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HOME EDITION

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FTC Assails Deception In Weight-Loss Ads

By SALLY SQUIRES
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Ads for billions of dollars of diet products and services sold each year often include false, misleading and exaggerated claims that promise rapid, effortless weight loss and unachievable goals, according to a government report released yesterday.

With nearly 70 million Americans trying to lose weight or to prevent weight gain at any given time, these rampant, deceptive claims not only waste money but also place some consumers at risk, according to the Federal Trade Commission report.

"We have known for some time now that there is a serious problem with weight-loss product advertising," said FTC Chairman Timothy J. Muris. "This report demonstrates the extent of that problem."

The FTC reviewed ads from a wide variety of weight-loss approaches, including well-known programs such as the Atkins Diet and those promoted by Jenny Craig, LA Weight Loss Centers, Metabolife, Richard Simmons and Weight Watchers, as well as those involving the relatively obscure Apple Cider Vinegar Capsules and Synadrene-HCL.

At least 40 percent of the 300 ads reviewed in the two-year study made at least one false representation, such as "can eat as much as you want and still lose weight," according to the report. More than half of the ads either made false statements or statements that were very likely to be false, including the suggestion that pounds could be shed without cutting calories and increasing physical activity, and the promise of a steady weight loss of eight to 10 pounds per week.

Other ads made unproven claims about safety and effectiveness, and still others purported that their products produced long-term permanent weight loss, when there was little to support that claim.

While the report included a list of the programs and products reviewed, it stopped short of specifying which weight-loss products or programs had been found to be engaging in false, deceptive or misleading advertising, saying that was beyond its scope.

"Government and industry share a responsibility to insure that accu-

rate and understandable information about weight-loss treatment is readily available to consumers," the FTC report concluded. "Success will come when the public is convinced that there is no magic bullet."

Reputable weight-loss companies continue to avoid false and misleading claims, Muris said, but "it appears that too many unscrupulous marketers are making false claims promising dramatic and effortless weight loss to sell their products." Moreover, since 1992, the number of false or misleading claims made in diet product ads "appears to have increased dramatically," the report stated.

In 2000, according to the FTC, Americans spent approximately \$35 billion on a wide variety of weight-loss products, including videos, audiotapes, books, medications, special diet foods, dietary supplements, medical treatments and other related goods and services. Six out of every 10 Americans, 18 years and older, are overweight or obese, putting them at increased risk for heart disease, diabetes and high blood pressure.

"As with cigarette smoking and alcohol abuse, false or deceptive advertising of weight-loss products and services puts people at risk," said George Blackburn, chairman of nutrition medicine at Harvard Medical School and a member of the Partnership for Healthy Weight Management, a coalition of scientists, federal agencies, commercial enterprises and nonprofit groups that helped the FTC conduct the study. "Many of the products and programs most heavily advertised are at best unproven and at worst unsafe," he said.

Since 1990, the FTC has filed 93 cases challenging false and misleading weight-loss claims involving over-the-counter drugs, dietary supplements, commercial weight-loss centers, weight-loss devices and exercise equipment.

The most recent was announced yesterday against a Canadian corporation operating in the United States as Bio Lab. The FTC said the company and its president, Jean-Francois Brochu, were charged on Sept. 3 in U.S. District Court with deceiving consumers through false advertising for their purported rapid weight-loss product, Quick Slim, and for the alleged anti-cellulite product, Cellu-Fight.

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- Sandra- Yorkshire, England
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