

BY TERRI D'ARRIGO

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SUPPLEMENTS

Hope Or Hype?

You're flipping through a magazine and the ad jumps out at you: "EAT ALL YOU WANT AND STILL LOSE WEIGHT! MIRACLE FAT-BLOCKING PILL ACTS LIKE A SPONGE TO ABSORB CALORIES!"

Sounds interesting. Promising, even. You've tried everything else. Why not this? They couldn't advertise it if it wasn't proven to be safe and effective, right?

Wrong—but you wouldn't be alone in making that assumption. In a recent telephone survey of 1,444 people who had tried to lose weight, 65 percent said the supplements were proven to be safe and 63 percent said they were proven to be effective. Roughly 54 percent said the supplements were approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). (The survey was funded by Glaxo-SmithKline, makers of prescription weight loss drug Xenical.)

The truth is that the FDA has yet to approve any weight loss supplement for over-the-counter purchase. Dietary supplements are regulated differently than drugs. Drugs require FDA approval before companies can market them; supplements do not. Pharmaceu-

tical companies must prove the safety and effectiveness of their drugs by submitting studies to the FDA. Supplement manufacturers don't even have to register their products with the FDA—although the FDA can take action against any unsafe supplements once they're on the market.

This means the creams, herbs, powders, and "miracle" pills you see advertised in the back of magazines and on late-night infomercials are not proven to work. In fact, some of them may even be dangerous. In 2004 the FDA banned the sale of ephedra (ma huang) in dietary supplements after a 2003 study reported more than 16,000 "adverse events" such as heart palpitations, sleeplessness, and tremors among people who used products containing the substance.

The U.S. Federal Trade Commission's (FTC's) Division of Advertising, has recently launched an initiative against misleading advertising. Yet there's only so much the government can do. When it comes to protecting your health—and your wallet—you're your own best guardian. The FTC advises you to proceed with extreme caution when you encounter the following claims:

- You can lose 2 pounds or more per week without cutting calories or increasing your physical activity
- You can lose a lot of weight while eating a lot of high-calorie foods
- Your weight loss will be permanent—weight will stay off even when you stop using the product
- The product blocks the absorption of fat or calories (again, no over-the-counter product has been proven to do this)
- You can lose more than 3 pounds per week for more than 4 weeks
- The product is worn or rubbed into the skin
- The product is okay for everyone to use

Also, be on guard for terms like "miracle," "revolutionary," "lightning fast," "breakthrough," "without effort," and "without dieting."

Safe weight loss occurs slowly and requires changes in your lifestyle, including an increase in your physical activity and a decrease in your calorie consumption—and that's something you can take to the bank.

Terri D'Arrigo is an associate editor of Diabetes Forecast.