

THE SKINNY ON DIET PILLS

Do over-the-counter weight-loss supplements really work? And are they safe? *OK!* gets the facts

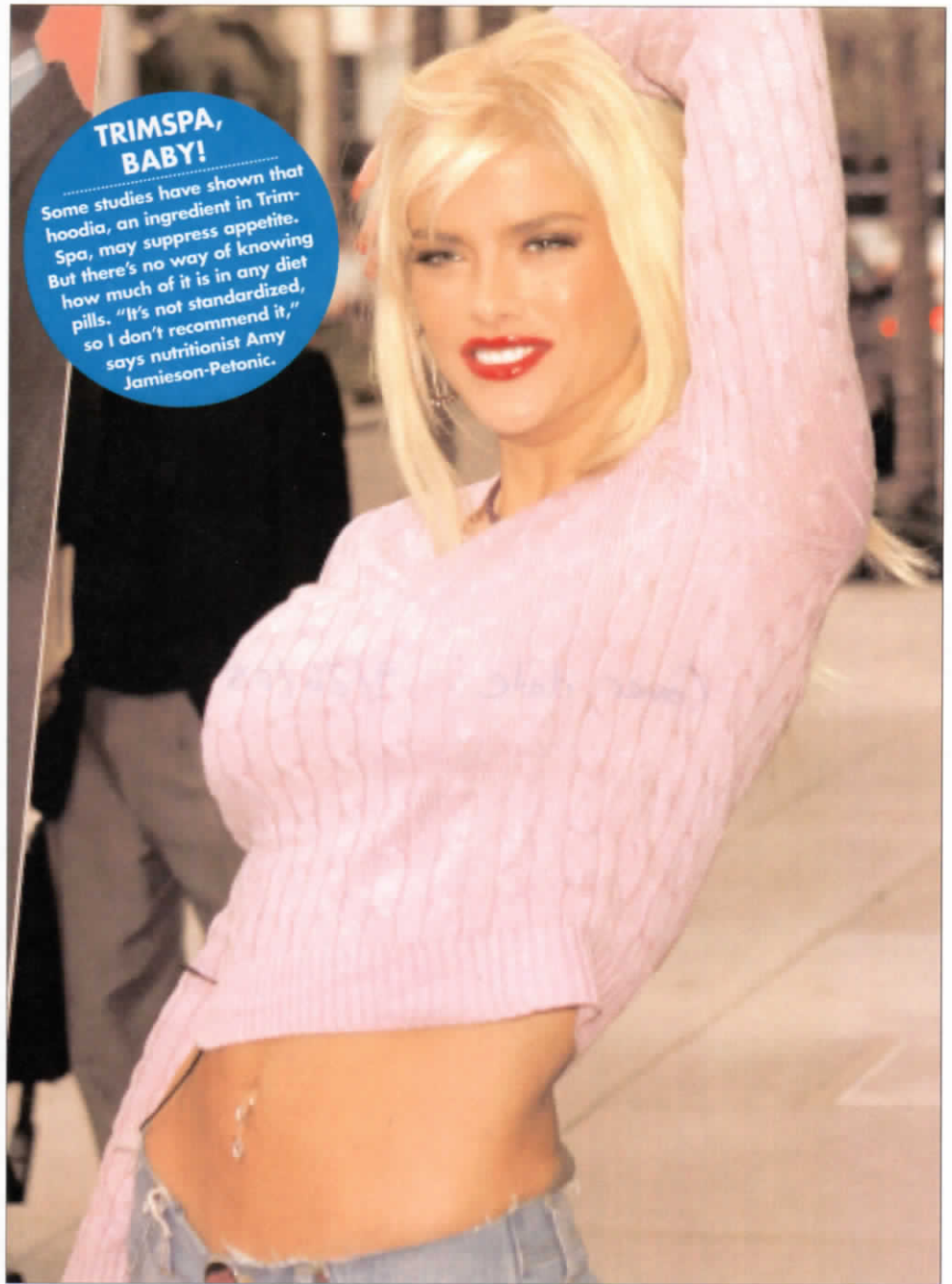
Let's face it: Losing weight is hard. It takes willpower to resist overeating, discipline to choose healthy foods and motivation to get your butt to the gym regularly. But wouldn't it be great if you could take a magic pill and miraculously get a body like Eva Longoria or Halle Berry? "I wish I had a penny for every weight-loss patient who has said, 'Just give me a pill, and I'll take it!'" says Amy Jamieson-Petonic, a Cleveland dietitian and spokesperson for the American Dietetic Association (ADA). Sadly, it's not that easy. But is there any truth to the enticing claims made by weight-loss pill manufacturers — or Anna Nicole Smith, the poster girl for the supplement TrimSpa? Can you safely use diet supplements or drugs to shed pounds? We asked the experts for the real skinny.



