

Slim Chances

As weight-loss supplements regain popularity, more women risk extreme side effects

BY LAUREN SIEBEN

Fen-phen and ephedra—chances are you’ve heard these two dirty words in the discourse about diet pills.

Both were popular active ingredients in weight-loss supplements during the '80s and '90s, and they were eventually banned for their frightening lists of side effects, which included increased heart rate, hypertension, heart attack and death.

Now, diet pills are ubiquitous as ever, but are they any safer? Celebrities hype Xenadrine, Quick Trim, SlimQuick and myriad others, affordable and legally available over the counter. Some promise you'll shed 25 pounds in as little as a month. Others tote weight-loss success stories of up to 10 pounds per week.

If their claims seem too good to be true, it's probably because they are, says Siobhan DeLancey, a spokeswoman for the Food and Drug Administration.

The FDA doesn't regulate diet pills, DeLancey says. Manufacturers are solely responsible for ensuring their products are safe before they hit the market. The FDA only tests certain diet pills after they're available to consumers. So be wary of the pills on pharmacy shelves—many haven't been tested by the FDA.

"Medical drugs have to go through clinical trials and things like that, but dietary supplements don't," DeLancey says. "If you have a dishonest manufacturer, they're trying to circumvent the law to get their products out."

Today's most popular diet pills include anything with "slim" in the title and some foreign supplements, like Pai You Guo capsules from China, DeLancey says. The FDA has found many pills are tainted with high quantities of pharmaceuticals, such as ephedra, fluphenazine and sibutramine—all associated with potentially

life-threatening cardiac risks.

Heart attack, stroke and death are on the extreme end of side effects, but the more common ones can still lead to major problems: insomnia, increased heart rate and irregular heart beat are a few more adverse effects, among many.

The FDA publishes a list of tainted weight-loss products on its Medication Health Fraud Web page. The list includes products the FDA has tested and deemed unsafe, but, DeLancey says, "if you're thinking about a product that's not on the list, don't assume it's OK."

As the FDA warns against a growing list of diet products, you may be wondering: Are any diet pills safe? A handful of FDA-approved products do exist, but DeLancey recommends them with a disclaimer.

"The only products that are approved are (those with the active ingredient) orlistat, so Alli and Xenical," she says. "But even with those products, we have warned that people with existing liver problems shouldn't take them."

To complicate matters, the FDA issued a warning about a counterfeit type of Alli being sold online. The counterfeit claims to contain orlistat, the active ingredient in Alli, but it's instead made with a dangerous amount of sibutramine, a stimulant that can cause elevated blood pressure, stroke and heart attack in people with a history of cardiovascular disease.

If you're determined to take a weight-loss supplement, talk to your doctor first. Otherwise, you may be wise to steer clear of pills that promise miracle results. Don't be tempted by the lure of a "two-day diet" that could be accompanied by fatal side effects.

As DeLancey puts it, most diet pills, "promise things that would be difficult to deliver."



FAST FACT

The FDA doesn't regulate diet pills. It's up to manufacturers to make them safe.

DECEPTIVE DIET PILLS

To see what medications are on the FDA's health fraud list, go to FDA.gov, roll over "Drugs," then click "Resources For You." On that page, click "Buying and Using Drugs Safely," then click "Medication Health Fraud."