

Nine OTC Weight-Loss Agents Failed to Impress

BY MITCHEL L. ZOLER

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STOCKHOLM — Nine commonly used, over-the-counter weight-loss products found on the shelves of German pharmacies worked as well as or worse than placebo in a randomized study with 143 patients.

"Because the tested supplements are sold in pharmacies in most countries, a lot of customers might think they will really work. These products are an exception to that general rule," Dr. Thomas Ellrott said at the meeting.

"Some of the tested products are very expensive placebos," with one priced in Germany at more than \$400 per month.

Dr. Ellrott's study tested these nine agents sold as weight loss products in Germany: polyglucosamide (chitosan), cabbage powder, konjac extract, sodium-alginate complex, bean concentrate (phaseolamine), selected plant extracts, L-carnitine, special fiber formulation, and guarana-seed powder.

Polyglucosamide and sodium-alginate complex are both in the fat-absorbers/blockers/dissolvers category. The other seven are all supplements.



Some of the tested products are 'expensive placebos,' with one priced in Germany at over \$400 per month.

DR. ELLROTT

The study did not include any agency-approved prescription drugs, nor did it include liquid low-calorie diets.

The study enrolled 189 overweight or obese adults, with a body mass index of 25-35 kg/m². They underwent randomization to one of the nine OTC agents or placebo. Participants received the agents in neutral packaging with instructions to follow each agent's standard method of use. Participants received the agents weekly, and compliance was monitored. The study did not provide any additional counseling or advice, and the researchers saw patients weekly to measure their weight and blood pressure. Median age was 47; median BMI was 30 kg/m².

A total of 143 patients completed 8 weeks in the study, with 10-15 patients completing in each of the 10 treatment arms (nine products plus placebo).

Significant weight loss compared with baseline occurred in seven of the agent subgroups and in the placebo recipients. The amounts lost in these groups ranged from 1.2 kg to 2.0 kg. People in the placebo group lost an average of 1.2 kg. None of the agent groups had a significant weight change compared with placebo. The two remaining agent subgroups had no significant weight change compared with their baselines.

The monthly cost for the nine agents

tested based on their pharmacy prices in Germany ranged from about \$35 to \$440, said Dr. Ellrott, head of the Institute for Nutrition and Psychology at the University of Göttingen.

"This does not mean that all supplements are useless," noted Dr. Ellrott. Some supplements provide essential nutrients that selected patients need, and a handful of prescription drugs

have proven efficacy for weight loss.

The study "is of high quality, and shows that the nine supplements are no different from placebo. The only thing [patients] will lose is their money," commented Judith S. Stern, Sc.D., a professor of nutrition at the University of California, Davis. Dr. Stern previously ran studies documenting the chitosan's (polyglucosamide) lack of efficacy. ■

VITALS

Major Finding: Seven different OTC weight-loss agents had efficacy comparable to placebo and another two agents worked worse than placebo.

Data Source: Single-center randomized controlled study with 143 patients completing 8 weeks on treatment.

Disclosures: Dr. Ellrott said that he and his associates had no relevant disclosures.

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¹Robison M. Shaw K. Proton Pump Inhibitor Attitudes and Usage: A Patient Survey. P&T April 2002 Vol127: #4:202-206
²Jacobson BC. et al. Who is using chronic acid suppression therapy and why? AmJ Gastroenterol 2003;98: 1:51-58
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