No quick fix here: Exercise and good genes seem to be the secret to Halle Berry's bod.

DANGERS OF DIET SUPPLEMENTS

"With over-the-counter diet pills, it is still a buyer-beware world," says Arizona dietitian Melinda Johnson, an ADA spokesperson. What many consumers don't know is that dietary supplements are not considered drugs — so they're not approved or closely monitored by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA). That means not only that a supplement's claims may be unfounded, but more importantly, that a sup-



TRIMSPA, BABY!
Some studies have shown that hoodia, an ingredient in TrimSpa, may suppress appetite. But there's no way of knowing how much of it is in any diet pills. "It's not standardized, so I don't recommend it," says nutritionist Amy Jamieson-Petonic.

TrimSpa spokesperson Anna Nicole Smith reportedly lost 69 pounds while using the diet pill along with a colon cleanser. But experts warn that TrimSpa and other diet aides can have some serious side effects. Talk to your doctor before taking any supplement.

plement may not have been tested for safety. "Manufacturers can market a dietary supplement without doing any rigorous testing on the product, so even if the product doesn't work, unless it's shown to cause harm, it can stay on the shelves," says Johnson. And in some cases, it

takes many reports of adverse effects before a supplement is removed from the market. For instance, it took multiple consumer deaths before diet pills containing ephedra (also called Ma huang) were officially banned from pharmacy shelves in 2004. "Anyone who takes weight-loss

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supplements is taking their chances," says Tara Gidus, a Florida dietician and spokesperson for the ADA. "Since most diet pills contain some kind of stimulant, many of them can cause side effects such as nervousness, dizziness, rapid heart beat, raised blood pressure, seizures, nerve damage, stroke and heart attack."

MYSTERY INGREDIENTS

So what exactly do these over-the-counter diet pills contain? Most top-selling weight-loss supple-

ments have one or a combination of the following ingredients: caffeine derivatives (like the plant seed called guarana), the mineral chromium, green tea extract, conjugated linoleic acid (CLA) and hoodia (a plant grown in Africa). These ingredients are supposed to rev up metabolism and decrease body fat in one way or another, with the exception of hoodia (the active ingredient in TrimSpa), which is supposed to suppress appetite. "But the research out there for these substances is not great," says Jamieson-Petonic. "And most of the supplements say they should be used in con-



Model Carre Otis abused diet pills and battled eating disorders before getting healthy.

junction with a low-calorie diet and an exercise plan. You'd be better off using the 150 dollars a month you spend on that supplement to buy fresh fruits and vegetables and a gym membership — or a visit with a dietician." Still, for a person who is desperate to lose weight, it's tempting to believe in a miracle cure. "I can understand wanting to find something that will give you a jump-start or a boost," says Jamieson-Petonic. "But when it comes down to it, you lose weight by going to the gym and eating well."

DOCTOR APPROVED?

Dr. David C. Dodson, assistant clinical professor of medicine at Tufts School of Medicine and author of *The Diet Pill Guide*, has a slightly different perspective. He does think that weight loss requires healthy eating and exercise, but he also believes that prescription weight-loss drugs can work along with lifestyle changes, when used under a doctor's supervision. "I don't think much

of diet pills that are not prescription — they're not well-studied and they're not effective — but my patients have found success with certain prescription drugs," he says. In particular, he likes the drug phentermine (it sells under brand names Ionamin and Phentride). It suppresses the appetite center in the brain — the hypothalamus. It's FDA approved, but only for a three-month time frame because people become resistant to it after a few months. Dr. Dodson also prescribes orlistat (brand name Xenical), which blocks fat absorption. "But many patients don't like it because if you eat too much fat while taking it, you get diarrhea."

