

CONSUMER'S EDGE

CONSUMER PROTECTION DIVISION, MARYLAND OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

ANTHONY G. BROWN, MARYLAND ATTORNEY GENERAL

DON'T FALL FOR PHONY WEIGHT LOSS CLAIMS

- “Eat All You Want and Lose Weight!”
- “Flush Fat with Celebrity Diet Drink”
- “Lose 30 Pounds in 30 Days”
- “Speed Up Your Metabolism the Natural Way”



It's hard not to be tempted by diet products that offer quick, easy ways to shed pounds. Advertisements for these products are everywhere—on social media, in newspapers and magazines, on TV and radio, in email and text messages, even fliers on telephone poles.

The ads often show “before and after” photos and testimonials from people who were overweight but are now slim. The people in the ads say that nothing ever worked for them before, but this product melted away the fat. They say they have more energy and look better than ever. The ads claim the products use a new scientific discovery, are recommended by a leading doctor, or are “all-natural.”

It sounds good, but weight loss claims are often misleading or fraudulent, and some products have health risks. Dietary supplement companies do not need the approval of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) prior to marketing their weight loss products. It's the company's responsibility to make sure its products are safe and that any claims made about such products are true. Think carefully before buying any weight loss product.

Be skeptical of “amazing scientific breakthroughs.” The ads usually feature impressive-sounding medical jargon that may be meaningless. The “doctor” who developed the product may not be a medical doctor or may not have the credentials claimed. Many products claim to “burn,” “block,” or “flush” fat from the body, but have no proof that they can actually do so.

Claims that you can lose weight effortlessly are false. The only proven way to lose weight and keep it off is to eat fewer calories than you burn off, and that usually requires effort and time.

Crash diets are usually not effective, and can be dangerous. Rapid weight loss is usually followed by rapid regaining of the weight. In addition, very low-calorie diets can be dangerous to your health. People who have medical problems caused by obesity might choose to try to lose weight rapidly under a doctor's supervision, but for most people it's not advised.

Note the disclaimers. If a product is advertised to help you lose weight “when combined with a low-calorie diet and exercise,” it might be that the diet and exercise alone is what would produce weight loss. If so, what are you paying for?

“Natural” or “herbal” does not equal “safe” or “wholesome.” Many herbal ingredients are toxic in certain doses, cause allergic reactions, or react with prescription or over-the-counter medications. Remember: The FDA does not analyze or approve the safety of dietary supplements before they go on the market.



Weight loss products may contain hidden ingredients that could be dangerous. The FDA has reported a trend where weight loss products contain harmful hidden ingredients, including varying quantities of approved prescription ingredients, banned substances, controlled substances, and untested and unstudied active ingredients. None of these compounds were listed on the product label. For example, some weight loss products were tainted with active ingredients found in approved seizure medications, blood pressure medications, and antidepressants. These tainted weight loss products could cause serious side effects or interact in dangerous ways with prescription drugs or other supplements taken by consumers.

Diet pills, laxatives, and “dieter’s teas” can have serious side effects. Appetite control pills that contain amphetamines can be addictive and harmful to the heart and nervous system. Some herbal “dieter’s teas” contain powerful laxatives or diuretics that have caused heart arrhythmias. Some fiber-based products that claim to reduce hunger by absorbing liquid and swelling in the stomach have caused dangerous obstructions that required emergency surgery to remove. Other chemicals used in these products may, according to the FDA, increase the risk of cancer.

Teenagers feel great pressure to be thin and can be vulnerable to the promises made by weight loss products. They and their parents should be aware that some diet products containing stimulants or laxatives can be habit-forming and dangerous.

Before taking any weight loss product, consult with a healthcare provider, and review the FDA’s website: <https://www.fda.gov/drugs/medication-health-fraud/tainted-weight-loss-products>.

What Really Works

The truth is that losing weight isn’t easy and does require effort. Most health experts say that the only effective way to lose weight and keep it off is to reduce the amount of calories you eat and exercise more.

Don’t just rely on willpower. Ask your doctor, a dietician, or a nutritionist for help in planning a new diet, or consider a weight loss program (see below). For example, you might be surprised to find out what a proper serving size is. In our “super-sized” society, restaurants and packaged foods offer servings that are often the equivalent of two or three servings. It can be helpful to get advice on how to shop for and cook foods that are different from what you’re used to, such as lower-fat foods, whole grains, and fruits and vegetables. There are social issues, too. You might need to break a habit of eating when you are bored or stressed, or learn how to have a good time at parties or restaurants without overeating.



As for exercise, you might need to try several activities to find one or two that you can do regularly. The key is to find the right balance of foods and exercise that will keep you at a healthy weight for the rest of your life.

Weight Loss Programs

A supervised weight loss program can give you a structured way to lose weight, with support and monitoring. A good one should focus on long-term weight management and eating healthfully. If the program consists of selling you expensive special foods and supplements, you may put all the weight back on once you reach your weight goal and leave the program. Here are some good questions to ask before you sign up:

- What are the credentials of the professionals involved?
- What kind of professional supervision is provided?
- What are the health risks?

Find out how much the entire program will cost, including membership, weekly fees, food, supplements, and counseling. Ask about refund.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) has additional information about how to evaluate claims in ads for weight loss products. Visit the FTC’s website <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0061-weighing-claims-diet-ads>.

HOW TO CONTACT US

Consumer Protection Division

200 St. Paul Place, 16th Fl., Baltimore, MD 21202

- **General Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-8662
Toll-free: 1-888-743-0023 TDD: 410-576-6372
En español: 410-230-1712
9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday
www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/CPD/
- **Health Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-1840
Toll-free: 1-877-261-8807 TDD: 410-576-6372
En español: 410-230-1712
9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
www.marylandcares.org
- **For information on branch offices** in Largo, Salisbury, Hagerstown, and a full list of offices across Maryland, visit: www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/contactus.aspx

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ATTORNEY GENERAL
ANTHONY G. BROWN

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