



HEALTH

Weight Loss Products and Programs no. 9.363

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Quick Facts...

Many diet products and programs offer a quick, short-term fix, but there is no “magic bullet” for weight loss.

When investigating weight loss products or programs, beware of high costs, pressure to buy special foods or pills, and fraudulent claims.

Diets

Approximately 50 million Americans go on a diet each year — yet only 5 percent keep the weight they lose off. Many trying to lose weight continually struggle to find an effective weight loss method. Unfortunately, there is no “magic-bullet.” The only proven way to lose weight and keep it off is by making permanent lifestyle changes. You must eat healthier, watch portion sizes and be active.

Even if you choose to use an over-the-counter weight loss product or participate in a weight loss program, the bottom line is that you still must eat fewer calories than you burn to lose weight. When selecting a weight loss product or program, gather as much information as possible. Beware of high costs, pressure to buy special foods or pills, and fraudulent claims. Refer to Fact sheet no. 9.364, *Weight Loss Diet Books*, for information regarding books (eg. Atkins’s Diet)

Weight Loss Products

Diet drink powdered formulas usually are mixed with a glass of milk and are substituted for one or more meals. Many users of these shakes report feeling constantly hungry and regain the lost weight when they give up the shakes. By relying on shakes, dieters follow artificial dieting methods and avoid learning how to work food into their lives.

Many prescription diet medicines have side effects and may not work for long-term weight loss. Over-the-counter (OTC) pills containing the appetite suppressant PPA (phenylpropanolamine hydrochloride) can increase the risk of stroke. Over-the-counter pills containing ephedra may cause serious side effects, including dizziness, increased blood pressure or heart rate, chest pain, heart attack, stroke, seizure and even death. Currently, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is taking action to remove the use of PPA and has banned ephedra in over-the-counter medications and dietary supplements.

Chitosan Supplements

- **Characteristics:** Pills contain a dietary fiber derived from the shells of shellfish. Claim that taking the pills will reduce fat absorption, lower cholesterol and promote weight loss. Typical recommendations are to take 2 to 6 grams of chitosan per day, divided into doses of 1 gram with each meal.
- **Weaknesses:** May cause gas, bloating and diarrhea. At high intakes, may interfere with absorption of fat-soluble vitamins.
- **Comments:** Studies have shown weight loss occurs only when chitosan supplements are combined with a low-fat, reduced calorie diet.

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Chromium Supplements

- **Characteristics:** Claims that pills will lower blood sugar, reduce body fat, control hunger, reduce cholesterol and triglyceride levels, and increase muscle mass. Supplements are usually available as chromium salts that help increase the absorption of chromium.
- **Weaknesses:** One form of chromium, called chromium picolinate, may cause adverse side effects, including anemia, memory loss and DNA damage.
- **Comments:** Roughly 50 percent of scientific studies have shown chromium has a beneficial effect, while the remaining studies have shown no effect.

CLA (Conjugated Linoleic Acid) Supplements

- **Characteristics:** take 3 to 5 grams daily. Comes as a capsule or syrup.
- **Strengths:** Some studies have found that CLA produces moderate weight loss compared to a placebo.
- **Weaknesses:** Claims to build muscle and burn fat, but evidence is sparse. Other studies have found CLA supplementation to increase risk factors for heart disease.
- **Comments:** CLA is found in meat and dairy products and has been linked with antioxidant and anti-cancer properties in animal studies.

Diet Pills Containing Guarana

- **Characteristics:** Major active component is caffeine. It contains twice the amount of caffeine found in coffee beans with concentrated formulas, having much higher amounts.
- **Weaknesses:** May lead to insomnia, nervousness, anxiety, headaches, high blood pressure and heart palpitations.
- **Comments:** Theory is that it increases metabolic rate, suppresses appetite and enhances physical and mental performance. Caffeine may suppress appetite somewhat at high amounts, but does not increase calorie expenditure.

Examples of Ineffective Diet Products

Diet patches. Removed from the market by FDA in the early 1990s because they were ineffective as a diet aid.

