

SPECIAL REPORT

The Truth About Diet Pills



LUYD SUTTON/MATERIELL PILLS-KRATZ (2)

The come-ons are hard to resist: "Simply the most powerful, clinically proven weight-control compound available... Period!" "The new science in weight loss!" "Fifteen years of research leads to new formula to control stress hormone linked to stubborn abdominal fat levels!" With ads like these, it's no surprise that dietary weight-loss supplements (in pill form) have hit sales of \$1.7 billion, according to the Nutrition Business Journal. But in the wake of the FDA's ban on stimulants derived from ephedra (linked to strokes, seizures, even death) earlier this year, what should we know about the new generation of "natural" diet pills? Are they safe? Do they work? Why do they cost a small fortune?

Because dietary supplements are available without a prescription and untested by the FDA, consumers have little to go on beyond the producers' own sales pitch. With that in mind, we took a closer look at two of the most talked-about top sellers, both said to work for those who are significantly overweight.

Leptoprin-SD, recently reformulated to be ephedra-free, claims to boost metabolism with a compound containing aspirin and caffeine, producing weight loss "without diet and exercise," asserts spokesman Louis Rinaldi. Dearborn Heights, Mich., radio talk show host Tony Trupiano, 43, has written extensively about Leptoprin on his own Web site but is not compensated by the company; he says "there is no question" the supplement helped him drop from 450 lbs. to around 230 lbs. But Trupiano also admits that exercise played a part. Meanwhile, numerous detractors argue that the product doesn't deliver. In June, the Fed-

eral Trade Commission launched a lawsuit against Leptoprin, charging that claims that the product produces weight losses of more than 20 lbs. were unsubstantiated. Moreover, the inclusion of acetylsalicylic acid (aspirin) may be inconsistent with FDA guidelines. "Supplements cannot contain an over-the-counter drug such as aspirin," says Tod Cooperman, M.D., president of Consumerlab.com. In the past, the FDA has taken action on dietary supplements found to contain drugs. As for Leptoprin-SD's sticker price, \$153 per 30-day supply, Cooperman says, "That is the kind of price you'd see for a prescription drug that has gone through major clinical trials and shown benefit."

CortiSlim, which runs \$50 for a month's supply, promises to "work with your body's metabolism to control cortisol levels and help you lose weight." The results have been gratifying for Amy Clegg, 37, a Draper, Utah,

mother of five who lost 15 lbs. on the supplement. "I immediately felt my stress level go down," she attests. "At the same time, it keeps my blood sugar even, so I lose weight." But consumers from 26 states are less enthralled. In July, a class-action lawsuit was filed against the manufacturer of CortiSlim, claiming the supplement was ineffective. "The plaintiffs in the suit are individuals who used the product as directed and did not experience any of the weight-loss benefits that the company proclaims in its advertisements," says their lawyer Jeff Carton. In addition, the FDA sent a warning letter in August to the makers of CortiSlim asking them to validate "unsubstantiated claims" that their product "controls appetite" and "reduces cravings." Some medical experts question the safety of CortiSlim's ingredient synephrine, which is similar in composition to ephedrine. "It has an amphetamine-like stimulation," says William Obermeyer, Ph.D., director of research at Consumerlab.com. No conclusive studies have proven that synephrine is either safe or dangerous to humans. Anyone considering taking these supplements should consult their doctor first.

In fairness, experts agree that diet supplements have not been well studied, and the pills are no magic bullet. "Right now there is not much scientific evidence that these products work, and you pay quite a bit of money for them," says James Tisdale, PharmD, associate professor of pharmacy practice at Purdue University's School of Pharmacy and Pharmaceutical Sciences. "It's boring to say, but if people want to lose weight, the most effective way is to eat less and exercise more."

Tempted by those outrageous weight-loss ads? Read this first

HOPE—OR HYPE—IN A BOTTLE?

We asked Consumerlab.com, an independent testing laboratory in White Plains, N.Y., to analyze these two top diet aids



LEPTOPRIN-SD

Claim: Increases energy and suppresses a hormone that controls hunger.

Ingredients include Caffeine (minimum 300mg per day, equal to 4 cups of coffee)
Surprise Ingredient Aspirin (81mg) A rep says it "enhances the effects of the energy-producing compound." Doctors say it may have a thermogenic effect.



CORTISLIM

Claim: Controls cortisol, curbs cravings, boosts metabolism.

Ingredients include Bitter-orange-peel extract, which contains synephrine.
Surprise Ingredient Magnolia bark extract. Used by Chinese herbalists for stress, can also cause contact dermatitis.