

Ottawa Journal by David Tilson MP ? Safely using health products for weight loss

Many of us are working hard to honour the New Year's resolutions we made last month.

One of the most common resolutions is weight loss. For most, weight loss is achieved through exercise and diet changes, such as healthier food choices and smaller portions. Here in Canada, some Canadians also use health products to assist with weight loss, including prescription drugs and natural health products (NHPs). Such products may offer benefits when taken properly and when part of a weight management program, while there are also dangers to our health if these products aren't used properly. However, by being aware of potential health risks, we can all make well-informed decisions to aid our weight management program and achieve our weight loss goals.

According to the Healthy Canadians website (<http://healthycanadians.gc.ca>), the number of Canadians who are overweight or obese has considerably increased over the last 25 years. The increase in number of overweight and obese Canadians has led to an increase in weight loss products. There is a range of prescription drugs developed for weight loss that are only available to Canadians whose weight concerns pose a medical risk to their health. Furthermore, these types of drugs are to be taken under the supervision of a health care practitioner and as part of a weight loss management plan, which also includes exercise and reduced caloric intake. Many types of NHPs to assist with weight loss have also emerged. Such products may be found over the counter at a variety of retail outlets (i.e. pharmacies, health food stores, grocery stores) and online. If used in appropriate situations, some of these products may be safe and helpful when used as part of a weight management program which includes reduced caloric intake and increased physical activity. Healthy Canadians reminds us there isn't a 'magic pill' to allow effortless weight loss and if you're considering the use of any health product for weight loss, you should be aware of the potential risks of using these products.

Due to the fact there is such a wide variety of weight loss products on the market, it is difficult to list the risks of every single product. Moreover, there are many factors that play into the risks associated with these products according to Healthy Canadians, which include the ingredients of the specific health product; whether the health product is used alone or in combination with other products for weight loss, prescription and non-prescription health products, as well as certain foods; and the age and health circumstances of the person using the product.

There are a variety of scenarios where the misuse of a weight loss product may pose serious health risks, such as ordering prescription drugs online that have not been prescribed for you by a health care practitioner who hasn't examined you; taking several different kinds of weight loss products together or taking weight-loss products in addition to other health products without discussing possible risks with your health care practitioner; purchasing weight loss products online from unreliable sources; using health products 'off-label' for weight loss unless this has been recommended by your health care practitioner; and assuming that a weight loss product is 'safe' because it is 'natural.' Another factor to consider is that some products make claims which don't have legitimate scientific evidence to support their claims.

In order to minimize your risk, Healthy Canadians suggests that you speak with your health care practitioner about any potential risks associated with any health product you're considering to use for weight loss. It's also important to tell that practitioner about all other health products you're currently taking, including prescription and over-the-counter drugs, as well as NHPs, including vitamins, minerals and other supplements. In addition, only take prescription drugs that have been prescribed for you by a health care practitioner who has examined you; avoid purchasing health products online from websites who refuse to provide you with a telephone number and street address and/or is prepared to provide you with a prescription based on answers to an online questionnaire; avoid using health products off-label for weight loss unless your health care practitioner has recommended it; avoid using multiple health products for your weight loss program unless your health care practitioner has recommended otherwise; and be wary of 'natural' claims in weight loss products. If you want to be certain that the health products you're taking have been evaluated by Health Canada for safe use, effectiveness, quality, and authorized for sale in Canada, examine the package to locate the Drug Identification Number (DIN), a Natural Product Number (NPN), or a Homeopathic Medicine Number (DIN-HM). Furthermore, if you experience an adverse reaction while taking any health product for weight loss, contact your health care practitioner immediately.

The more we know about health products for weight loss, we can make informed choices for safely losing weight to keep those New Year's resolutions. For more information on the safe use of health products for weight loss, visit <http://healthycanadians.gc.ca>

