Dear Alice,

I've decided not to use Alli for weight loss because I already eat a relatively low fat diet. However, I'm looking for something else that might help such as hoodia. I've lost about 55 pounds since last August but need a bit of help at this point. Is hoodia safe to use?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Trying to find a trusty ally in your quest for a healthy weight can feel like an uphill battle. With so many products claiming to help you shed pounds, it can be good to be a bit cautious when eyeing the options. Some weight loss aids are classified as medications?like Alli?and are closely monitored by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). However, other aids like hoodia (made from the roots and stems of an African cactus-like plant) are classified as dietary supplements and are not as closely regulated. More specifically, hoodia is considered an herbal supplement, which is a type of dietary supplement that could contain one herb or a mix of different herbs. Unfortunately, many herbal supplements can have unknown ingredients, interact with other medications, and haven't always been researched extensively. When considering hoodia or any dietary, herbal, or ?natural? supplement, it's recommended that you chat with a health care provider before diving in.

Hoodia's claim to fame stems from its history among people living in the Kalahari Desert, who would consume hoodia plants to suppress hunger and thirst during long periods of hunting. However, at least one study has found that hoodia did not actually lead people to eat less or lose weight when compared to people who didn't consume any hoodia. In fact, the people who consumed it had several not-so-great side effects, including increased heart rate, blood pressure, and feelings of nausea. For more information on the story behind this supplement, check out All about hoodia.

You mention that you've already ruled out Alli, but for the curious, here's the 411: Unlike hoodia, Alli is an over-the-counter (OTC), lower dose form of the prescription drug Orlistat (prescription Orlistat is only for people with a body mass index (BMI) over 30). Because it's classified as a drug, Alli is under much more stringent safety regulations. Alli works by stopping the enzymes that break down fat. In turn, much of the fat you consume would pass through your body undigested. It is generally seen as safe when taken as directed, but it has been associated with a few rare cases of liver damage. Milder side effects, like gas,
abdominal discomfort, urgent bowel movements, anxiety, and headaches, have also been reported. The blocking of fat absorption also affects the body's ability to absorb beta-carotene, and other fat-soluble vitamins, such as A, D, E, and K, so taking a multivitamin may be in order.

Now that you’re armed with info about hoodia and Alli, you might be curious about other weight loss aids. Keeping a skeptical eye when choosing dietary supplements is a smart move as the risks of dietary supplements may outweigh the benefits. For example, a popular dietary supplement called ephedrine (or ma huang) was banned in the United States in 2004 after it was found to lead to heart attacks, stroke, and even death. Some supplements still on the market like bitter orange have been found to have similar stimulant effects. As you consider how to rev up your weight loss plan, you might consider some of these pointers:

- Don’t underestimate the old fashioned diet and exercise plan. It sounds like you’ve had some weight loss success already and are aware of maintaining a balanced diet, but another component to consider is to get that body up and moving.
- Try browsing the National Institutes of Health Time to Talk tips, which can help you figure out how to talk to your health care provider about using alternative or herbal supplements. It can help you figure out the right questions to ask to make sure an alternative therapy won’t interfere with any of your current medical conditions or medications. While talking with a health care provider is recommended for anyone thinking of adding a supplement or medication, this is especially a wise decision for pregnant or nursing women and children.
- Keep in mind that advertising can be misleading, especially on the internet. Studies have found that sometimes herbal supplements actually don’t contain the ingredients they claim to or can be contaminated with pesticides or other substances. Sticking with supplements that have been reviewed by safety organizations like the FDA can help you avoid falling into a false advertising trap. You can often spot these products if they include a disclaimer saying that, “These statements have not been evaluated by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease.”
- No matter what medication or supplement you’re taking, it is advised that you follow the recommended dosage and instructions on the label or from your health care provider may help you avoid any serious side effects or reactions.

Best of luck achieving your weight loss goals!

Alice!

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