"Natural" products... that contain dangerous drugs

Some aphrodisiac or slimming products conceal the fact that they contain potent drugs such as tadalafil or sildenafil (both of which are subject to compulsory medical prescription in the treatment of erectile dysfunction), or sibutramine (an appetite suppressant that has been banned in France for several years). Consumers are therefore unknowingly exposed to the sometimes very serious adverse effects of these compounds. They are therefore advised to avoid buying these products from parallel traders, through social media or on the Internet. Any unexpected side effects should be reported to the nutrivigilance scheme or a poison control centre in order to obtain medical advice and, if necessary, to conduct screening for drugs in any remaining tablets or capsules. This enables the health authorities to take the necessary measures and withdraw these very dangerous products from the market.

Recent alerts

Aphrodisiac honeys

In February 2021, a poison control centre notified ANSES of a new case of serious poisoning due to a "love honey", an aphrodisiac product called Black Horse Vital Honey, which, according to its leaflet, contains honey, ginseng, royal jelly and Eurycoma longifolia, a plant believed to have aphrodisiac properties. The evening before admission to the hospital emergency room, the patient had consumed a quantity of this product that was difficult to determine. In the morning, he was admitted to the intensive care unit for convulsions, cerebral oedema, and major respiratory and kidney failure.

A search of the poison control centres' database identified another case with the same product from December 2020. That time, the symptoms were benign. The patient, who had only taken a few drops, rapidly felt hot and thirsty, with a dry mouth. He had stayed at home and the symptoms had soon regressed.

Analyses of the product identified tadalafil at a concentration of 8 mg/ml. For comparison, medicines contain 5-20 mg per tablet. A consumer ingesting several millilitres of aphrodisiac honey in one go (one tablespoon contains about 10 ml or 80 mg of medicinal substances), therefore absorbs the equivalent of several tablets of this medicine, whereas the usual dosage is 10 mg, with a maximum of 20 mg.

In July 2021, the Directorate General for Competition Policy, Consumer Affairs and Fraud Control (DGCCRF) and the ANSM issued a joint press release alerting consumers to the danger of aphrodisiac honeys, in particular Jaguar Power and Black Horse Vital Honey, which have been withdrawn or recalled [2].

However, other cases were recorded by poison control centres after July 2021, sometimes in people who had consumed the product and reported problems after reading the alert. In others, consumption took place well after the alert was issued, indicating that the products were still available. For example, in October 2021, a 36-year-old man with no previous medical history experienced a permanent erection resulting in irreversible penile damage after taking Black Horse Vital Honey.

Lastly, in December 2021, a new aphrodisiac honey, Honey Palace Special Power, was found to have caused poisoning in several people. This honey had also been circulating in Belgium where it was withdrawn from the market due to the presence of sildenafil. The DGCCRF and the ANSM were alerted, to enable them to take the necessary measures for France.
The Inci slimming supplement

In January 2021, a woman experienced symptoms of fatigue, insomnia, vomiting, dry mouth, accelerated heart rate and chest pain after taking a weight-loss product called Inci Naturel for four days. This prompted her to seek medical advice after seven days. The product had been purchased on an internet platform and the patient brought a leftover capsule to the medical consultation. Its analysis confirmed adulteration with sibutramine and sildenafil, thus explaining the observed symptoms.

French poison control centres then received numerous calls about this product, totalling about 100 cases of exposure, of which about 80 were in the same community between January and June 2021.

An investigation by the DGCCRF identified one company, one supplier and several sellers. The ANSM reminded them that the product was dangerous and its sale illegal (illegal practice of medicine). Action by the Departmental Directorate for the Protection of Populations led to the products being seized.

No other cases have been reported since.

They are effective... but why are they dangerous?

These adulterated food supplements present a real threat to consumers’ health. They think they are using “natural” products whose ingredients only mention plants, whereas in fact they are ingesting drugs that can be highly dangerous.

Some drugs have been banned because their risks outweigh the expected benefits. This is the case with sibutramine or fenfluramine, which are found in slimming supplements and which expose consumers to the risk of serious cardiovascular events. Other medicines are authorised but only on prescription, so that a doctor can verify that there are no contraindications to their use and explain how to use them at a suitable dose. This is the case for compounds that are effective on erectile dysfunction, such as sildenafil (the compound in Viagra®) and tadalafil (the compound in Cialis®), to name just those most often found in adulterated food supplements. The most common adverse effects are headaches, facial flushing, digestive disorders, vision disorders mainly affecting colour perception, decreased visual acuity, hypersensitivity to light and dizziness. There is also the potential for more serious problems, such as prolonged and painful erection, high or low blood pressure with loss of consciousness, stroke, heart rhythm disorder or hearing loss. These substances must under no circumstances be taken in combination with certain medicines or by individuals suffering from certain diseases. Only a doctor can assess the balance between benefit and risk of taking these compounds for a person with erectile dysfunction.

Lessons to be learned

ANSES points out that an adequate, balanced diet provides all the elements necessary for good health, without the need for food supplements.

However, if people still wish to take them, they are encouraged to buy them from conventional channels, including food supplements for slimming or aphrodisiac purposes. They are advised to talk to their doctor before starting to use these products, especially people with a medical condition and/or taking medicine with which the supplements may interact.

After taking a food supplement, in the event of side effects or very high effectiveness that seem disproportionate for a product supposed to contain only plants, consumers should always consider the possibility of adulteration, especially when the product has been purchased outside conventional channels, and should call a poison control centre for medical advice, keeping some capsules or tablets for analysis. Only by screening for the drug will it be possible to identify any fraud and take the necessary steps to withdraw the product from the market and prevent others from falling victim to poisoning, sometimes more severely.

Healthcare professionals are invited to report any adverse effects of food supplements observed in their patients on the Ministry of Health’s reporting portal or directly on the ANSES nutrivigilance website. These reports will be analysed by ANSES as part of the nutrivigilance scheme. Users who have not called a poison control centre can also report adverse effects on the Ministry of Health’s website. They may be contacted by a poison control centre if further information is needed.

Websites selling fraudulent products of any kind can be reported on the Ministry of the Interior’s portal. The sale of prescription-only medicines over the Internet is prohibited in France.

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2. https://www.nutrivigilance-anses.fr/nutri#
3. https://www.internet-signalement.gouv.fr/PortailWeb/planets/Accueil
References

[1]. https://vigilanses.anses.fr/sites/default/files/VigilancesN1_adult%C3%A9rationscompl%C3%A9mentsalimentaires_0.pdf