

What to do about weight loss: *choosing drugs, diet or exercise*

• Experts agree a balance of the three is most healthy for weight control

By Aleta Walther
Special to *Healthy Living*

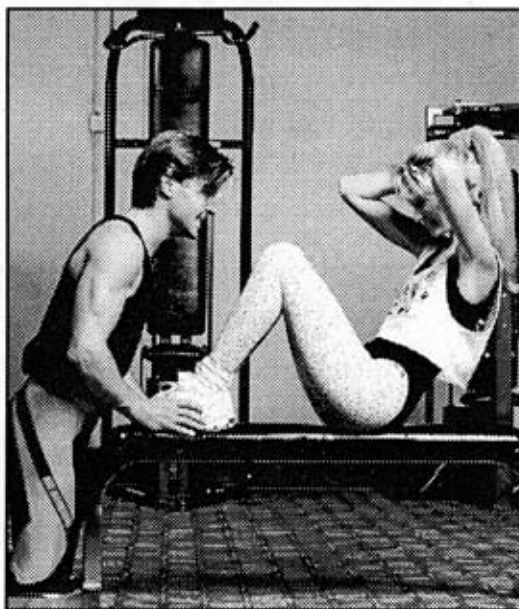
Depending on who you talk to, combining the drugs phentermine and fenfluramine was either the weight-loss discovery of the '90s, or a Pandora's box of potential side effects. While many weight-loss clinics, physicians and patients rallied in support of the weight-loss formula, other physicians and some clinical researchers voiced skepticism and concern over the long-term side effects of combining the drugs.

Millions of prescriptions for phentermine and fenfluramine — better known as fen-phen, were doled out last year before the Food and Drug Administration yanked its approval of fenfluramine in September.

Although the FDA deemed phentermine safe as an appetite suppressant, the FDA forced the manufacturer to pull fenfluramine off the market, citing concerns that the drug had been linked to heart problems. Although the FDA's concerns over fenfluramine were backed by some legitimate studies, many fen-phen users were distraught over having to find yet another way to control their weight.

Although there are still some alternative weight-loss drugs available, none are recommended for long-term use or are the answer to permanent weight loss in and by themselves.

So what is the best way to lose weight? That is determined by how much weight an individual wants to lose and the person's overall health, motivation and lifestyle. But whatever the weight loss plan or program, permanent weight loss is best achieved the old-fashioned way, through diet modification and regular exercise — more energy out than



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Co-owner, Medthin, Inc.

energy in.

According to information supplied by the American Academy of Family Physicians, weight-loss medicines, when combined with a reduced-calorie diet, can help obese people lose weight. Appetite-suppressing drugs such as phentermine or phenylpropranolamine may help control hunger.

"You must change the kinds of foods you eat and you must exercise," according to information supplied by the AAFP's web site (<http://home.aafp.org/patientinfo/loseweight.html>). "Weight-loss medications can help you lose weight, but to keep the weight off, you must eat a healthy low-calorie diet and exercise regularly. Weight-loss medicines can help

you get off to a good start, but once you stop taking them, the weight you lose may come back."

Corey Disler, co-owner of Medthin Inc., agrees whole-heartedly that medications can jump-start weight loss, but the real success behind permanent weight loss is behavior modification.

"If you take just the medication, there is a decent chance you will lose weight," said Disler. "The problem is the minute you get off the pills — and you can't stay on them forever — you are going to gain the weight back. You have to make moderate lifestyle changes."

Medthin is located in Laguna Hills and offers its clients programs that combine weight-loss medication with exercise using high-tech stationary bikes. Depending on an individual's need, Medthin's in-house physician may prescribe phentermine or Meridia. Meridia was just

approved by the FDA in November as an appetite suppressant.

"Our most successful program is our Phen-Ex program, which is short for phentermine and exercise," said Disler. "The phentermine helps control the appetite while the exercise burns calories and builds muscle. Our philosophy is that drugs can be very beneficial for jump-starting a weight-loss program, but they're not for long-term use. We get our clients off the drugs as quickly as possible. Our keys to long-term weight-loss success are caloric reduction and exercise."

Exercise and calorie reduction are also philosophies behind the weight loss and weight-management programs offered through Mission Hospital Regional Medical Center in Mission Viejo. The hospital offers three weight-loss programs through its Center for Sports and Wellness — two for adults and one for children between 8 and 12 years old.

"We don't use medications as part of our weight-loss programs," said Elizabeth Krok, a registered dietitian and supervisor for the center. "Our programs are not geared toward the woman who wants instant results to get into a size 8 dress for a

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spring wedding. Our programs are for those individuals who are concerned about their overall health.

The hospital's programs emphasize permanent behavior modification through calorie control and regular exercise. All programs are medically supervised and consist of weekly clinical and educational classes led by a registered dietitian, exercise physiologist or behavior therapist.

Program participants also have access to the hospital's on-site gym. For truly obese individuals, the hospital offers its New Directions Program. New Directions is designed for adults who are at least 50 percent over their ideal weight for their height.

"All prospective patients for our New Directions Program must undergo a thorough medical screening to determine the appropriateness of the program for them and the safety of their participation," Krok added. "We do all of this because the long-term control of obesity and its complications depends on a patient's ability to continue practicing

lifestyle changes established in the program."

Individuals accepted in the New Directions Program typically stay in the program for six months to a year, and in some cases longer. It involves three phases: the reducing phase, adapting phase and sustaining phase. The reducing phase consists of a liquid diet, the adapting phase moves the patient back on to solid foods, and the sustaining phase is designed to assist the patient with maintaining his or her weight loss.

"Our programs emphasize lifestyle changes rather than dieting," Krok said.

Another alternative for weight control is to combine natural weight-loss products with a sensible diet and exercise program. Health food stores across Orange County offer a variety of products. The GNC

store in Laguna Niguel offers three types of weight-loss products: herbal-based, vitamin and amino acid-based and a combination product that offers herbs, vitamins and amino acids.

"We encourage people to consider natural alternatives for weight control," said Mohammad Camdar, owner of the Laguna Niguel GNC. "But, we also stress that for the best results, people should use these products as part of an overall weight-loss program that includes exercise and diet modification."

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