Hey Alice,

Is there any danger to taking ephedra (ma huang) for weight loss?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It's smart of you to ask, since there's been considerable controversy over the safety and use of ephedra. In fact, there's been enough reported cases of harmful side-effects and even deaths associated with ephedra that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) decided to prohibit the sale of ephedra in the United States in 2004. When the substance was re-evaluated in 2007, the FDA chose to continue the ban.

Ephedrine, also known by its traditional Chinese name, ma huang, is an extract of the desert shrub, Ephedra sinica. Originally ephedrine was used to relieve asthma symptoms, which it accomplished through dilating the bronchioles that supply the lungs with oxygen. But in the late nineties ephedrine gained popularity for its stimulant properties, raising blood pressure and heart rate, and stimulating thermogenesis, or heat production, actions similar to those produced by other stimulant drugs like amphetamines. Because of its heat-producing, calorie-burning, and appetite-suppressing qualities, ephedrine became a popular fat-burning supplement. Prior to 2004, the drug was available in scores of nutritional supplements, energizers, and dietary teas, as well as in herbal ecstasy, which was the impetus for its controversy.

However, on April 12, 2004, the FDA made any products containing ephedrine illegal for over-the-counter sales after it "...received an increasing number of reports of adverse reactions. These reported reactions vary from the milder adverse effects known to be associated with sympathomimetic stimulants (e.g., nervousness, dizziness, tremor, alterations in blood pressure, headache, gastrointestinal distress, etc.) to chest pain, myocardial infarction (heart attack), hepatitis, stroke, seizures, psychosis, and death." Some 32 deaths were attributed to this drug.
In fact, many diet drugs are found to be unsafe, and are often taken off the market once their brief stint of popularity has proved harmful. If you're interested in weight management or loss, try the following exercise and nutrition recommendations:

- Eat breakfast — this jump starts your metabolism for the day.
- Experiment with eating five to six small meals instead of three large meals a day to help keep metabolism high.
- Participate in regular aerobic exercise, which helps to reduce stored fat. This activity also allows your body to continue to expend calories at a high rate for a short amount of time after exercise.
- Participate in a weight lifting program to build more lean muscle mass since this will increase your basal metabolic rate (BMR), thereby expending calories even when you are not exercising.
- You can also make an appointment with a health care provider or a registered dietitian if you're wondering what a healthy weight is for you [2], or if you want guidance in planning a diet or exercise plan.

Thanks for asking, and take care!

Alice!

Related questions

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Resources

Medical Services (Morningside) [11]
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Published date:
May 21, 1998
Last reviewed on:
Jun 17, 2015
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