

HEALTH

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TCM

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Do or diet

Advertisements for slimming products are everywhere, and more consumers are turning to them for help in their battle with the bulge.

Some of these dietary supplements, or herbal drugs, contain the natural stimulant ephedra (*ma huang*). Last year, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) banned the uncontrolled sale of supplements containing ephedra because of reports that misuse had resulted in heart attacks, strokes, seizures, psychosis and even death.

According to the FDA, ephedra was involved in 155 deaths in the US, mostly due to cardiac problems and strokes.

Ephedrine is one of the active ingredients in ephedra. In western medicine, ephedrine was once widely used as a nasal decongestant and as a bronchodilator to treat asthma.

Because one of the side effects of ephedrine is stimulation of

the central nervous system, it's been misused by students, workers, professional athletes and weightlifters as a stimulant. As a result, it's been classified as a prohibited substance by the World Anti-Doping Agency.

The effect of ephedrine on the central nervous system is similar to that of amphetamines, so it's also considered to be a precursor to some illegal drugs.

Ephedra's modern use for weight loss isn't found in traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) literature such as the *Compendium of Materia Medica* – considered to be the most thorough works on the history of TCM.

TCM practitioners wouldn't prescribe ephedra or a formulation with ephedra for weight loss because that's not its traditional use.

Traditionally known as *ma huang* (below), ephedra is a common herb for treating respiratory diseases – and it has a long history in TCM. According

to the *Pharmacopoeia of People's Republic of China*, its actions include inducing perspiration for dispelling colds, relieving asthma and causing diuresis.

Indications for ephedra include: the common cold associated with a wind-cold syndrome; oedema or swelling in acute nephritis; and bronchial asthma. It's also an important ingredient in many formulas that treat infectious disease.

In TCM, some herbs are considered mild and can be taken on a regular basis, whereas others with stronger medicinal effects are generally prescribed for short periods during the course of illness. Ephedra comes under the latter category.

TCM practitioners generally wouldn't suggest long-term consumption of ephedra because of its strength and potential side effects when taken for longer than the course of an illness.

In TCM, ephedra still has its place in treating respiratory illnesses if prescribed properly by a trained practitioner.

Always advise the practitioner of any western medicine you may be taking, to minimise the risk of interactions.

Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or general practitioner.