



Meal replacements and malnutrition: are your customers eating themselves thin?

The proliferation of weight loss products has given Australian pharmacies a retailing advantage, but has it come at the cost of consumer nutrition? By Hailey Settineri.



More people than ever are relying on meal replacements for short and long-term weight management. The convenience of adding some powder to a glass of water and not having to worry about counting calories is appealing to those with hectic lifestyles. But are brisk breakfasts and liquid lunches fulfilling dieters' nutritional needs?

Meeting the standards

There are three different types of weight loss foods sold in pharmacies: formulated supplementary foods, formulated meal replacements, and very low energy diets (VLEDs). Unlike most products sold in pharmacies, each of these products need to be approved by Food Standards Australia and New Zealand (FSANZ).

Formulated supplementary foods (such as MediTrim and Aliten) have the lowest nutritional requirements, requiring just 8g of protein, 550kJ, and 20 per cent of the RDI of at least one suitable vitamin or mineral.

These products are not designed to replace meals, so pharmacy staff should give clear instructions when selling to consumers. It is

necessary to consume a balanced diet alongside formulated supplementary foods to ensure nutritional needs are met.

"Supplementary foods are not allowed to be sold as a meal replacement," Dr Tim's Success spokesperson, Sarah Orchard, explains. "They're more along the lines of a nutritional supplement for people who might be sick or needing some type of nutritional boost."

Formulated meal replacements (such as Celebrity Slim and Tony Ferguson) have higher nutritional requirements to meet. As they are designed to replace entire meals (although not entire diets), each serve of a formulated meal replacement must contain no less than 12g of protein, 850 kJ and 25 per cent of the RDI of at least 16 vitamins and nutrients.

A further eight trace elements, vitamins and minerals can be added to formulated meal replacements to boost the nutritional value. While some brands have taken advantage of this, many contain only the minimum requirements.

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VLEDs (such as Optifast and KicStart) are designed to be total diet replacements over short periods of time. They should contain the recommended daily intake of all essential vitamins and minerals.

"VLEDs are like the gold standard of meal replacements," Ms Orchard said. "Its nutritional profile has been designed so that someone gets all their nutrition without the need for supplements of additional food."

Despite the high expectations of VLED products, there is currently no specific classification for VLEDs under the FSANZ code. A draft revision of the code adds the extra category 'Foods for Special Medical Purposes,' which applies to VLEDs. The revision distinguishes VLEDs from formulated meal replacements by adding an extra compulsory five vitamins and minerals, and increasing the minimum energy values.

"One of the biggest changes is that VLEDs will have to contain Omega 3 and Omega 6 fatty acids," Ms Orchard said. "It will also have to contain a certain level of potassium which is quite a lot higher than the previous standards."

The draft also proposes changes to the sale and marketing of VLED products. Classified as a 'foods for special medical purposes,' VLEDs will only be sold on restricted medical premises such as pharmacies, hospitals or nursing homes. They will not be advertised directly to the consumer.

No VLED currently on the market complies with the proposed standards.

Nutrition

Retail Pharmacy compared the nutritional information of nine meal replacement shakes and found almost half of the brands did not exceed bare minimum nutritional requirements.

Betty Baxter, Celebrity Slim, Kate Morgan and Tony Ferguson meal replacement shakes contain the lowest legal nutritional values for most of the 16 compulsory nutrients. Of these four brands, only Celebrity Slim contains the optional eight trace elements – again, with minimal value.

Queensland dietitian and spokesperson for the Dietitians Association of Australia, Tara Diversi, warns the nutritional content of some formulated meal replacements and VLEDs may be too low to support someone who is obese.

"If they're of normal weight they should be fine with some of these meal replacements, but you can't say it meets the requirements of everyone. There may be some people who need three to five servings of the sachets to get their NRVs, rather than two and a meal, or three and a meal. That kind of blanket approach doesn't work."

Ms Diversi said a broad spectrum multivitamin tablet would be adequate to support

most people on a meal replacement diet. Similar advice is given by spokespeople from Tony Ferguson and Kate Morgan weight loss programs, which provokes the same questions from retailers

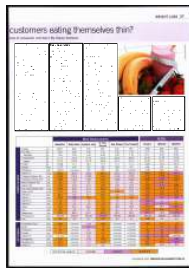
and consumers – why are the additional nutrients from the multivitamin tablets not included in the meal replacements in the first place?

Weightloss practitioner for Tony Ferguson, Rita Yousef, said obtaining an adequate vitamin and mineral intake can sometimes be difficult because many people still do not consume a balanced diet on a regular basis. For this reason supplementation can be beneficial as it helps to ensure that people are meeting the recommended daily intake.

"During weight loss, certain vitamins and minerals are required in the process of transferring fat from the body's cells into the bloodstream where it can be used for energy by the body. Insufficient nutrient intake can affect this process and weight loss may be compromised," she said.

"The Simply Balanced formula (recommended for use with Tony Ferguson meal replacements) has a sustained release action, meaning that nutrients are

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delivered over an eight hour period to ensure their best utilisation and absorption by the body. This aids in keeping energy levels at an optimum throughout the whole day."

Managing Director and founder of Kate Morgan Weightloss Program, Peter Rogers, said that while taking a multivitamin tablet alongside Kate Morgan meal replacements is a desirable thing to do, it is not essential.

"If you look at the compulsory elements that you do need, they are all within (the meal replacement). However you'll also notice that although our meal replacements meet the minimum – or in many some cases exceed the minimum – requirements they don't always meet the maximum that your body is capable of absorbing. So there is definitely a benefit in taking a multivitamin, but it's not essential. If you take the total eating program for the day, you do meet your minimums of everything safely," he said.

Individual needs

Although many weight loss meal replacements list high levels of nutrients on their packaging, Ms Diversi warns pharmacy staff should be aware that the nutritional panels do not always give an accurate estimation of the

nutritional benefits.

"There are different grades of minerals that they put in, particularly when it comes to protein," she said. "Manufacturers can use a very cheap form of protein, right through to an expensive high biological value protein, but the consumer is never going to know that from reading the packet."

The current focus on 'tasty' meal replacements may have impacted the nutritional quality of these foods, Ms Diversi said.

"What that usually means is that they're using a lower grade protein and lower grade minerals, because higher grade protein and higher grade minerals don't actually taste good."

Depending on energy levels contained, meal replacements can also limit the amount of physical activity a dieter is able to maintain.

While exercise may not be the key to weight loss, it's definitely the key to weight maintenance. Studies have shown dieters who continue regular exercise after completing a diet are more likely to keep the weight off. This is because exercise maintains muscle mass, which is vital for long-term weight loss.

Ms Diversi warns many of

the energy intakes from meal replacements and VLEDs are too low to support regular moderate exercise.

"People who are dieting need to ensure they're eating the right foods around their exercise. It might be that they continue with the (meal replacement) program and then on the days they go for a walk they might need a carbohydrate snack or something like that," she said. "We do get a lot of people coming in with dizzy spells because they're not eating enough carbohydrates or enough energy to exercise while they're losing weight."

Ms Diversi said all pharmacies offering weight loss products or programs should have access to an accredited practicing dietitian. She warns that although pharmacy staff may be trained by companies about their specific product, they may not have the knowledge needed to cater for individual needs.

"If they're not trained in the biochemical processes of the body and the physiology then they're not sure what conditions are allowed to take the product and which are not. They're often guessing and that's a danger that puts pharmacies at risk." **RJ**

