

Over-the-counter (OTC) weight-loss pills: What you need to know

A number of weight-loss pills are available at your local drugstore, supermarket or health food store. Even more options are available online. Most haven't been proved effective, and some may be downright dangerous.

How can companies sell potentially unsafe products? Dietary supplements and weight-loss aids aren't subject to the same rigorous standards as are prescription drugs. Thus, they can be sold with limited proof of effectiveness or safety. Once a product is on the market, however, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) monitors its safety and can take action to ban or recall dangerous products.

For this reason, it's important to do your homework if you're thinking about trying weight-loss pills. Read labels and talk with your doctor or pharmacist. Also check the FDA Web site for alerts about safety concerns and product recalls. The table shows common weight-loss pills and what the research shows about their effectiveness and safety.

Product	Claim	Effectiveness	Safety
Alli — OTC version of prescription drug orlistat (Xenical)	Decreases absorption of dietary fat	Effective; weight-loss amounts typically less for OTC versus prescription	FDA investigating reports of liver injury
Bitter orange	Increases calories burned	Insufficient reliable evidence to rate	Possibly unsafe
Chitosan	Blocks absorption of dietary fat	Insufficient reliable evidence to rate	Possibly safe
Chromium	Increases calories burned, decreases appetite and builds muscle	Insufficient reliable evidence to rate	Likely safe
Conjugated linoleic acid (CLA)	Reduces body fat and builds muscle	Possibly effective	Possibly safe
Country mallow (heartleaf)	Decreases appetite and increases calories burned	Insufficient reliable evidence to rate	Likely unsafe and banned by FDA
Ephedra	Decreases appetite	Possibly effective	Likely unsafe and banned by FDA
Green tea extract	Increases calorie and fat metabolism and	Insufficient reliable evidence to rate	Possibly safe

decreases appetite

Guar gum	Blocks absorption of dietary fat and increases feeling of fullness	Possibly ineffective	Likely safe
Hoodia	Decreases appetite	Insufficient reliable evidence to rate	Insufficient information
