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Herbal Remedies for Weight Loss

Natural Strategies

When it comes to losing weight, many have resorted to popping a pill and there are a number of untested substances that manufacturers falsely claim to lose weight. This may pose dangerous consequences for the unsuspecting public who can readily purchase harmful substances claiming to lose weight without getting proper advice from qualified and regulated practitioners such as medical herbalists and nutritionists (Corns & Metcalfe, 2002). Herbal medicines by themselves will not enable the body to lose weight. Herbalists prescribe remedies as part of a holistic approach and will recommend lifestyle and dietary changes that will be far more effective in weight loss than any herbal medicine alone. In some instances, prescribing a course of herbs will improve functions of certain organs that will assist in weight loss such as the liver, the kidneys and the circulation. Combined with proper advice about healthy eating and exercise regimes, weight loss in patients is far more effective and long-term than radical diets or taking herbs indiscriminately.

The following gives some information about some of the herbs that may be useful and some that have had much press attention and commercially marketed worldwide.

Herbal Formulas:

Commercial herbal formulas usually contain a combination of herbs that have desirable effects in weight loss such as increasing the metabolism (thermogenesis), water loss (diuretic effect), increased circulation, boosting energy, increasing bowel movement (laxative effect) and appetite suppression. Taking stimulants in general like caffeine or ephedra, boosting circulation by taking cayenne pepper or ginger can often achieve thermogenesis. However, ephedra is not available over the counter as it has potentially dangerous effects if taken without proper consultation from a registered herbalist. It is for this very reason that ephedra is not for sale OTC in the UK or the US so purchasing it online or from other non-regulated sources is potentially unsafe. Interestingly though, the main active ingredient in this herb (ephedrine) can be sold OTC and can be found in many of the pharmaceutical preparations such as nasal decongestants. Thermogenesis is often referred to as fat burning but herbs that generally stimulate body systems and improve circulation will undoubtedly burn fat in the course of energy release. It is upon this basis that many of the herbs that stimulate and increase metabolism are popular with dieters. The following describes some of the actions of the herbs often used either as single or combination preparations.

- **Natural metabolic stimulants**

Popular and common herbal stimulants include the ginsengs (Siberian and Korean), caffeine (found notably in coffee and tea but also present in some cocoa, chocolate and some fizzy drinks), ephedra and guarana. Some of these herbs can pose serious health risks in some individuals. This is particularly true of ephedra which is not available over the counter in any health food store in the UK. However, there are many unlicensed and unregulated products containing ephedra which can be obtained via the internet and must always be viewed with caution. Although an effective bronchodilator and particularly useful in cases such as asthma, ephedra should not be taken by anyone with conditions such as high blood pressure, heart disease or glaucoma (amongst many others) Side effects can include restlessness, insomnia and tremors. It can also induce high blood pressure in some cases. It is for this very reason that only qualified medical herbalists are licensed to dispense ephedra. Another popular herb is Guarana which is a stimulant made from the seeds of a vine found in Brazil and the jungles of the Amazon. It is popular because it has a flavour similar to chocolate and so it is used in many of their foods and drinks. The caffeine levels found in guarana are stronger than those in coffee or tea and it is therefore harnessed for its stimulating properties. Taken orally as an extract, guarana curbs the appetite and excites the nervous system. These qualities have led companies to include guarana in diet and weight-loss pills which help people keep energy levels up while not eating. Long-term effects or excessive consumption of any stimulant is not good for the body as it becomes increasingly reliant on it and does not encourage the body to make more efficient use of food or increase the metabolic rate through natural methods such as exercise.

Another popular herb is kelp (seaweed) which is a natural thyroid stimulant and this may boost the metabolic rate in sluggish systems. Effectively, this boosts the rate at which energy is released from food and reduces the body's desire to store unwanted food reserves.

Other notable stimulants include green tea, damiana and yerbe mate but proper advice should be sought before taking any herbs. Herbs can be extremely useful in any weight loss regime only with proper care and advice. They cannot exert their full effect by themselves with little change to poor diet and lifestyle choices.

- **Circulatory stimulants**

A good example is chilli (cayenne pepper or capsicum) which has the effect of increasing the heart rate encouraging sweating and increasing core body temperature. This has the effect of boosting energy release from food and therefore boosting the metabolic rate. Its other benefits include stimulating digestion, improving the immune system and increasing fat burning (thermogenesis). Another circulatory stimulant is ginger and again, in a similar manner increases body temperature. Both herbs have very little impact on weight loss being more effective in the whole process of aiding digestion. They are more likely to benefit the body by improving the delivery of nutrients to cells and make better use of food through an improved digestive function. In the long-term, this may prevent overeating and regulate body weight through proper use of food.

