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OSU expert speaks out on starchblockers

Starchblockers, a new diet aid now on the market, may be hazardous to your health, according to a food safety expert at Oregon State University.

The problem with starchblockers, says Jane Wyatt, OSU food science specialist, is that their primary ingredient is raw kidney bean extract.

"We know there are some naturally occurring toxicants in raw legumes and kidney beans are one of the legume family of plants," she says.

"These toxicants may inhibit normal body metabolism for protein breakdown, and may also cause other harmful effects if concentrated in the body in significant amounts."

According to Wyatt, the FDA has now classified starchblockers as a drug because of the effect they are supposed to have on body metabolism. This classification requires the makers of starchblockers to test them for safety and effectiveness before they can be sold.

Wyatt's criticism of starchblockers doesn't stop there. Even if they are proven not harmful to human health, she says she doubts that users of these dieting pills would get any more out of them than a case of diarrhea.

"The kidney bean extract in starchblockers is supposed to act as an inhibitor on the enzyme amylase," Wyatt explains. "Amylase breaks down complex carbohydrates into glucose, which is sugar and a source of energy to the body."

When the human body takes in more carbohydrates than it uses, the excess is stored as fat in the body. The starchblockers are supposed to prevent this by preventing breakdown of carbohydrates into glucose. Therefore, users of these diet aids are supposed to be able to eat all the carbohydrates they want and still lose weight.

Contrary to what the makers of starchblockers claim, Wyatt says she isn't convinced that kidney bean extract is effective in inhibiting the amylase enzymes. She says she also doubts whether the extract would be absorbed across the intestinal tract to participate in the normal body process of the breakdown of carbohydrates.

"It seems unlikely to me that the starchblocking material could get where it would need to be in the body's digestive system to act in the carbohydrate breakdown process," Wyatt states.

Probably the protein extract from the kidney beans would be treated as a protein by the body, and the enzymes in the digestive tract would break the extract down like any other protein.

Assuming that starchblockers would work in inhibiting the activity of amylase, Wyatt says that an individual taking these pills and then loading up on carbohydrates would probably end with a severe case of diarrhea.

Wyatt adds that there have already been reports among starchblocker users of not only diarrhea, but also nausea, vomiting and stomach pain.

Dieters should approach starchblockers or any other similar type of dieting aid with caution," suggests Wyatt. "Generally speaking, there is no easy way to lose weight."

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