today. Used together they are often referred to as “stacker pills.” This is because they exert a more powerful effect together than when used alone. However, the health risks become dangerously high. You may have heard advertisements for these weight loss pills on TV or radio as the “best” fat burner on the market. Below are descriptions of the ingredients, including the synthetic and naturally occurring chemicals, and how they function in the body.

- **Ephedrine, Ephedra and Ma Huang**
  The main component of the stacker-type pill is ephedrine, also known as ephedra or ma huang. The effects of ephedrine, ephedra and ma huang are virtually identical. They are central nervous system (CNS) stimulants, which means that they increase certain chemicals in the body that control mental awareness, heart rate, respiration, metabolism, blood pressure, and other primary processes. This leads to a chemically-induced increase in energy expenditure and temporary loss of appetite. However, once a person discontinues the ephedra product, his/her metabolism will slow down beyond the initial rate, leading to rapid and significant weight GAIN. Ephedrine is also addictive, so you need more and more to keep experiencing the same effects.

- **Caffeine and Guarana**
  Another ingredient used in diet pills is caffeine or guarana. Guarana, a plant found in Brazil, has a caffeine content 2-4 times that of regular coffee. Caffeine is also a CNS stimulant, and it reacts with other chemicals to enhance the effectiveness of ephedrine. The body’s response to caffeine is individual. For some it may cause shakiness, heart palpitations, and low blood sugar levels. For others it may enhance athletic performance.
• **Aspirin and White Willow Bark**

Aspirin (also known as white willow bark) is commonly used as a pain reliever and to reduce heart attack risk. However, it has other implications when used in conjunction with certain drugs. The combination of caffeine and aspirin boosts the effects of ephedrine, compounding the potentially dangerous effects of ephedrine. Be sure to talk to your doctor if you’re taking vitamin E, Coumadin, or other blood thinners.

**Side Effects**

Side effects from these over-the-counter medications can range from mild and irritating to deadly. Potential side effects including trouble sleeping, headaches, nervousness or jitters, diarrhea, high-blood pressure, dehydration, mood swings, paranoia, psychosis, heart palpitations, irregular heartbeat, heart attacks, strokes, seizures, increased risk of complications during surgery and death.

**WARNING:** If you suffer from or have a history in your family of certain diseases or ailments such as high-blood pressure, heart disease, or stroke, or if you are pregnant, nursing, or using MAO inhibitors, you may be at even greater risk for these side effects.

**The Bottom Line**

With or without the addition of diet pills, an overweight person MUST modify diet, exercise, and lifestyle in order to effectively lose weight and keep it off. Adding a stacker-type pill may be temporarily MORE effective than just diet and exercise, but AT WHAT COST? The health risks and long-term effects of using such products are potentially worse than just sticking to diet and exercise alone. Anyone taking this risk should be under the close supervision of a physician. The professional staff at the Women’s Sports Medicine Center do not recommend the use of these products.

**FYI**

- The FDA has linked 80 deaths and 800 adverse reactions to ephedra since 1994.
- You don’t have to be a long-term user to suffer adverse reactions. People using these pills for only a couple weeks have suffered devastating health effects.
- Health Canada recently announced a recall of all ephedra stacker pills and all pills that claim appetite suppression and metabolic enhancement due to the potential risks.
- Ephedra is a banned substance for athletes competing in NCAA intercollegiate sports and those training for and competing in world championship and Olympic events.
- The NFL recently banned the use of all ephedra products after several players experienced adverse reactions. Ephedra and steroid violations are viewed with the same severity, including a four game suspension for first time offenders.
- The NBA is considering a similar ban.