Also keep in mind that these drugs are not designed for someone who wants to lose five pounds. Candidates for these drugs usually need to have a body mass index (a measure of weight relative to height) of 30 or more. "I'm not prescribing these drugs so that someone can fit into a swimsuit. I'm doing this to prevent heart attacks and diabetes, which are linked to being overweight," says Dr. Dodson. "But we don't have a magic pill yet," he adds. "The problem with these drugs is keeping the

weight off once you stop taking them." And that's where our old friends diet and exercise come in. No matter how much we might try to do without them, we can't escape them. It may not be the fairy-tale ending you were hoping for, but with a little willpower, discipline and motivation, you can still live happily ever after. **OK!**

FEATURE BY RACHEL RABKIN

HEALTH BITE

GOOD NEWS ABOUT ALLERGIES

Having asthma, hay fever or other allergic conditions may lower your risk of developing a fatal form of brain cancer, says a new study in the journal *Cancer Research*. It seems that the variations in certain genes that make people prone to asthma and allergies are the same variations that may protect against the most common kind of brain cancer.

ASK RACHEL

Our health director answers your top questions



DEAR RACHEL I've started to get varicose veins on my legs. How can I prevent more from developing?

- Unfortunately, you can't prevent varicose veins entirely, but you can reduce your chances of developing them by improving blood circulation. Here, some tactics to try:
 - Exercise regularly. This helps get blood flowing in your legs.
 - Watch your weight. Excess pounds put unnecessary pressure on leg veins, making it harder for them to carry blood back to your heart and causing them to enlarge.
 - Avoid tight clothes around your waist or legs (like skin-tight jeans or spandex girdles). This restricts blood flow.
 - Don't stand for a long time or sit with your legs crossed for an extended period because this limits circulation. Instead, change your position frequently.
 - Put your feet up. Take a break every once in a while to elevate your legs above your heart to improve blood flow.

If you have a particularly large varicose vein, you may want to talk to your doctor about surgical removal options. If the vein becomes swollen, red or tender, see a doctor as soon as possible because this could mean that you have a blood clot or another serious problem.

DEAR RACHEL I've heard you need to be a certain age to get LASIK. Is that true?

- Not exactly. Doctors recommend that you wait to get LASIK until your vision stabilizes, which usually happens in your 20s. If you get LASIK done before your vision has stopped changing, you may need to get it done again. How do you know when your vision is stable? "If you have glasses or contacts that are a year old and you're still seeing well, then your vision has probably stabilized," says Dr. Robert Maloney, clinical professor of ophthalmology at UCLA and the *Extreme Makeover* LASIK surgeon. "If, however, you keep needing new prescriptions, then you should wait on the surgery."



When considering LASIK (which involves peeling back the outermost layer of the eye, reshaping the eye with a laser beam and replacing the outer layer), be sure to go to a trusted and experienced doctor — someone who has done at least 5,000 LASIK surgeries. He will determine whether you're a good candidate for the procedure. If you are, your vision should stay corrected. "LASIK doesn't wear off like a face-lift," says Dr. Maloney. "And almost half of people who get LASIK actually see better than they ever did with their glasses or contacts."

IF YOU HAVE A HEALTH OR FITNESS QUESTION, E-MAIL askrachel@ok-magazine.com OR WRITE TO: ASK RACHEL, OK! MAGAZINE, 475 5TH AVE., NEW YORK, NY 10017

These answers are not intended to substitute for individual professional care.

GREEN TEA TIME

The jury is still out on whether or not green tea (and green tea extract — an ingredient in many diet pills) can help burn calories and reduce body fat, but preliminary studies do show promise, says nutritionist Lyssie Lakatos, co-author of *Fire Up Your Metabolism*. But instead of buying an unregulated supplement, buy the real deal. Green tea also has disease-fighting antioxidants.



Lipton Green Tea with Honey \$2.49 at grocery stores nationwide

Zhena's Gypsy Tea Grand Green \$8.99 gypsytea.com

