

# Think supplements are gonna make you lose weight? Fat chance

By ACSH Staff — January 5, 2015



It should come as no surprise to our Dispatch readers that we have

a real problem with the ever-changing, bogus world of dietary supplements. Although these allegedly non-medicines make cleverly disguised non-claims about utility for just about every human malady real or imagined the most popular of these useless products are for weight loss.

People *love* their supplements (although not as much as the companies selling them). They are perceived as non-drugs, which, since they are natural can do no harm, can only help. Although all of this is dead wrong, the \$30 billion supplement industry is unlikely to be especially upset about the misinformation and ignorance flying around.

And the amount of misinformation is evident [from a new Consumer Reports poll](#) <sup>[1]</sup> that quantifies the extent of how bad it really is.

The answer: Pretty bad. Of the 3,000 people asked whether there were magic pills that will make you lose weight without any change in diet or physical activity, 20 percent of the respondents said yes.

In the Consumer Reports news release, Dr. Pieter Cohen of Harvard Medical School someone we have quoted in the past about supplements said "The barrage of advertising leads us to think there's a magic way to melt away 10 pounds even when we have no evidence that supplements work. The labels on weight loss supplements look like those on over-the-counter medications, and the supplement facts are organized like nutrition facts labels. There's no way for consumers to tell the difference."

This is no accident, says ACSH's Dr. Josh Bloom, who has written frequently about the fraudulent supplements industry. The whole scummy business is based on a scummy 1994 law that was pushed through Congress by Sen. Orrin Hatch (R, UT). The law, ironically named the Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act, allows supplements to be treated as foods, thus allowing them to escape the aegis of the FDA. In fact, supplements are unregulated drugs that are allowed to bypass the FDA approval process leaving the agency with only the power to recall supplements *after*

harm has been done.

Dr. Cohen amplifies this point: [The] scientific-looking labeling gives you the sense the products are being scrutinized by the FDA. "

To which Dr. Bloom says, Supplements are the poster children for the anti-science movement in this country. This type of mindset encourages, directly or indirectly, people to do other stupid things, like giving their kids immune booster supplements rather than vaccines, or drives imbeciles to buy homeopathic remedies (better known as water) to treat their strep throat or cancer rather than an actual drug that might work.

Although far from the only huckster pushing magic pills, our old friend Dr. Oz is probably the highest profile salesman of (non) weight loss supplements. This remains true despite the fact that he was [turned into cat food](#) [2] in a hearing chaired by Sen. Claire McCaskill (D, MO) in June 2014, and last month was found to give evidence-based advice on his show a whopping 46 percent of the time slightly less than would be expected from an amoeba, as Dr. Bloom noted in his rather unflattering [Science 2.0 piece](#) [3] entitled Dr. Ozvorkian and the Amoebas.

So, supplements for weight loss are ineffective, but are they at least safe? The answer is maybe, or maybe not, depending on which one you take and whether the label is indicative of what's really in the bottle.

According to the report, about half of the people who tried weight-loss supplements said they also developed symptoms such as rapid heart rate, jitteriness, gastrointestinal problems, or dry mouth. Dr Cohen elaborates, "of all dietary supplements, the ones for weight loss seem to cause the most harm -- sometimes liver failure and even death."

So, what does one do? Throwing your supplements into Mt. Kilauea an active volcano in Hawaii is probably a good idea, but if you are not prepared to go that far, the FDA just issued a [consumer alert](#) [4] entitled Beware of Products Promising Miracle Weight Loss. We strongly suggest that you read it.

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**Links**

[1] [http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/news/fullstory\\_150198.html](http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/news/fullstory_150198.html)

[2]

[http://www.slate.com/blogs/weigel/2014/06/17/sen\\_claire\\_mccaskill\\_dissects\\_dr\\_oz\\_for\\_weight\\_loss\\_scams.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/weigel/2014/06/17/sen_claire_mccaskill_dissects_dr_oz_for_weight_loss_scams.html)

[3] [http://www.science20.com/pfired\\_but\\_still\\_kicking/dr\\_ozvorkian\\_and\\_the\\_amoebas-151662](http://www.science20.com/pfired_but_still_kicking/dr_ozvorkian_and_the_amoebas-151662)

[4]

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