



SOUTH AFRICAN METABOLIC MEDICINE AND SURGERY SOCIETY

# Commercial products and programmes in obesity management

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## KEY MESSAGES FOR HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS

- The commercial weight loss industry is enormous. Clinicians should familiarise themselves with the commercial obesity management offerings in their vicinity. Criteria have been published to evaluate whether a commercial programme is safe and potentially successful.
- None of the weight loss products from the commercial industry that were studied in randomised control trials of more than 12 weeks' duration were shown to produce clinically meaningful weight loss.

## KEY MESSAGES FOR PEOPLE LIVING WITH OBESITY

- The commercial weight loss industry is flourishing and is often characterised by unrealistic advertising. Before adhering to a commercial programme or using a commercial weight loss product, people living with overweight or obesity should ensure that the approach is safe and potentially effective.
- People living with overweight or obesity should be cautious of weight loss programmes that: (i) promise weight loss without diet or exercise; (ii) promise weight loss while eating as much food as you want; (iii) promise reduction of weight from particular locations on the body; (iv) promise overly rapid loss; or (v) include before-and-after photos and personal endorsements that seem too good to be true.
- Many natural weight loss products are available without a prescription, but none of these have been proven to provide clinically meaningful weight loss in high-quality scientific studies.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. For adults living with overweight or obesity, some commercial programmes exist that should achieve mild-to-moderate weight loss over the short or medium term, and a mild reduction in glycated haemoglobin values over a short term in adults with type 2 diabetes compared with usual care or education.<sup>[1-3]</sup>
2. We do not recommend the use of over-the-counter commercial weight loss products for obesity management, owing to lack of evidence (Level 4, Grade D).<sup>[4]</sup>
3. We do not suggest that commercial weight loss programmes be used for improvement in blood pressure and lipid control in adults living with obesity (Level 4, Grade D).<sup>[5]</sup>

## Introduction

*An intensive study of medical frauds and fads made over a period of nearly twenty years has convinced me that in the whole realm of quackery there is no field that is more easily worked nor one that offers greater financial returns to the medical swindler than that devoted to the exploitation of 'cures' for obesity. (Arthur J Cramp, MD, 1929<sup>[6]</sup>)*

While healthcare providers cannot be expected to be familiar with all of the direct-to-consumer obesity management goods and services,

developing an awareness of what is readily available to their patients in their local geographical area is worthwhile. It is also worthwhile to gain some familiarity with some of today's more popular commercial weight loss initiatives.

Evidence for these various products and services, however, is at times scant and at other times challenging. Limitations of the research to date include a disproportionate representation of females compared with males in commercial weight management programme trials, imbalance in socioeconomic status representation, and lack of

reporting on risk factor measures for chronic disease prevention, such as blood pressure, lipids, quality of life, and glycated haemoglobin.

Evidence is perhaps most challenging when it comes to the evaluation of obesity management service provision. The efficacy of a service is in some part, if not the large part, dependent on the service providers' skills. Furthermore, with many commercial programmes the service being provided changes, and hence what might have been shown to be true for one iteration of a programme may not necessarily be applicable to future iterations.

People should be cautious of weight loss programmes that:

- Promise weight loss without diet or exercise
- Promise weight loss while eating as much food as you want
- Promise spot reduction of weight from particular locations
- Promise overly rapid loss (for example, losing 15 kilograms in 30 days), and/or
- Include before-and-after photos and personal endorsements that seem too good to be true.

## Commercial products

Perhaps the most widely available of the products and services purported to help with obesity management are weight loss supplements. These products are available in pharmacies and corner stores across the country. Although it is difficult to quantify the degree of morbidity supplements and adulterated supplements may confer, a 2015 study published in the *New England Journal of Medicine* reported that they are responsible for over 23 000 emergency room visits annually in the USA.<sup>[7]</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this guideline to review all the products available in South Africa.

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