

The Myth of the Little Magic Pill

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I know you've heard of it...the little magic pill you can pop to help accelerate fat loss, speed up your metabolism, block carbohydrates from entering your blood stream and trick your mind into thinking that you already ate.

It's not sold on street corners like the illicit drugs of the urban ghetto though. No, this little pill is readily and legally available to all — even hawked in magazines that you find on popular retail shelves. It's promoted on television by health experts, celebrities and even some doctors. And your best friend's cousin's hairdresser even heard about it on Oprah last week. It's sold in bright-colored little boxes and marketed under various brand names. It comes in different forms — sometimes blended in a shake, crushed into a nutrition bar or soaked into a frozen meal, but at the end of the day one aspect of this little pill is consistent. It always represents a pipe dream.

The Pipe Dream Personified

The other day, I was e-chatting with one of my best girlfriends. It's hard to gauge moods through email, but I could tell by her responses that she was feeling down and definitely not having a good day. When I asked her what was on her mind, she responded with this note: "I'm just really frustrated because I HATE my size. I'm tired of being big, and I want to lose weight. But I want to eat whatever I want and I don't want to exercise. I'm so miserable."

Her note came off as being utterly absurd when I first read it, but I quickly realized that her musings represent the feelings of myriad women. It is the desire and expectation to get something for nothing that feeds our \$50 billion diet industry. Some people actually believe that the pills, shakes, bars and infomercial exercise products are going to give them a free ticket to "skinny-ness," but most of us know that these products won't really get the job done.

So why do we continue to buy them? Because the lure of the little magic pill is sometimes too much to resist. It promises that the pounds will be shed with little to no work on our part, and that is a concept that even the most level-headed of us wants to believe in. However, the fact of the matter remains that if there were a little magic pill, or anything else for that matter, that could safely ensure rapid and permanent weight loss, EVERYONE would be taking it and the average American woman would not wear a size 14 dress.

The Real World

Little magic pills aside, there is a surefire road to success when it comes to losing excess weight — weight training, aerobic activity and consistently good nutrition. Any one of these activities taken in isolation may have a moderate effect; the trifecta nearly guarantees the desired results. While this scientifically proven route isn't as sexy as sitting at home eating pizza and doing nothing while the pounds drop off, it is certainly more effective.

At the risk of making it seem as if dedication and consistency are the only routes to successful weight loss, let's acknowledge that there are exceptions to every rule. There is someone out there who lost weight without the commitment and without putting in the work. We all hate her, but she does exist. And while we're being up front and honest with ourselves, let's also agree that while it's not impossible for the little magic pill to work wonders, it is highly improbable. Fair enough?

Weight Training

Weight training or strength training refers to the use of equipment that allows variable resistance. This resistance can be in the form of "free weights" like barbells and dumbbells, machines that use cables or pulleys to help you lift the weight or exercises like pull-ups or dips that rely on your own body weight. If you're new to lifting weights, you should rely on a certified personal trainer to show you the ropes, but here are some general guidelines:

- Complete a minimum of 8 - 10 exercises each time
- Involve major muscle groups
- Lift weights a minimum of 2 times per week
- Do at least 1 set of 8 - 12 repetitions of each exercise
- Use a resistance level that results in near fatigue

Aerobic Activity

The American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) defines aerobic exercise as "any activity that uses large muscle groups, can be maintained continuously, and is rhythmic in nature." This is the kind of exercise that causes your heart and lungs to work harder than they normally work. It is also referred to as cardiovascular activity or "cardio" for short, and jogging, brisk walking, step classes and kickboxing are all great examples. Remember these tips:

- Do cardio 3-5 days per week
- Aim for 40 to 60 minutes of continuous aerobic activity
- Work at a moderate intensity: 60-80% of maximum heart rate (Use a heart rate monitor)

Consistently Good Nutrition

A healthy diet is an integral part of making your workout work for you. Choose a diet that is low in saturated fat and cholesterol and moderate in total fat intake. In addition:

- Eat foods high in fiber
- Reduce the number of calories in your diet that come from processed sugars
- Choose and prepare foods with less salt
- Drink the daily recommended amount of water: 8 to 10 cups (64 to 80 ounces) of water a day
- If you drink alcoholic beverages, drink them in moderation (no more than one drink per day)

The Plan

To lose weight, you don't need any expensive equipment or fancy diet plans. You just have to do a few simple things and do them consistently. It will require some effort, and you certainly won't lose the weight overnight, but if you follow these suggestions the weight loss will be much easier to sustain over time. So watch what you eat, weight train, do some type of aerobic activity and leave the little magic pills in Fairytale Land with Cinderella and her girls. Amber O'Neal is the owner of Café Physique, an Atlanta-based fitness and nutrition company specializing in personalized nutrition services, personal training, and private yoga & pilates instruction. Visit her online at www.cafephysique.com. Have questions? Submit your fitness & nutrition questions to AskAmber@CafePhysique.com