Magnet diet pills. Purportedly flush fat out of the body.

Certain bulk fillers (such as guar gum) may cause internal obstruction.

Electrical muscle stimulators. FDA may remove from market if promoted for weight loss.

Appetite suppressing eyeglasses. Claim colored lenses project image on retina and decrease appetite.

Magic weight-loss earrings. Supposedly control hunger by stimulating acupuncture points.

Glucomannan Supplements

- **Characteristics:** Follow 1,000-calorie per day diet and take two capsules before each meal. Claim that capsules reduce appetite and decrease fat absorption.
- **Weaknesses:** Claim weight loss of 1/2 to 1 lb/day. Sensational, nutritionally inaccurate presentation.
- **Comments:** Glucomannans are naturally occurring food thickeners. Not yet proven safe or effective. Weight loss probably comes from following the diet.

Green Tea Extract Supplements

- **Characteristics:** Pills contain polyphenols, which are extracted from green tea and are thought to be strong antioxidants. May help lower cholesterol and triglycerides, and enhance weight loss.
- **Weaknesses:** Extracts that also contain caffeine may lead to restlessness and/or insomnia.
- **Comments:** More studies are still needed to determine if green tea extracts are beneficial for weight loss. Choose extracts that have a “standardized polyphenol content.” People taking aspirin or blood thinning medications should consult their doctor before taking green tea extracts, because green tea extracts may interfere with blood clotting.

Herbalife Nutritional Program

- **Characteristics:** Replaces 2 meals a day with Herbalife “shakes” and tablets.
- **Strengths:** One meal per day of regular food advocated. Shakes generally include nonfat dry milk.
- **Weaknesses:** Heavy reliance on Herbalife powders and tablets. Suggested rate of weight loss is too high (2 1/2 to 7 1/2 pounds/week).
- **Comments:** Weight loss is never “fun and easy” as claimed. Reliance on a specific product does not teach healthy, lifelong eating habits.

Mega-Thin/100 Formula

- **Characteristics:** Drink Mega-Thin formula. Eat according to specified diet. Formula contains “antifat weapon.”
- **Weaknesses:** Diet de-emphasized. Behavior modification lacking. Emphasis on speed of weight loss.
- **Comments:** Formula probably contains an appetite suppressant.

Nestlé’s Sweet Success

- **Characteristics:** Weight loss program recommends three shakes/day (powder and skim milk), and a complete dinner of 500 to 650 calories.
- **Strengths:** Low-fat, nutrient rich foods are encouraged for dinner.
- **Weaknesses:** Does not promote healthy eating habits.
- **Comments:** Difficult to maintain weight loss once shakes are discontinued.

Spirulina Supplements (Algae Tablets)

- **Characteristics:** 1.) Take tablets as an appetite suppressant before meals, 2.) replace evening meals with six to 10 spirulina tablets, or 3.) in a modified fast, take only spirulina and drink juice for several days.
- **Strengths:** Spirulina does contain essential nutrients and can be an acceptable food when used as part of a varied diet.
- **Weaknesses:** Taken in large amounts on top of an adequate diet, spirulina could lead to toxic levels of certain nutrients. Does not teach sound eating habits.
- **Comments:** Tablets are expensive. No studies have found spirulina effective for weight loss.

St. John’s Wort Supplements

- **Characteristics:** Claims that supplementing with St. John’s wort will suppress appetite and promote weight loss.
- **Weaknesses:** Side effects may include gastrointestinal discomfort, tiredness, insomnia and mild allergic reactions.
- **Comments:** According to the Food and Drug Administration, St. John’s wort has not been proven safe or effective for weight loss. Not recommended for children, or for pregnant or breast feeding women.

Ultra Slim Fast

- **Characteristics:** Weight loss program recommends two shakes/day (powder and milk), a snack and a complete dinner of 500 to 650 calories.
- **Strengths:** Plan encourages regular exercise.
- **Weaknesses:** Promotes use of Ultra Slim Fast Frozen Entrees and snack bars. Does not teach good eating habits.
- **Comments:** Difficult to maintain weight loss once shakes are discontinued.

