

# HCG DIET and the FDA

If you have been fortunate enough to avoid the bombardment of ads for the latest diet craze, then the FDA has just issued a warning that should shine a spotlight and hopefully put a stop to this dangerous practice. Unfortunately, I don't think we are going to be so lucky. It usually takes a tragedy for us to come to our senses.

Many in the diet industry, including physicians, have been promoting a new diet called the HCG Diet. This diet is available in two versions. One is supervised by a licensed provider, such as a physician, and the other is not. Both versions restrict the user to a diet of 500 calories per day. In the supervised version, the user also gets regular injections of HCG. In the unsupervised version, the user can obtain HCG from a retail food store and take a few drops by mouth daily. The key difference is one offers HCG by mouth and the other, by injection. According to those who promote this diet, HCG is supposed to decrease appetite and force the body to burn unwanted fat.

HCG or Human Chorionic Gonadotropin Hormone is a hormone produced naturally by women during pregnancy. It is this hormone that indicates a woman is pregnant when she takes a pregnancy test. In fact, some of the commercially available HCG is extracted from the urine of pregnant women.

During pregnancy, HCG helps to simulate the production of another hormone, progesterone, which in turn helps to maintain pregnancy. As an approved medication, HCG is available only as an injection. It can be obtained by prescription for the treatment of infertility and a few other conditions. In women, it stimulates the release of eggs from the ovaries. In men, it stimulates the release of testosterone. This boost in testosterone production is the basis for its use by some athletes in sports and the reason for its ban by many sports organization. Of note, HCG is not approved to treat obesity and has not been shown to promote weight loss. In fact, the prescribing information for the product specifically states that it has not been demonstrated to be effective in the treatment of obesity. It also has not been shown to have any effect on appetite. Importantly, the version which is sold over-the-counter in retail stores has been deemed illegal by the FDA. The Food and Drug Administration or FDA is the government agency which must approve any drug in order for it to be legally sold in The United States. The over-the-counter products are not approved by the FDA. Additionally, it is hardly likely that when taken by mouth, HCG gets absorbed into the body to provide any benefit. Since HCG is a protein hormone much like insulin, it would be destroyed by acid and enzymes in the digestive tract.

So what then is the basis for the success claimed by people on HCG Diet and what are its risks. Well, the HCG diet is basically a starvation diet. An average adult requires about 2000 calories per day. If most people restricted their diet so severely they would lose weight. According to the FDA, all of the weight loss achieved by people on this diet can be attributed to this caloric restriction. The risk posed by just the caloric restriction is that the dieter may not get enough nutrients such as vitamin, minerals and protein for good health. According to experts, such severe calorie restriction can lead to electrolyte disturbances, irregular heart beat and increased risk of gallstones. In short, it can be dangerous. Such a diet also causes you to lose muscle tissue in addition to fat. Consequently, if the dieter has not made any

lifestyle modification, then after getting off this diet, he/she tends to gain all of the weight back and often more, with a higher percentage being fat.

The risk posed by HCG in these diets is difficult to evaluate. The version sold in retail food stores are labeled homeopathic. This suggests that they have very small amount of the active drug. Homeopathic products are not evaluated for safety and effectiveness by the FDA and by law cannot be promoted for the treatment of certain illnesses or conditions. It is on this ground that the FDA has issued warning to several manufactures of the homeopathic version of HCG. According to the FDA, HCG is not even an approved homeopathic product. Perhaps the greatest risk with this version of HCG is not knowing what you are putting into your body when you take these products.

HCG has risk even when the legally prescribed version is used. According to the manufacturers own data, HCG can increase the risk for blood clots, vaginal bleeding, ovarian cysts and breast enlargement in men.

The bottom line is HCG Diet is not a healthy way to lose weight. While extremely low calorie diets are sometimes deemed medically necessary, these should only be done under the supervision of a qualified practitioner. The addition of HCG, however, increases the risk of harm with no apparent weight-loss benefit. Healthy and sustainable weight loss is achieved through a long, slow process that should include lifestyle modification. This includes a balanced diet in appropriate portion and regular exercise.