- **Herbal laxatives**

Many people who diet regularly, use and sometime misuse laxatives in the mistaken notion that this will prevent the body from gaining weight. What this does is to mistreat the body and to encourage the bowels to become heavily reliant on laxatives. This is one of the reasons why herbalists rarely prescribe herbal laxatives on any long-term basis preferring to use it sparingly in the first instance introducing dietary changes that train the lower gut to become more active and also in severe cases where it is absolutely necessary to get things moving. The build-up of toxins due to sluggish bowel movement can sometimes result in weight gain but the use of laxatives is never the answer to weight loss either in the short-term or long-term.

Herbal laxatives fall into 2 categories: those that provide bulk to the food eaten and therefore making it easier for the bowels to work properly and those that increase gut motility so that the transit of food is quicker. The former is the preferred favourite of herbalists, particularly in weight loss because it encourages patients to introduce fibre to their diet and to retrain their bowels into functioning more effectively. Good bulk laxatives are psyllium husks (can be sprinkled onto cereals or added to juices or smoothies) and flaxseeds (can be sprinkled onto cereals or added to salads). Flaxseeds have the added bonus of providing essential fatty acids as they are high in natural omega oils.

Common herbal laxatives of decreasing strength that stimulate bowel movements include senna, butternut, rhubarb, yellow dock and dandelion root.

- **Herbal diuretics**

Many of the commercial brands for dieting (prepared either as teas, pills or tinctures) invariably have one or more herbal diuretics. Water retention is a real problem for some but many do not realise that poor dietary habits have probably led to that situation in the first place. In the short-term, it can be of benefit to the very few who have genuine water retention problems. However, for the vast majority, diuretics have limited long-term value and only tricks the body into thinking it has lost weight when all it has achieved is to shed a few pounds of water. Diuretics can be addictive and can deplete the body of important nutrients and electrolytes such as sodium and potassium. In a strange paradoxical way, the best way to remedy the problem of water retention is to drink plenty of purified water as this will flush out the toxins that cause the retention of water in the first place. A lack of water causes the body to retain as much water as possible in as much as crash dieting and not eating very much in order to lose weight will trigger the body to go into 'starvation mode'. Therefore fat is retained much more as the body responds to a lack of food and prepares itself for a lengthy stint of starvation by holding onto its energy reserves (fat stores). Water is an essential component of our diet and though not strictly classified as a nutrient, we are dependent on it for our survival. Water is essential to keep us hydrated and to ensure that all our body systems work efficiently. This will prevent toxic build up which is the cause of so many illnesses and poor health. Effective herbal diuretics include dandelion, nettle and celery amongst others.

- **Natural appetite suppressants**

Given the many health risks of conventional appetite suppressant discussed earlier, it is somewhat unsurprising therefore that the natural plant substance extracted from the plant *hoodia gordonii* and marketed simply as hoodia (in various formulations and preparations) has widespread appeal as a natural appetite suppressant and has had much press attention. Traditionally, this is used by the San tribe bushmen of the Kalahari desert who consume only the inner portion and drink the white latex to suppress hunger whenever out on their long hunting expeditions. Research has revealed that the active constituent in this plant responsible for appetite suppression is a substance labelled as P57 and so far only one company has the exclusive rights to develop and market this active ingredient. Given this, it is surprising how many commercial brands of hoodia extract are available and freely marketed. Nevertheless, the only clinical trial (results of which are yet to be published) shows promise and so far, there have been no reported adverse effects from taking this herbs. Other studies also show favourable results with subjects losing over 4 lbs in 2 weeks (Keville, 2006). However, it is important to buy the right product of reputable quality and whilst many of the brands are sold as whole plant preparations others have been found to have very little of the specific species of hoodia, being mixed with other varieties and worse still, synthetic ingredients which may pose health risks due to it being unregulated and unlicensed for sale. This is because it is notoriously difficult to grow and is now in great demand. Many of the commercial brands through unregulated outlets have not been properly tested for safety and can prove risky to health.

It is highly recommended that a consultation with a medical herbalist is sought prior to purchase or self-medication. Proper advice and information on individual herbal remedies and preparations is vital in order to prevent the health consequences of taking unlicensed and unregulated commercial products.

Conclusions

In order to tackle the obesity epidemic, it is important to firstly understand why this has arisen. Many argue as to the years of neglect in education about food, nutrition and cooking with the removal of the traditional home economics classes. This, combined with a lack of playing fields and curtailing physical education classes in favour of more sedentary pursuits such as computing classes has certainly contributed to the childhood obesity that we see today. The UK government has in part made some attempt at re-introducing cookery lessons in schools and lessons geared towards the importance of nutrition to health although this needs to be more widespread.