Commercial Weight Loss Programs

Before investing in a commercial diet program, ask the company the following questions.

- How much, on average, do clients regain long-term?
- What is their maintenance and follow-up program?
- What rate of weight loss does the program aim for?
- Does the program emphasize balanced food choices and exercise?
- Are you required to buy specially formulated foods or supplements?
- What are the costs for membership, weekly fees, brand food, supplements and counseling?
- What are the credentials of those running the program?
- What are the health risks?

Check your local telephone directory for the programs available in your community. Prices may vary by location.

Commercial weight loss programs such as Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, NutriSystem and Diet Center usually offer a 1,000 to 1,500 calorie diet and individual or group counseling. Few participants succeed in keeping weight off long-term. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) brought action against some companies to challenge their weight loss and maintenance claims.

Diet Center

- **Characteristics:** Daily weigh-in and individual counseling.
- **Strengths:** Encourages exercise. Strong support in psychological aspects of weight loss.
- **Weaknesses:** Heavy reliance on supplements.
- **Comments:** Has a center-based or online option. No contract required.

Jenny Craig Weight Loss Clinic

- **Characteristics:** Weekly classes and individual counseling sessions. Both Jenny Craig preportioned foods and grocery store foods are used. Provides lifestyle management, motivation and nutritional information.
- **Strengths:** Emphasizes behavior education and practical eating skills. Expected weight loss 1 to 2 pounds a week. Exercise encouraged.
- **Comments:** Based on sound weight-loss principles, focuses on weight management, no wild claims or promises. Has a center-based or online option.

NutriSystem

- **Characteristics:** Select a plan and 28 days worth of food (breakfast, lunch, dinner, and dessert for each day). Food is delivered to you. Follow the meal planner provided while eating the delivered food and selected grocery items. Track weight loss and access counselors and educational tools online.
- **Strengths:** No points or calorie counting required. Food is pre-portioned. Social support, nutrition education, and exercise tips available online.
- **Weaknesses:** Uses NutriSystem food that can be expensive and does not simulate real life. Counseling not provided by registered dietitians.
- **Comments:** Offers a money-back guarantee. Center-based company has been replaced with an online option only.

Overeaters Anonymous

- **Characteristics:** Group meetings. Twelve-step program deals with physical, spiritual and emotional aspects of overeating. No “diets,” weigh-ins or lectures on food and weight. Primary purpose is to stop compulsive eating.
- **Strengths:** Encouraged to consult qualified professionals if interested in learning about nutrition or seeking professional advice. Provide good support structure.
- **Weaknesses:** Binge eating problems do not apply to everyone.
- **Comments:** No fees, voluntary contributions. Only membership requirement is a desire to stop compulsive eating. Online “meetings” available as well.

TOPS (Take Off Pounds Sensibly)

- **Characteristics:** Diet based on a standard diet of regular foods. Group meetings for weekly weigh-ins, education and support. Groups organized locally.

- **Strengths:** Nutritionally sound diet. Emphasizes slow, steady weight loss. Encourages camaraderie for support.
- **Comments:** Dues assessed per year. Less commercial than Weight Watchers. Does not sell food products or accept advertising from commercial companies. Nonprofit and noncommercial. Online membership is offered as well.

Weight Watchers Momentum Program

- **Characteristics:** Group meetings for education and support. Individual counseling available. Integrates food, behavior, social support, and exercise. Calories not counted daily. Lifestyle fit and convenience is paramount. Weight Watchers food available, not required. Points plan gives points to food based on calories, fat, and fiber. Each person receives a daily point allotment based on current weight. Plan to stay within daily allotment.
- **Strengths:** Nutritionally balanced. Emphasizes slow, steady weight loss. Teaches how to maintain ideal weight. Personal daily exercise plan. No good or bad foods. Focus on sustainable, healthy lifestyle.
- **Comments:** Lifetime membership by maintaining weight within 2 pounds of goal weight for six weeks. Has a meeting-based or online option.

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