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Diet Pills – Buyer Beware

In December 2008, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a press release to warn consumers about 28 weight loss products that contain undeclared, active pharmaceutical ingredients. Recently updated, the list of tainted supplements has expanded to include 69 products, and with further investigation this number is expected to grow.

The undeclared ingredients discovered to date include a diuretic, an anti-seizure medication, an unapproved drug, a controlled substance, and a suspected cancer-causing agent typically used for chemical experiments. Even the drugs among these considered safe (when used properly) are often present in amounts far above their maximum recommended doses. Potential side effects are numerous, and a few include seizures, heart attack, and stroke, as well as an increased risk of depression and suicidal thoughts.

How are these drugs getting into supposedly ‘natural’ dietary supplements?

The major legislation regulating dietary supplements, enacted in 1994, was designed to protect the rights of consumers, and encourage the availability of supplements for those wishing to promote wellness. Unfortunately, this served to greatly limit the ability of the FDA to regulate the safety and effectiveness of these products. Not surprisingly, this resulted in a massive influx of new dietary supplements: since 1994 the industry has grown seven-fold, with over 1,000 new products introduced annually.

To compound the difficulties of coping with a rapidly expanding market, the current regulations do not require supplements to be tested for their safety or effectiveness before being made available to the public. In addition, marketing claims are not subject to FDA approval—leading many companies to publish misleading or outright fraudulent claims that are far from being based on sound science.

If a supplement is deemed sufficiently dangerous the FDA can take action, as it did when ephedra-containing supplements were banned in 2004. However, this is a cumbersome process, and the burden of proof is placed squarely upon FDA. Furthermore, in the case of the ephedra ban, manufacturers were able to quickly replace the ephedra in their diet pills with another ‘natural’ stimulant: bitter orange. It appears that bitter orange acts very similar to ephedra once in the body, and many experts believe it has the same potential for deadly side effects. Practices such as these have only added to the woes of an agency that was already ill-equipped to handle the workload.

In the current supplement marketplace regulation is minimal, and consumers are often left to fend for themselves. In fact, few of the tainted products have issued recalls, and many are still readily available from retailers. Please be cautious if considering using any type of dietary supplements. Protect your body and your wallet. If you have any questions, it’s a good idea to speak with a medical professional such as your health care provider, dietitian, or pharmacist for reliable and unbiased supplement advice.

A press release by the FDA, as well as a full list of tainted products can be found by searching ‘weight loss’ from the FDA’s website (www.fda.gov). *Kentz Willis, M.S., is the University Extension Educator in Nutrition and Food Safety for Sheridan and Johnson counties. He can be reached via email at kwillis3@uwyo.edu.*