



Fake slimming pills web sales warning

Beware of buying fake slimming pills over the net when you want to shed the extra pounds piled on over Christmas, warns Judy Hobson

THE UNSCRUPULOUS people offering you a quick fix for your weight problem are not interested in helping you to get rid of the extra pounds of fat from your body, but have their eyes firmly fixed on removing the pounds from your bank account.

Between 2013 and 2014, the government's health watchdog, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), seized 425,663 fake or unlicensed slimming pills, and between 2015 and October 2016 it had seized 544,689 and was still counting.

It has also closed down more than 5000 websites operating illegally and removed 320 videos from YouTube which

criminals are also starting to use to sell their illegal wares.

Selling dodgy diet pills and unlicensed medicines via the internet is a lucrative business. In a crackdown on the illegal trade co-ordinated by Interpol and

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Marg Oaten of eating disorder support service SEED

involving 115 countries last summer, £15.8m-worth of counterfeit and unlicensed medicines and devices were seized in the UK alone. The haul, the biggest recorded so far in this country, included huge quantities of harmful

slimming pills that can cause heart attacks, strokes and even death.

According to Alastair Jeffrey, head of enforcement at the MHRA, the haul was almost twice the size of that seized the previous year, illustrating that the internet sale of these fake pills and products is on the increase.

Sometimes sites use celebrity images, without permission, to endorse dodgy slimming pills, as Laura Hamilton, the host of Channel Four's *A Place In The Sun*, discovered to her disgust.

She says: “The people who do this are ruthless con-artists. They used my image without telling me and made it look as if I was endorsing their product. I've worked hard and followed a strict diet to get into

shape. These kinds of pills can be deadly and I would never endorse them.”

The attraction of fake slimming pills offered on the internet seems to be their promise of providing a shortcut to getting slim. At best their ingredients are useless. At worst they can make you seriously ill.

One of the nastiest is a highly toxic chemical called dinitrophenol (DNP) that is known to damage the heart as well as the nervous system. During the First World War it was used to make explosives. To would-be slimmers, it is described as ‘a fat burner’.

“DNP is an industrial chemical unfit for human consumption. It has led to several deaths, but continues to be sold in powders and capsules over the net as a fat burner”

Gavan Wafer of the National Food Crime Unit

Indeed, DNP does accelerate the body's metabolism rate but to a dangerous level. In 2015, 21-year-old Eloise Parry, a student from Shrewsbury, died after taking pills containing DNP. The inquest into her death heard how Eloise's metabolism went into overdrive and she burnt up from the inside.

A few weeks later, another young woman, Rachel Cook, 25, from Worthing died from heart failure as a result of taking pills containing DNP. Tragically, Rachel thought she had eaten too much at a birthday dinner and decided to go onto

the internet to buy some fast-acting slimming pills. Three days after taking them, she was dead.

Gavan Wafer, head of operations at the National Food Crime Unit, says: “DNP is an industrial chemical unfit for human consumption. It has led to several deaths, but continues to be sold in powders and capsules over the net as a fat burner.”

In the late Eighties a weight-loss drug called Sibutramine, also known as Reductil, was developed, but in 2010 because of its association with heart

attacks and strokes, it was withdrawn. Its other side-effects include headaches, dry mouth, constipation, insomnia, joint pain, nausea, nervousness and sinusitis.

Alarming, this banned drug has now resurfaced and is being found in pills sold over the net which claim to be ‘herbal’ or ‘all natural’ slimming aids.

