



HEALTH

Weight Loss Products and Programs no. 9.363

by J. Anderson and L. Young ¹

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.

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 pills containing the appetite suppressant PPA (phenylpropanolamine hydrochloride) can raise blood pressure. 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 limit and/or ban the use of PPA and ephedra in over-the-counter medications and dietary supplements.

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.

**Colorado
State**
University
Cooperative
Extension

© Colorado State University
Cooperative Extension. 12/98.
Revised 10/02.
www.ext.colostate.edu

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.

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.

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.

Diet Pills Containing PPA

- **Characteristics:** Take capsule once or twice a day. Follow diet plan that comes with capsules. Pills suppress appetite, but weight loss occurs from following diet plan. Most brands have a diet plan enclosed. Many of these are good diets.
- **Weaknesses:** Pills produce side effects that have not been adequately studied.
- **Comments:** Weight loss comes from following the diet, not from taking the pills.

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.

Diet Pills Containing Ephedra (also called Ma Huang)

- **Characteristics:** Claims to promote weight loss. Take tablets daily. Recommended number of tablets varies depending on the product manufacturer.
- **Weaknesses:** Pills can produce potentially life-threatening side effects. Side effects have not been adequately studied.
- **Comments:** Ephedra is a central nervous system stimulant that suppresses appetite. Often combined with caffeine, which can increase risk for adverse side effects. Not proven safe or effective for weight loss.

Glucomannan Supplements

- **Characteristics:** Follow 1,000-calorie per day diet and take two capsules before each meal. Claim that capsules reduce appetite and decrease food 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.

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 – 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.

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 which helps 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.

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.

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.

Spirulina Supplements (Algae Tablets)

- **Characteristics:** 1) Take tablets as an appetite suppressant before meals, or 2) replace evening meals with 6-10 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.

Commercial Weight Loss Programs

Commercial weight loss programs such as Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, Nutri-System 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.

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.

¹J. Anderson, Cooperative Extension food science and human nutrition specialist and professor; and L. Young, former graduate student.

Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Milan A. Rewerts, Director of Cooperative Extension, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colorado. Cooperative Extension programs are available to all without discrimination. No endorsement of products mentioned is intended nor is criticism implied of products not mentioned.

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:** 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 lbs/week. Exercise encouraged.
- **Comments:** Based on sound weight-loss principles, focuses on weight management, no wild claims or promises.

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.

TOPS (Take Off Pounds Sensibly)

- **Characteristics:** Diet based on a standard diet of regular foods. Group meetings for 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. Nonprofit and noncommercial.

Weight Watchers Winning Points Program

- **Characteristics:** Group meetings for education and support. Individual counseling available. Emphasis on meal planning. Calories not counted daily. Lifestyle fit and convenience is paramount. Weight Watchers food available, not required. Winning Points plan gives points to food. 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.
- **Comments:** Lifetime membership by maintaining weight within 2 lbs. of goal weight for six weeks.