

HEALTH & WELLNESS

Do Patches Help Weight Loss?

By LAURA JOHANNES

Like the nicotine patch, but for dieters, slimming patches stick on the skin like a Band-Aid. Marketers say the patches reduce cravings and speed metabolism, helping you to lose weight. Some doctors say there's no proof the patches work, and in recent years the Federal Trade Commission has charged certain companies with false advertising.

ACHES & CLAIMS Slimming patches are being widely advertised on the Web and in some stores. The ingredients are typically a mixture of plants and natural ingredients, such as hoodia gordonii, a seaweed called fucus vesiculosus and guarana, a stimulant. The Slim Weight Patch, sold by Roduve Healthcare Solutions BV of the Netherlands, contains a blend of ground seaweed, guarana and nine other ingredients the company's website says will "control your hunger cravings and speed up your metabolism."

Some obesity experts are skeptical of the patches. "There is no evidence that it works. I think you are wasting your money," says Xavier Pi-Sunyer, director of the New York Obesity Nutrition Research Center at St. Luke's-Roosevelt Hospital Center in New York.

Roduve CEO Tim Thurlings says the patches likely do work in part by providing a psychological boost, and are best used while also being active and not overeating. "It's not a miracle cure. If you just sit on the couch, it's unlikely that it will help," he says.

Typically the patches are applied once a day, anywhere on the body that is clean, dry and hairless. Companies who sell the patches say the active ingredients are ab-

sorbed through the skin. Costs vary, but typically range from \$15 to \$40 for a month's supply. Some contain instructions for healthy eating; SCI Inc., of Kingwood, Texas, recommends drinking a glass of water before meals, increasing fiber intake and avoiding sugar.

Roduve and SCI say they haven't been contacted by the FTC. The FTC confirmed that neither company has been charged, but declined to comment on whether they have been contacted.

The patches being marketed haven't generally been tested in rigorous clinical trials. Roduve and some makers point to clinical trials of the patches' active ingredients that show taking the ingredients in pill form helps with weight loss.

For most of these ingredients, doctors and pharmacists say evidence is limited. Fucus vesiculosus, a seaweed also known as bladderwrack, gets a "C" grade as a diet aid from Natural Standard Research Collaboration, a Cambridge, Mass., scientist-owned group that evaluates natural therapies. The C grade denotes "unclear scientific evidence."

"There is weak evidence that it affects the thyroid [which helps regulate metabolism] but evidence is lacking for its use in weight loss," says Catherine Ulbricht, co-founder of Natural Standard and senior attending pharmacist at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Garcinia cambogia, one of Slim Weight Patch's ingredients, gets a somewhat better B

grade, which means there's good scientific evidence that it works. A Natural Standard report on Hydroxycitric acid, a main ingredient in Garcinia, found mixed results for weight loss, with some trials showing a benefit and others showing no improvement.

Another issue is that even if the ingredients do affect appetite and weight, there is no proof they are getting into the body via the patches, without well-designed clinical trials. "Just because a drug is effective when swallowed doesn't mean the drug is going to be effective when put on the skin," says Mark R. Prausnitz, director of the Center for Drug Design, Development and Delivery at Georgia Institute of Technology in Atlanta. To pass effectively through the skin, he adds, a substance must have a low molecular weight (which means it is very small) and must be oily. And once an ingredient is in the body, it may have a different effect when eaten compared with skin absorption, scientists say.

Roduve's Dr. Thurlings says the company grinds its ingredients fine enough so that they will be absorbed through the skin. He agrees that clinical trials are needed and says the company is planning them.

Since 2004, the FTC has filed at least 10 legal actions in federal courts alleging violation of federal truth-in-advertising laws by companies marketing diet patches as weight-loss aids. The law forbids unfair or deceptive advertising, says Mary Engle, the FTC's associate director for advertising practices.

Of the 10 cases, seven were settled and three were won by the FTC, she says. The cases resulted in hundreds of thousands of dollars of court-ordered judgments, much of which are earmarked to provide refunds to wronged consumers, Ms. Engle says. Companies were also ordered in each case to stop making false weight loss claims.



F. Martin Ramirez/The Wall Street Journal

SCI Inc.'s slimming patches