Other illegal ingredients found in these fake slimming pills include the stimulant DMAA which can cause high blood pressure and cardiovascular problems; Ephedrine, a nasal congestion medication



Tips for safe weight loss

Nutritionist and food writer Fiona Hunter agrees there's no quick fix to weight loss. Here are her tips to help you shed weight safely:

- **Avoid crash diets, however tempting they seem.** Most people who lose weight on these end up not just regaining the weight they lost but putting on more as well
- **Don't skip meals.** It is important to eat regularly because this helps to balance your blood sugars and stops you from getting over-hungry. When you get over-hungry, you are much more likely to over-eat and make poor food choices
- **Drink plenty of water or low-calorific drinks** because it is easy to confuse thirst with hunger, so ensure you always stay well-hydrated
- **Take some exercise.** Your metabolic rate is related to the amount of muscle you have. Exercise helps to preserve your muscle mass
- **Forward-plan your meals.** Being organised about what you are going to eat in the week ahead is the key to success
- **When you're tempted to start nibbling in the late afternoon if you haven't had anything to eat since lunch, have a healthy snack ready such as a yoghurt, a couple of oatcakes or a banana**
- **Using smaller plates can help you eat less.**

whose side-effects include kidney failure and seizures; and Senna, a laxative that can cause colon damage, irregular heartbeat, muscle weakness and liver damage.

The agency is so concerned about the situation it has launched a FakeMeds awareness campaign (www.gov.uk/fakemeds) alerting people to the problem. The campaign website page shows them how to tell whether someone is really a legitimate online retailer of medicinal products.

Lynda Scammell, senior policy

manager of the MHRA's enforcement unit, says: "We're aware of a number of deaths from heart attack, stroke or liver damage in people who've taken fake or unlicensed slimming pills they've bought online, but because these are supplied outside the legitimate supply chain, it's impossible for us to gauge exactly how many people have died as a result of taking them."

And Lynda warns: "The sale of fake pills over the net is a growing problem. There are thousands and thousands of sites selling them. We need to educate the public and make them aware of the dangers they face when they buy pills off the net."

"Buying medicines, particularly from sites based outside Europe, is dangerous. Sites selling fake slimming pills are mainly located in the Far East, but this is a transnational crime and so the products may or may not come from the country hosting the website. Indeed, the product can come from one country, the money be paid to another and the site be based in yet another one."

"What is appealing about buying these pills online is that it's so easy. Girls and

women are tempted because they offer them a quick fix to losing weight, but they should remember that the people running these sites, and who are breaking the law, have no concern whatsoever for their health.

"Pills bought from unregulated sources won't have met standard requirements and will, therefore, pose a danger. They'll be untested so there won't be any clue as to what is in them or what they might do to you."

"If you've taken something you bought online and are concerned about the effect it's having on your health, see your doctor immediately and report it to us via our Yellow Card scheme."

Anyone who comes across a site that looks suspicious should report it to the MHRA by e-mail: (counterfeit@mhra.gsi.gov.uk), or contact the anti-counterfeiting hotline, tel: 020 3080 6701.

"And if you do buy online," says Lynda, "ensure you do so from a legitimate site that carries the logo found on our Fake Meds website."

Marg Oaten, from SEED, the eating disorder support service, points out:

For more advice, log on to: (www.nhs.uk/livewell/lose weight)

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"Many people are addicted to slimming pills and will source their addiction through any means possible. Although it is well-documented that buying pills off the internet can be a risk, that is of no consequence to the individual who seeks to be slimmer and evaluates themselves through their shape and body weight."

"For me, making it illegal to buy medication off the internet has to be the best way forward. However, in practice, this may be unrealistic, so increased awareness-raising is the key and we need to get the message out sooner rather than later before another life is taken."

Tony Neate, chief executive officer of Get Safe Online, says: "It's a real tragedy to see so many people becoming seriously ill or even losing their lives as a result of taking some of the diet and weight loss pills sold online. The internet is a great tool for buying things you want quickly but this can also be its curse, as people seeking hope access potentially harmful drugs without first taking the time to seek advice from a medical professional."

Lynda adds: "We're not in the business of scaring people. We simply want to make purchasing medicines a safer experience and to get people to understand there are no quick-fix solutions to losing weight. My advice is to stay away from self-medication where slimming pills are concerned. You're not the best person to decide what's right for you. Speak to your GP because he or she knows your medical history."

