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NUTRI-NEWS

Sorting out weight-loss stimulants

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Weight-loss supplement manufacturers have scrambled to fill the vacancy left when the Food and Drug Administration banned the popular supplement ephedra in 2004 because of its association with heart attacks, stroke and seizures.

In 2001, ephedra products accounted for only 0.8 percent of dietary supplement sales but were linked to 64 percent of reported herb-related adverse effects.

Ephedra was used for centuries in Asian cultures as an expectorant, says natural foods expert and dietitian David Grotto. The problem was its conversion for use as a weight-loss supplement.

"Where you have abuses of herbs is the common thinking that because it's natural, it can't cause any harm. We tend to think more is better," Grotto says.

Ephedra was marketed as a stimulant that increased metabolism and calorie burning. Following are some popular stimulant ingredients in weight-loss supplements and current evidence on safety and effectiveness.

Bitter orange

Derived from the peel of the Seville orange, this has replaced ephedra in many weight-loss supplements. It is claimed to increase energy expenditure but has not been well-studied.

The active ingredient in bitter orange is a stimulant called synephrine, which is chemically related to ephedrine, the active ingredient in ephedra. In a recent study at the University of California, products containing bitter orange were found to increase the heart rate of healthy users by 18 percent. In combination with caffeine, it also increased blood pressure by 7 percent to 12 percent. The researchers suggested that people with high blood pressure, heart disease or other conditions that might be adversely affected avoid products containing bitter orange.

Still, Mark Blumenthal of the American Botanical Council suggests that the media has unfairly indicted bitter orange.

"The study that came out showed that bitter orange in addition to caffeine caused an increase in blood pressure and heart rate. No study shows that there is any additive effect of bitter orange," he asserts.

But does it help users lose weight?

"The evidence is not overwhelming," says Blumenthal. "If it causes weight loss, it's relatively modest."

Yerba mate and guarana

These are herbal sources of caffeine. These have often been used to boost the effects of other weight-loss supplements but have rarely been studied in isolation. In one short-term study, a

combination of yerba mate, guarana and damiana was found to have a mild appetite-suppressant effect. Side effects are the usual ones for caffeine: nervousness, heart palpitations and sleeplessness.

Wendy Goldstein of Mustard Seed Market and Cafe in Solon says some of her customers have lost weight with caffeine-containing products, but many report side effects.

"I have found some of the caffeinated products to be effective, but they aren't good for a lot of people. It makes them jittery," she says.

Grotto agrees. "There's some concern in persons with hypertension and cardiac problems," he says. "I have seen people losing weight on it. But it's not the solution to obesity in this country."

Yohimbe

This comes from the bark of an African evergreen tree. Trials using this product have shown conflicting results, with one reporting a benefit and two showing no significant effect. Also popular as a treatment for erectile dysfunction, yohimbe has been included on a Consumer Reports list of "likely hazardous" supplements due to reported side effects including changes in blood pressure, heart arrhythmias, respiratory depression and heart attack.

So many supplements, so little space! In my next column, I'll review chromium piccolinate, conjugated linoleic acid, garcinia cambogia and more. In the meantime, remember that herbal products and dietary supplements can interact with over-the-counter and prescription medications. Be sure to discuss any herbal products or dietary supplements you choose to take with your doctor.

E-mail nutrition and weight-control questions, labeled "Nutri-News," to food@plaind.com.

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