

**U. S. Food and Drug Administration**

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# The Facts About Weight Loss Products and Programs

*Presented as a Public Service by:*  
**Federal Trade Commission  
Food and Drug Administration  
National Association of Attorneys General**

## The Weight-Loss Industry

Looking for a quick and easy way to lose weight? You're not alone. An estimated 50 million Americans will go on diets this year. And while some will succeed in taking the weight off, very few--perhaps 5 percent--will manage to keep all of it off in the long run.

One reason for the low success rate is that many people look for quick and easy solutions to their weight problems. They find it hard to believe in this age of scientific innovations and medical miracles that an effortless weight-loss method doesn't exist.

So they succumb to quick-fix claims like "Eat All You Want and Still Lose Weight!" or "Melt Fat Away While You Sleep!" And they invest their hopes (and their money) in all manner of pills, potions, gadgets, and programs that hold the promise of a slimmer, happier future.

The weight-loss business is a booming industry. Americans spend an estimated \$30 billion a year on all types of diet programs and products, including diet foods and drinks. Trying to sort out all of the competing claims--often misleading, unproven, or just plain false--can be confusing and costly.

This brochure is designed to give you the facts behind the claims, to help you avoid the outright scams, and to encourage you to consider thoroughly the costs and consequences of the dieting decisions you make.

## The Facts About Weight Loss

Being obese can have serious health consequences. These include an increased risk of heart disease, stroke, high blood pressure, diabetes, gallstones, and some forms of cancer. Losing weight can help reduce these risks. Here are some general points to keep in mind:

- Any claims that you can lose weight effortlessly are false. The only proven way to lose weight is either to reduce the number of calories you eat or to increase the number of calories you burn off through exercise. Most experts recommend a combination of both.
- Very low-calorie diets are not without risk and should be pursued only under medical supervision. Unsupervised very low-calorie diets can deprive you of important nutrients and are potentially dangerous.
- Fad diets rarely have any permanent effect. Sudden and radical changes in your eating patterns are difficult to sustain over time. In addition, so-called "crash" diets often send dieters into a cycle of quick weight loss, followed by a "rebound" weight gain once normal eating resumes, and even more difficulty reducing when the next diet is attempted.
- To lose weight safely and keep it off requires long-term changes in daily eating and exercise habits. Many experts recommend a goal of losing about a pound a week. A modest reduction of

500 calories per day will achieve this goal, since a total reduction of 3,500 calories is required to lose a pound of fat. An important way to lower your calorie intake is to learn and practice healthy eating habits.

## In Search of the "Magic Bullet"

Some dieters peg their hopes on pills and capsules that promise to "burn," "block," "flush," or otherwise eliminate fat from the system. But science has yet to come up with a low-risk "magic bullet" for weight loss. Some pills may help control the appetite, but they can have serious side effects. (Amphetamines, for instance, are highly addictive and can have an adverse impact on the heart and central nervous system.) Other pills are utterly worthless.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and a number of state Attorney General have successfully brought cases against marketers of pills claiming to absorb or burn fat. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has banned 111 ingredients once found in over-the-counter diet products. None of these substances, which include alcohol, caffeine, dextrose, and guar gum, have proved effective in weight-loss or appetite suppression.

Beware of the following products that are touted as weight-loss wonders:

- Diet patches, which are worn on the skin, have not been proven to be safe or effective. The FDA has seized millions of these products from manufacturers and promoters.
- "Fat blockers" purport to physically absorb fat and mechanically interfere with the fat a person eats.
- "Starch blockers" promise to block or impede starch digestion. Not only is the claim unproven, but users have complained of nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach pains.
- "Magnet" diet pills allegedly "flush fat out of the body." The FTC has brought legal action against several marketers of these pills.
- Glucomannan is advertised as the "Weight Loss Secret That's Been in the Orient for Over 500 Years." There is little evidence supporting this plant root's effectiveness as a weight-loss product.
- Some bulk producers or fillers, such as fiber-based products, may absorb liquid and swell in the stomach, thereby reducing hunger. Some fillers, such as guar gum, can even prove harmful, causing obstructions in the intestines, stomach, or esophagus. The FDA has taken legal action against several promoters containing guar gum.
- Spirulina, a species of blue-green algae, has not been proven effective for losing weight.

