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,

These claims are questionable at best. Here’s the scoop: HCA, short for hydroxy citric acid, is an ingredient found in many weight loss supplements. It’s derived primarily from the Garcinia cambogia plant. Citric acid is a substance involved in the metabolism of carbohydrates. HCA (a modified form of citric acid) is believed by some to inhibit the enzyme that allows carbohydrates to be stored as fat. It is suggested that, in the presence of HCA, excess carbohydrates would be expended instead of being stored as fat. A decrease in appetite is purported to be a side effect of this process, which further promotes weight loss. This certainly sounds good in theory. But... in 2009, a popular brand of dietary supplements for weight loss containing HCA as the main active ingredient was recalled after the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a safety warning. The FDA received 23 reports of liver problems among those who took them, as well as other problems such as seizures and cardiovascular problems, and one death occurred. Since then the makers of the brand have stopped using HCA in their formulas, but HCA remains the active ingredient in several weight loss supplements that are currently available.

Studies on the effectiveness of HCA in animals and humans indicate mixed results. A study using rats found that high daily doses of HCA led to testicular atrophy and other toxicities, while other studies using smaller doses of HCA have found no adverse effects in lab animals. In human trials, there are studies that have found HCA as an effective weight loss supplement, while other studies have found that HCA does not prevent fat storage or promote weight loss.

Although some websites claim HCA is safe, the truth is, we really don't know. Considering the 2009 recall of products containing HCA and the lack of information on long-term effects, is...
HCA worth the possible risks associated with it?

You may want to consider speaking with a health care provider to develop an effective weight loss plan. If you are a Columbia student on the Morningside campus, you can make an appointment with a health care provider and/or nutritionist by calling 212-854-2284 or logging on to Open Communicator [2]. If you are on the Medical Center campus, you can do the same by calling 212-305-3400 or logging on to the Student Health Service [3] web portal. You can also check out the Get Balanced! [4] and CU Move [5] initiatives, to help you reach your nutrition and physical activity goals.

Alice!

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