

## Herbal Weight Loss Supplements-Getting Ripped or Ripped Off?

Introduction Walk into any health food store and you might be slapped in the face with names like Inferno, Up Your Gas, and Ripped Fuel! These are the battle cries of various supplement companies vying for your hard earned dollars. And it's convincing. Who wouldn't want to incinerate a little extra fat or get gassed up and ripped like a chiseled Greek god? Over the past decade, America's battle of the bulge has spawned a multi-billion dollar dietary supplement industry. Browse through any muscle magazine these days and you can't help but get snagged on sharp names like Razor Ripped, Ripped to the Max, Ripped Force, Extreme Ripped Force, and Metacuts. Turn the page and the temperature rises as more hot products named Inferno, Thermicore, and Thermospeed entice you with glossy, colorful multi-page advertisements. But be careful, lest you find yourself in the burn unit getting stitches on scorched fingers! But the true herbal heavy hitters are the big budget powerhouse multilevel marketing firms. Distributors push products on everything from internet websites to online chat rooms and message boards to colorful shopping mall kiosks to windshield fliers. Most have their own ma huang/guarana blends which, in simple English, are merely high charged ephedrine/caffeine mixes.

**Herbal Uppers: Getting Ripped or Ripped Off?** The popularity of herbal supplements is soaring. With the public's growing distrust of the medical establishment, people are shying away from prescription and over the counter weight loss drugs, instead opting for the "natural, help yourself" approach. However, tip-toeing through a virtual herbal minefield can be confusing, if not downright intimidating without an earned doctorate in botany. Ruth Kava, Ph.D., R.D., the Director of Nutrition for the American Council on Science and Health cautions that people should not be so quick to jump on the herbal bandwagon. "Not only are tested pharmaceutical products potentially harmful, herbal mimics can do the same and are not tested." Consumers should understand that while pharmaceutical weight loss aids like Dexatrim might be no more effective than their herbal relatives, from a safety standpoint, at least you know the exact quantity of active ingredient per dose. Herbal remedies do not afford you this luxury, so the actual amount of active ingredients you receive could vary. Ma huang (also called ephedra, Chinese ephedra, or ephedrine) usually tops the ingredient list on most herbal weight loss products. The active chemical compounds found in this herb are called alkaloids, the most common of which is ephedrine. Alkaloids are amphetamine-like compounds that stimulate the cardiovascular and central nervous system. This is why taking ma huang elevates your heart rate and blood pressure, giving you that jolt of energy! While these effects probably pose no immediate danger to the apparently healthy population, people with existing medical conditions might be well advised to steer clear. Heart and stroke patients, those with high blood pressure, thyroid problems, diabetes, or any other health condition adversely affected by high blood pressure should seek their physician's advice before trying ma huang. With all the hype surrounding this herb, does it live up to its reputation as a fat stripper? According to Varro Tyler, Ph.D, Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Purdue University, "Ephedra might work a little for weight loss, but not as much as people think." It may mildly boost metabolism, but it could be the alkaloids' appetite suppressive effect that is really responsible for lost pounds. Either way, this is still desirable to most dieters and should not be discounted. People might be tempted to use herbal stimulants as a motivational tool for hitting the gym. But using ephedrine to get 'jacked up' for workouts can cause unpleasant side effects such as rapid heart rate, palpitations, nervousness, dizziness, and increased blood pressure, which could adversely affect performance and health.

**Herbal Blends** Herbs are often blended with other herbs, vitamins, minerals, amino acids, or any other nutrient du jour. The blends are sold under the guise that their combined fat burning potential is greater than each of the ingredients alone. Hydroxycut is a popular product marketed as a "highly effective fat burning supplement" that can "dramatically increase fat loss." It contains several herbs and nutrients, most notably ma huang and guarana. Guarana is an herbal source of caffeine which when combined with ephedra alkaloids, makes for a potent mix that can send you bouncing off the walls. Dayne Callum, a biochemist in Boston, Massachusetts said, "After a long sabbatical from the gym, I decided to take Hydroxycut as a way to jumpstart losing weight. I took it for one month and lost 10 lbs but had to stop because it made me too jittery. Then the next month, I lost about the same amount of weight but without the jitters." Dr. Tyler offered words of warning about herbal cocktails stating, "caffeine magnifies ephedrine's effects which can be dangerous for people with existing high blood pressure." This raises questions about the safety of herbal products. What's being done to protect consumers?

The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act In October of 1994, President Bill Clinton signed into law the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA). The law provides that, as long as a product is labeled a dietary supplement, it can be sold to consumers without proof of safety, efficacy, purity, or potency. The burden of proof is now on the Food and Drug Administration to prove that a supplement DOESN'T work or is harmful. If a product is found to be dangerous to the public welfare, it can be pulled from the market. Dr. Tyler refers to the law as a double-edged sword. "On one hand, it keeps products on the market, but on the other hand, it allows many companies to enter the market without exercising proper care and sensibility." Consumers' preference of herbal remedies over prescription drugs is understandable. Phen-Fen's association with heart valve damage and subsequent 1997 removal from the market sent shock waves through the public and served to reinforce distrust for the pharmaceutical industry. The scare gave rise to a more "natural" alternative called "Herbal Phen-Fen." The main ingredients in this product are ma huang and St. John's Wort. Promotional literature suggests that the combination will offer the same results as the prescription counterpart. However, the Food and Drug Administration counters these claims saying that the mix has not been proven effective for weight loss. Intense marketing has lulled the public into believing that "natural" equals "safe and effective." Unfortunately, this is not always the case. For example, other "natural" herbs like chaparral and comfrey (not used for weight loss) have been associated with liver damage. Under DSHEA, product potency is not guaranteed. Researchers at the University of Arkansas found considerable variation in the alkaloid content of nine commercially available supplements. The authors suggested that the active components found in different ephedra species can vary, leading to remarkable concentration differences among products. They warned that weakened labeling laws could contribute to toxicities associated with ma huang usage. After thousands of reports of adverse reactions related to ma huang, the Food and Drug Administration is proposing new labeling requirements that would recommend a total daily dose of 24 milligrams per day or less of ephedra alkaloids.

Supplement is the Operative Word The bottom line is that

until reliable research proves herbal stimulants safe and effective, you may want to consider other ways to lose weight. Be responsible and exercise caution. Watch out who's pushing pills. Because most personal trainers are not registered dietitians or pharmacologists, you should view their recommendation for such products with skepticism-are they selling the product on commission?Remember, herbal supplements are just that, supplements, not a substitute for reduced-calorie eating and regular exercise. So get out there, gas up, and incinerate those extra pounds the way nature intended, with healthy lifestyle habits. You'll look like a chiseled Greek god in no time!

### About the Author

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