## Phony Devices and Gadgets

Phony weight-loss devices range from those that are simply ineffective to those that are truly dangerous to your health. At minimum, they are a waste of your hard-earned money. Some of the fraudulent gadgets that have been marketed to hopeful dieters over the years include:

- Electrical muscle stimulators have legitimate use in physical therapy treatment. But the FDA has taken a number of them off the market because they were promoted for weight loss and body toning. When used incorrectly, muscle stimulators can be dangerous, causing electrical shocks and burns.
- "Appetite suppressing eyeglasses" are common eyeglasses with colored lenses that claim to project an image to the retina which dampens the desire to eat. There is no evidence these work.
- "Magic weight-loss earrings" and devices custom-fitted to the purchaser's ear that purport to stimulate acupuncture points controlling hunger have not been proven effective.

## Diet Programs

Approximately 8 million Americans a year enroll in some kind of structured weight-loss program involving liquid diets, special diet regimens, or medical or other supervision. In 1991, about 8,500 commercial diet centers were in operation across the country, many of them owned by a half-dozen or so well-known national companies.

Before you join such a program, you should know that according to published studies relatively few participants succeed in keeping off weight long-term. Recently, the FTC brought action against several companies challenging weight-loss and weight-maintenance claims. Unfortunately, some other companies continue to make overblown claims.

The FTC stopped one company from claiming its diet program caused rapid weight loss through the use of tablets that would "burn fat" and a protein drink mix that would adjust metabolism. The FTC also took action against three major programs using doctor-supervised, very low-calorie liquid diets, and they agreed to stop making claims unless they could back them up with hard data.

Before you sign up with a diet program, you might ask these questions:

- What are the health risks?
- What data can you show me that proves your program actually works?
- Do customers keep off the weight after they leave the diet program? ?
- What are the costs for membership, weekly fees, food, supplements, maintenance, and counseling? What's the payment schedule? Are any costs covered under health insurance? Do you give refunds if I drop out?
- Do you have a maintenance program? Is it part of the package or does it cost extra?
- What kind of professional supervision is provided? What are the credentials of these professionals?
- What are the program's requirements? Are there special menus or foods, counseling visits, or exercise plans?

## Clues to Fraud

It is important for consumers to be wary of claims that sound too good to be true. When it comes to weight-loss schemes, consumers should be particularly skeptical of claims containing words and phrases like:

- easy
- effortless
- guaranteed
- miraculous
- magical
- breakthrough
- new discovery
- mysterious
- exotic
- secret
- exclusive
- ancient

## Sensible Weight Maintenance Tips

Losing weight may not be effortless, but it doesn't have to be complicated. To achieve long-term results, it's best to avoid quick-fix schemes and complex regimens. Focus instead on making modest changes to your life's daily routine. A balanced, healthy diet and sensible, regular exercise are the keys to maintaining your ideal weight. Although nutrition science is constantly evolving, here are some generally-accepted guidelines for losing weight:

- Consult with your doctor, a dietician, or other qualified health professional to determine your ideal healthy body weight.

- Eat smaller portions and choose from a variety of foods.
- Load up on foods naturally high in fiber: Fruits, vegetables, legumes, and whole grains.
- Limit portions of foods high in fat: dairy products like cheese, butter, and whole milk; red meat; cakes and pastries.
- Exercise at least three times a week.

## For Help and Information

The [Federal Trade Commission](#) has jurisdiction over advertising and marketing of foods, non-prescription drugs, medical devices, and health care services. The FTC can seek federal court injunctions to halt fraudulent claims and obtain redress for injured consumers.

The [Food and Drug Administration](#) has jurisdiction over the content and labeling of foods, drugs, and medical devices. The FDA can take law enforcement action to seize and prohibit the sale of products that are falsely labeled.

Most state Attorney General have authority under state consumer protection statutes to investigate and prosecute unfair or deceptive acts and practices. Many have the power to seek consumer restitution, civil fines, and revocation of a company's authority to do business.

To get more information or to file complaints about weight-loss products or programs, write:

Federal Trade Commission  
Correspondence Branch  
Washington, D.C. 20580

or

Food and Drug Administration  
Consumer Affairs and Information  
5600 Fishers Lane  
Rockville, MD 20857

or

Your State Attorney General  
Office of Consumer Protection  
Your State Capital

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