It is without doubt that food manufacturers and businesses who place profit above health has played a significant part in the quality of our diet. A leading American professor in paediatrics has argued that food manufacturing practices have created a 'toxic environment' that dooms children to being overweight (Lustig, 2006). To some extent, this is also being addressed although it remains the responsibility of the discerning consumer to check labeling and ingredients being vigilant about their own intake of food as well as their children. Good quality food should not be expensive and it is reassuring to see the many campaigns for affordability especially for the many families who are forced to buy the less nutritious options in favour of whole foods owing to constraints in their

budget. The merits of organic foods have long been debated and this is only a small yet significant step in the campaign for better education on the quality of food and nutritional needs of individuals. Some of the possible contributory factors in obesity could include the following:

- years of neglect through poor education and poor understanding of nutrition and food preparation
- irresponsible regulation and laws governing food manufacturing
- poor rearing of animals used for meat production
- increased use of hormones and other synthetic chemicals in food manufacturing
- increased availability of convenience and processed foods
- poor food labelling,
- increased food productivity
- increased sedentary lifestyles
- increased availability of cheap foods
- increased outlets for fast foods
- limited activity choices and affordability of sporting activities for young people
- low priority of physical education & sporting activities in schools
- poor nutritional content of school dinners

The above list is by no means exhaustive but it does give some indication of how the situation of obesity in the population has become such a public health issue.

Modern life in Britain is extremely fast and furious. This leaves little time for relaxation let alone time to cook nutritious meals and spend time with family. Comparisons with other EU countries show that people in the UK work the longest hours than any other with the highest incidence of some of the major diseases affecting modern societies such as heart disease, diabetes, cancer, liver disease, mental illness and obesity (Mozaffarian *et al.*, 2007). Cross-cultural studies, particularly with our Mediterranean counterparts reveal this stark comparison the most (Giugliano & Esposito, 2008). We only have to look at Britain's alcohol consumption to have some idea of the 'binge culture' that exists in our society.

Despite the dismal outlook, much can be done to remedy the obesity crisis. The government has in part started to address the concerns about school dinners, cookery lessons, home economics and physical education. However, further funding is required to make this a truly coordinated, integrated approach at all levels from schools to parents, from policy-makers to food manufacturers and supermarkets in order to have long-term benefits for future generations. Interventions must be timely and effective. Much of the stubborn problems lie in changing attitudes towards food and addressing the general laziness that exists; we live in a culture of pill-popping and surgery as a first resort as opposed to a last resort. Many blame their 'glands' or their 'genes'. There is only really an extremely small percentage of the population that have a genuine and real metabolic or 'glandular' problem or even a genetic disorder that can be attributed to excessive weight gain. However, a very recent study in children has disputed this long held belief demonstrating that obesity is in fact inherited despite the obesogenic environment (Wardle *et al.*, 2008). Unsurprisingly, this has been

vigorously debated in the scientific community as well as in the public forum. Many criticise the study for not factoring in influences such as assortative mating and selection; that is, obese people are more likely to choose partners who are also obese and any offspring will inherit genes that will predispose them to being overweight or obese (Musani *et al.*, 2008). Other factors were also not included such as demographic changes and epigenetic effects. The findings will give unwanted support to those who make little effort in diet and exercise absolving themselves of any responsibility for their weight by blaming their genes.

Getting people to change dietary habits is fast becoming a huge challenge for nutritionists, dieticians and other health care practitioners involved in the concerted effort to reduce the incidence of obesity in the population. It is becoming clear that re-programming individuals and educating the public on food and nutrition is an absolute necessity. In cases of obesity, patients should be encouraged to also examine their relationship with food as it may be a coping strategy for long-repressed emotions such as anger, frustration, sadness and pain or perhaps a way of coping with a past traumatic event. An effective referral system involving counsellors and psychotherapists is a must when tackling obesity.

Examining our concept of body image is also vital given the extremes in our society; whilst obesity is on the increase, paradoxically, so too are conditions such as anorexia, bulimia and other eating disorders. More fundamental issues that govern body image must be examined and this may involve boycotting and showing a certain intolerance to the invasive, vacuous and superficial 'celebrity culture' which propagate and promulgate a distorted view of body image that often have a profound impact on young children. Measures to tackle obesity must start with children, our next generation. Obesity has a devastating and long-lasting impact not only on a physical level but also on a psychological and emotional level too, damaging individuals, their families, the society and the health of the nation. To effectively eradicate this problem requires much change from policy and legislation to adequate funding, education, information, practical help and support.

