

Rating the Weight-Loss Supplements

They come with names like Fat Burners and Trim-Maxx Burners, but do over-the-counter diet aids work? Are they safe? It's hard to know what you are getting when you buy a diet aid because many list proprietary formulas that claim to promote weight loss. However, the ingredients listed in the accompanying chart appear in many over-the-counter diet aids. This chart notes what each ingredient is said to do, and it rates the strength of the scientific support for such claims. For each ingredient, the chart also lists any associated side effects or adverse interactions with medications.

A means the evidence is excellent.

B means the evidence is fair.

C means the evidence is weak.

D means that there is no scientific evidence that ingredient can help people lose weight.

Note that none of the products on the market is sufficiently effective to rate a grade of A or B.

Product (Other Names)	Claims	Weight-Loss Rating	Side Effects	Drug Interactions
Caffeine	Claimed to decrease appetite; raise metabolic rate.	D	As a stimulant, it can temporarily cause mild tremors, agitation, and insomnia.	Amplifies the effects of other stimulants.
Carnitine	Claimed to aid in fat metabolism and reduce hunger.	D		
Chromium picolinate	Claimed to reduce body fat; increase muscle mass; and boost the metabolic rate.	C	Irregular heartbeat; use for several weeks can cause iron deficiency or interfere with insulin activity.	

DHEA (dehydroepiandrosterone)	A naturally occurring hormone in the human body. It metabolizes fat and converts it into muscle. Since levels of the hormone decline throughout adulthood, proponents claim that supplements not only help in treating obesity, but slow the aging process.	D	It can produce acne, oily skin, fatigue, irritability, insomnia, and facial hair growth in women. It may promote cancer in people with a personal or family history of the disease.	
Garcinia cambogia (hydroxycitric acid, camboge, butta cambodia, tom rong, gambodia)	Said to prevent body from storing fat.	D	Diarrhea, possible abdominal pain and vomiting.	
Ginseng	Claimed to stimulate the metabolism and help reduce the body's response to stress.	D		
Green tea	Said to speed up the rate of calorie and fat burning.	C	Not clearly useful for weight loss, but useful as an antioxidant. It contains caffeine and can cause mild	Amplifies the effects of other stimulants.

			tremors, agitation, and insomnia.	
Guarana (Paullinia cupana, Brazilian cocoa, guarana bread)	Said to aid weight loss when used in conjunction with Ma-huang.	C	It contains caffeine and can cause mild tremors, agitation, and insomnia.	Amplifies the effects of other stimulants.
Guggul gum (didin, didthin, gugalipid)	Said to release endogenous thyroid hormone.	D		
Kelp (seaweed, iodine, bladderwrack, Fucus vesiculosus)	Said to help the body burn fat and suppress appetite.	D		
L-methionine	Said to reduce the appetites of overweight people, but not those of normal-weight individuals.	D		
Ma-huang (ephedra, desert herb, ephedrine)	Said to increase energy expenditure; aid weight loss when used with guarana.	C	This drug is potentially dangerous. It has been linked to 17 deaths from heart problems and to more than 500 incidents of serious adverse reactions. Ephedra derivatives are	As a stimulant, it amplifies the effects of other stimulants.

			also reported to produce acute hepatitis and other unexplained liver damage.	
St. John's wort	Improves mood.	C	Few if any side effects.	Can reduce effectiveness of indinavir, warfarin, and digoxin. Should not be taken with these drugs, nor with antidepressant medications.
Uva ursi (<i>Arctostaphylos uva-ursi</i> , bearberry)	A diuretic that is claimed to aid weight loss by increasing the volume of urine excreted.	D		

From the Harvard Health Publications Special Health Report, Weigh Less, Live Longer. Copyright 2001 by President and Fellows of Harvard College. All rights reserved.

