

Many consumers misled about bogus weight-loss supplements, survey says

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Consumer Reports poll finds shoppers often mistakenly believe that FDA oversees these products.

(HealthDay)—Think a pill you saw advertised on the Internet can miraculously help you shed unwanted pounds? You're not alone: A new Consumer Reports survey finds many Americans are misinformed about the quality and effectiveness of these supplements.

"The barrage of advertising leads us to think there's a magic way to melt away 10 pounds—even when we have no evidence that supplements work," Dr. Pieter Cohen, a physician at Harvard Medical School who studies supplements, said in a Consumer Reports news release.

"The labels on [weight loss](#) supplements look like those on over-the-counter medications, and the supplement facts are organized like

[nutrition facts labels](#)," he added. "There's no way for consumers to tell the difference."

So it's perhaps not surprising that the new [survey](#) of nearly 3,000 Americans found that about 20 percent of respondents were misinformed, believing, erroneously, that the U.S Food and Drug Administration guarantees the safety and effectiveness of [weight-loss supplements](#).

All of that scientific-looking labeling "gives you the sense the [products](#) are being scrutinized by the FDA," Cohen said, even though the agency plays no such role when it comes to supplements.

More than a quarter of respondents to the survey said they had tried a weight-loss product in the past, and believed the product was safe and would help them lose more weight than other methods.

About 25 percent also believed the products have fewer side effects than over-the-counter or prescription medications. But the same survey suggests that's just not true: About half of those polled who said they had tried a weight-loss supplement said they also developed at least one symptom such as rapid heart rate, jitteriness, constipation/diarrhea, or dry mouth.

Cohen said, "of all [dietary supplements](#), the ones for weight loss seem to cause the most harm—sometimes liver failure and even death."

The survey showed that more than one-third of those taking weight-loss supplements were also taking a prescription medication for another condition. Many people taking weight-loss supplements don't inform their doctor, and that could raise the risk for drug-drug interactions and potentially serious complications.

"These products can interact with [prescription medications](#), but consumers often feel that supplements are different from prescription drugs, and doctors don't ask about them," said Cohen.

Complicating matters, weight-loss products may contain drugs that have been banned by the FDA. In another recent study, the researchers found that 27 supplements recalled by the agency were still being sold. Of those products, two-thirds being sold for weight loss contained some type of banned ingredient.

In the end, "there's no way to know what's in the bottle," Cohen said. "You're at the mercy of the manufacturer."

And what about the drugs' effectiveness at shedding unwanted pounds? Claims that these products will help people burn more fat or calories have not been validated by the FDA, the researchers said.

Like food, weight-loss supplements are generally considered safe until shown to be dangerous, the report's authors said.

According to the survey, one-third of those polled didn't lose any weight. Although another one-third lost some weight, only 9 percent reported losing all the weight they wanted to lose and kept it off. But, the weight-loss [supplements](#) probably had little to do with their weight loss success, the study's authors suggested.

"If you've spent money on something you think will help, you'll probably pay more attention to what you're eating," explained Cohen. "Taking the pill acts as a reminder."

The respondents who said they lost at least some weight while taking a weight-loss supplement were typically following a diet or exercise program, the survey revealed.

More information: The U.S. National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine provides more information on [weight-loss supplements](#).

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