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***Ephedra sinica* (Ephedra or ma huang)**

Ephedra, also known as ma huang, is a strong stimulant and found in some popular weight loss supplements. Despite its widespread use in over-the-counter weight loss pills, there is no firm evidence that it promotes weight loss. Ephedra reduces appetite and stimulates fat metabolism, making it very effective as a weight-loss supplement. The active compound in Ephedra (*Ma Huang*) is ephedrine. Ephedrine increases the metabolic rate, so that your body burns fats and sugar more efficiently. By mobilizing stored fat and carbohydrate reserves, ephedrine reduces appetite.

However, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has received over 800 reports linking ephedra with dizziness, headaches, chest pain, psychosis, seizures and strokes. Previously banned by the FDA in some states and restricted for sale in the UK. This is because when ephedra is taken regularly in weight loss supplements, your body stays in an unnaturally high gear and there is risk for heart palpitations and heart attacks.

In the UK, the sale of ephedra is already restricted so products containing less than 1,800 milligrams can only be sold following a consultation with a herbal medicine practitioner.

Products containing higher doses of ephedra can only be sold in pharmacies.

***Yerbe Maté* (*Ilex paraguariensis*)**

Yerbe Maté is a tea derived from the South American holly tree (*Ilex paraguariensis*) with a long tradition of use in Native America. It has only recently been marketed commercially in the West as a stimulant, dietary supplement and as an aid to weight loss owing to its reputed property as an appetite suppressant. The dried leaves are brewed and taken as a daily stimulant to invigorate the mind and body as well as a promoter of optimum health.

Yerbe Maté possesses a plethora of health benefits from being a rich source of important nutrients to its effects on the immune system, cardiovascular system, nervous system and gut. It contains polyphenolic compounds that exert very powerful antioxidant properties thus conferring protection against disease and cancer. Its most popular use is as a stimulant in weight loss by promoting thermogenesis (generating heat through the breakdown of fat stores) and as an appetite suppressant. It is taken as a suitable alternative to coffee and ordinary tea, and like them, is a diuretic.

The most notable active constituent in Yerbe Maté is mateine, a xanthine compound of which caffeine is another. The effects of mateine are more desirable than any of the related compounds since it exhibits the best combination of xanthine properties without side effects. It is an effective bronchodilator and therefore very useful in asthma. It stimulates the CNS (central nervous system) without being addictive and induces better attributes of sleep. It also relaxes peripheral blood vessels being clinically beneficial in reducing blood pressure.

As an alternative to coffee, Yerbe Maté is the preferred choice since observational studies show that it produces similar, if not, better clinical effects without the undesirable side effects that accompany most natural stimulants. Limited clinical trials have been conducted on this herb, and therefore its effectiveness is unclear but there has been much interest shown in North America in the last decade since its commercial marketing. Exceeding recommended doses can increase the risk of oesophageal cancer due to the high binding capacity of the tannins and polyphenols in the tea.

***Hoodia gordonii* (Asclepiadaceae family)**

Hoodia gordonii has been used by the South African San tribe for thousands of years. The San used *Hoodia* when they went on hunting expeditions. *Hoodia* helped to prolong their hunting trips by suppressing hunger, and increasing their energy levels.

There are various species of *Hoodia* but the *gordonii* variation is the only one that contains the natural appetite suppressant. *Hoodia* pills kills the appetite and attacks obesity, is organic with no synthetic or artificial appetite control agents and has no side effects. Researchers have identified the active ingredient as P57, which suppresses the appetite. P57 is currently being considered for marketing as a commercial slimming pill.

Hoodia is a natural substance that literally takes your appetite away. Aside from using it to stop hunger, it provides unperturbed energy and combats stress. The San also use it to treat diabetes and hypertension. It's even said to cure hangovers and upset stomachs too.

Some manufacturers claim that when *Hoodia* is combined with a healthy eating plan and exercise, it can help to bring about tremendous changes in body fat, and can greatly improve a person's health.

Double blind clinical trials have not yet been completed with *Hoodia*. Even those interested in trying *Hoodia* without waiting for clinical trials to be completed may have difficulties, since Phytopharm[®], the only licensed producer of *Hoodia* as a weight loss aid, does not yet market the product. Any other brands need to be viewed with caution since the relative scarcity of *Hoodia* means that the ingredient is hard for manufacturers to acquire. It is therefore hard to imagine how dozens of firms now claim to sell weight loss supplements containing *Hoodia*. There is as yet no conclusive evidence that *Hoodia* is a safe and effective appetite suppressant.