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Weight loss products containing hydroxy citric acid — Safe? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I have just received an envelope containing advertising for a weight-loss product containing hydroxy citric acid. The scary part is the huge amounts of weight loss in a short period of time — 7-11 pounds a week. Obviously, this is not all fat. What can you tell me about using H.C.A.?

— Skeptical

Answer

Dear Skeptical,

“Weight to go” for questioning these claims, especially as they seem “too good to be true.” Hydroxy citric acid (HCA), a modified form of citric acid, is commonly used as a “fat burner” in many weight loss supplements. It’s derived from the *Garcinia cambogia* (*G. cambogia*), a fruit-bearing tree found Asia, Africa, and the Polynesian islands. HCA is believed to inhibit lipogenesis (the metabolism formation of fat) by preventing the enzyme responsible for transforming carbohydrates into fat. However, the research on the effectiveness of HCA has primarily focused on animals, and indicates conflicting results, as well as side effects of using HCA (more on this later on). Also, it’s imperative to note that there isn’t enough research to determine HCA is safe for humans to use — especially in the long-term. Thus, seeking medical advice prior to trying HCA will help determine safe and appropriate use for those interested.

So, what is there to know about how HCA works? In studies with rats, HCA has been found to suppress the appetite by increasing serotonin levels, thereby reducing weight gain. Alternately, in studies with humans, HCA's weight loss effects appear to be minimal. Additionally, side effects from using of *G. cambogia* and HCA can include headaches, nausea, upper respiratory tract symptoms, and gastrointestinal issues. Less frequently, more severe effects may arise and result in such as liver toxicity [2]. Since all clinical trials testing the safety of HCA and *G. cambogia* have been short-term, its long-term safety (especially after twelve weeks) is unknown. It's also worth noting that even manufacturers of HCA supplements suggest they be used in conjunction with a healthy diet and regular physical activity in order to be impactful.

If you or someone you know are interested in losing weight, there are other safe, fun, and effective alternatives to consider. Incorporating a balanced and nutritious diet with some kind of physical activity is often the most recommended strategy — though significant change doesn't happen overnight or even in a single week. Since this can sometimes seem like a daunting task, it might be easier to team up with friends to cook healthy dinners and explore new restaurants. And there's no need to slog through a gym session if that's not what interests you. There are many ways to stay active, including hiking [3], dancing, yoga, swimming, and running [4]! Additionally, you may choose to speak with a health care provider or a registered dietitian to develop a personalized weight loss or meal plan. For more on healthy weight loss and maintenance, check out the related questions and the Go Ask Alice! Nutrition and Physical Activity [5] archives.

Cheers to taking the highway to health!

Alice!

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