

The Medical Minute: Natural remedies for people with diabetes

June 2 2010, by Chris Fan and Lorraine Mulfinger

(PhysOrg.com) -- Disease remedies using plant products fill the market, but most have not been tested well enough to be able to assure patients that they really work or that they are safe. Here is what is known about a few products that are often of interest to patients with diabetes.

Hydroxycut - There are numerous formulations of this product and many contain caffeine. The other reputed active ingredients include two plants: *Garcinia cambogia* and *Gymnema sylvestre*. *Garcinia* grows in Indonesia and regions of Africa, and a small number of studies have reported it useful in producing modest weight loss. A study in rats also showed lower [blood sugar](#) levels after meals, but also signs of damage in the liver and testicles. In May 2009, the FDA issued a warning about this additive, and most Hydroxycut formulas now focus on *Gymnema sylvestre*. Interestingly *Gymnema* reduces the taste of sugar when it is placed in the mouth, so that some use it to fight sugar cravings.

Hoodia - *Hoodia gordonii* is a flowering plant that grows in desert regions of Africa. Its effectiveness for appetite suppression was documented as early as 1937, but a concerned Pfizer researcher wrote in the *New York Times* in 2005 "...although hoodia did appear to suppress appetite, there were indications of unwanted effects on the liver ...". Hoodia is believed to work by tricking the brain into believing it has enough sugar, thereby suppressing the urge to eat when blood sugar is low, which could be dangerous for [diabetic patients](#).

Antioxidants - Many supplements are now being advertised for their

beneficial “anti-oxidant” effects. Antioxidants help neutralize compounds that are more rapidly generated when blood sugar is high and that are involved in the development of heart and vascular disease. Numerous natural foods are high in antioxidants, These include [green tea](#) , certain berries (including cranberries, [blueberries](#) and açai berry), most fruits and [vegetables](#), [red wine](#) and [dark chocolate](#). One active antioxidant found in wine and chocolate is a compound called resveratrol. It is now available in pill form, though wine and chocolate are more enjoyable. Research has suggested that consuming antioxidant foods is associated with better health, but supplements have not been proven to be helpful.

Green tea and the açai berry also have been suggested helpful in weight loss. However, the Center for Science in the Public Interest in Washington, D.C. said, “There is no evidence what-so-ever to suggest that açai pills will help shed pounds, flatten tummies, cleanse colons, enhance sexual desire, or perform any of the other commonly advertised functions.”

What is the bottom line? Many “natural” remedies may be effective in making small improvements in health, but they often do not work for everyone and typically produce less than the advertised result. As a general rule, eating the natural product is natural, but taking concentrated extracts is not natural at all (think almonds vs. cyanide pills)! In fact little is known about possible side effects of “more,” which certainly does not guarantee “better.” Caveat emptor—user beware.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

Citation: The Medical Minute: Natural remedies for people with diabetes (2010, June 2) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2010-06-medical-minute-natural-remedies-people.html>

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