

No magic pill
by Mike DeCinti

Listening to the news last week, I heard a very scary statistic. It's one that shouldn't come as a surprise to most people, but nonetheless, is still frightening and deals with a subject that seems to get a lot of press, but for some reason is mostly ignored. Being overweight.

By the year 2016 seven out of ten people will be overweight and four out of ten will be obese. Plus it is estimated that 85% of black women will be overweight. Those numbers are just mind-blowing. When you consider how much information is available to all of us, and how often this topic is discussed, why are the majority of Americans ignoring the fact that they are getting bigger and unhealthier every year?

Obviously, you can point to the facts that more people are eating unhealthy foods, as well as more of it, and getting less exercise as a reason for this alarming trend. Plus, the majority of people who need to lose weight don't want to put in the effort it takes to get healthy. They would rather wait around for the next "miracle" piece of exercise equipment or the next "wonder drug" that will do the work for them. Only to find out they never work, and often leave the person in the same condition, or worse, than they were before they started. And although this ongoing cycle is counter-productive, at times, it can also be dangerous. Especially when people start fooling around with diet pills.

The newest "buzzword" in America right now is Alli, which became the first FDA-approved diet pill available without a prescription, and is popping up all over. And despite its high price tag (\$50-\$60 for a 30 day supply), its very embarrassing and uncomfortable side effects, and its minimal potential benefits, it is flying off the shelves.

Basically, Alli is a fat-blocker and is the less potent version of the prescription drug Xenical (orlistat). The main ingredient binds with the digestive enzymes that would normally break down the fat you consume and prevents about 1/4 of that fat from digesting, allowing it to pass out of your body unabsorbed.

But since that fat is not digested, it has to go somewhere, which leads to the biggest problem people are finding with this drug. Alli users experience loose stools, more frequent stools that are hard to control, an urgent need to use the bathroom, and increased gas with oily discharge. These are referred to as "treatment effects" but are embarrassing and obviously affect a person's quality of life.

Plus, the pill doesn't know whether your fat intake is coming from fried chicken, healthy salmon (which contains healthy omega-3 fat) or a fat-soluble vitamin. It will block it all preventing those good fats from being absorbed by your body, possibly causing more harm than good.

The one positive thing I've heard about Alli is that the makers of this drug do not deny any of these facts, so users shouldn't be surprised. Surprisingly, they also stress the importance of eating a healthy diet and exercising regularly to maximize weight loss.

However, this is the area that most people who take these drugs choose to ignore. They feel the drug will do it all, but unfortunately it doesn't work that way.

But even though they do encourage their consumers to eat right and exercise, the other main complaint about Alli is that even if a proper diet and exercise program is followed, the added weight loss attributed to the diet pill is minimal. One study showed that dieters using Alli, and following a reduced-calorie diet and exercise plan only lost three more pounds over an entire year than those following the same plan who did not take the pill. At most you might only lose a few more ounces per week using Alli, and little research exists to show what happens when you stop taking the drug. Although experts believe that most people will re-gain the weight.

Healthy lifestyle changes are the key to long-term success at weight loss and improving your health. Most fitness and nutrition experts recommend staying away from quick fixes and other unsafe or questionable practices. When it comes to diet pills, they have always advised against them. Taking a pill doesn't teach you how to create a healthy lifestyle that you can live with long-term. But by making permanent changes to your diet and finding a fitness program that fits your lifestyle, you're likely to keep the weight off for good.

There is no magic pill or miracle product when it comes to weight loss, just good old common sense and a strong desire to live a healthier life for both you and your family.

As always, if you have any questions please consult your primary healthcare provider.

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