

WELLNESS



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Perhaps 2 percent of the U.S. male population ages 40-79 needs a testosterone supplement like Eli Lilly's Axiron, research shows.

Get ripped! Or maybe just ripped off

Low testosterone is a real problem, but few actually have it. Nonprescription supplements are unproven, doctors say.

Low testosterone, or hypogonadism, is a legitimate health problem. Men who have it can suffer a variety of conditions, from low energy and sex drive to depression, weight gain and even bone loss.



LANDON HALL
REGISTER WRITER

But chances are, you don't have this problem, and neither do many of the men you know.

That hasn't prevented a wave of interest in testosterone-replacement therapy. At the top of the hierarchy, there are the prescription-only gels and injections that replace the diminished hormone with synthetic testosterone. At the other, much more dubious, end of the spectrum are the dozens of over-the-counter supplements that purport to help the body boost its own T-levels naturally.

"It's just a bunch of nonsense,"

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EAT WELL

BRING ON THE BOK CHOY

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ILLUSTRATION BY JOSE J. SANTOS, ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

DEATH BY PAINKILLER

WOMEN ARE DYING FROM ACCIDENTAL OVERDOSES AT RATES HIGHER THAN EVER.

By **NICOLE GREGORY**
ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

In July, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention made a startling announcement: "Women are dying from prescription painkiller overdoses at rates never seen before."

That was followed by a number of staggering statistics, including this one: From 1999 to 2010, there was a 400 percent increase in these deaths among women.

Four hundred percent?

"It's a tsunami," said Dr. C. Philip O'Carroll, program di-

rector for the neurobehavioral medicine program at Hoag Neurosciences Institute in Newport Beach.

"It's actually an epidemic," said Peter R. Przekop, director of the pain management program at the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage.

If this increase in deaths among women were related to breast cancer, women would be marching in the streets. But the causes of painkiller overdoses among women are complex and the responsibility for the deaths is shared. (In contrast, painkiller overdose deaths increased by 265 percent among men during the same time frame.)

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TESTOSTERONE: Actual deficiencies are rare

FROM PAGE 1

Dr. Ellis Levin said of the supplements. He's chief of endocrinology, diabetes and metabolism at UC Irvine's School of Medicine, and he said those products aren't FDA-approved, nor are they generally tested to see how well they work. "So people can claim whatever they want, and nobody will hold them to the truth."

Often, when a user does find a benefit, it's a placebo effect that dissipates over time, he said.

The supplements, with names like Manimal, HexaTest and High T, often make bold claims in advertising and marketing. Andro400, which has a mailing address in Ventura, says on its website that its capsules are "powered by testosterone," which can have a variety of therapeutic properties, including the ability to "melt" body fat. Elsewhere on the exclamation-point-filled home page are slogans like "Get back your enthusiasm, motivation and zest for life!" ... "Recharge your energy, strength, stamina and sports performance!" ... "Enhance sexual performance and bring back romance!" One 60-pill bottle costs \$39.95.

On a recent afternoon during the Dodgers' pregame coverage on KLAC/570 AM, the following ad was broadcast:

"You've got to get Troxyphen. My doctor said I had low T levels, because every year us men produce less and less testosterone. Troxyphen can be picked up at GNC stores. It's 100 percent natural and the most powerful testosterone booster for the following reasons: Troxyphen fills your body with energy and vitality, builds lean muscle mass, shreds body fat through thermogenic stimulation, and it enhances your sexual performance. ... Get ripped, and get cut with Troxyphen."

MANY CAUSES

Is it true that men produce less testosterone as they age? Generally, yes. But that might not mean much. And there are other factors that can bring the level of hormone down, in-

cluding injury, illness, obesity and heavy use of marijuana and opiates.

A 2012 study found that men who were married tended to have less precipitous drops, possibly owing to being happier or having more sex. However, a 2011 study said new dads can see their levels drop faster than nondads, an effect possibly caused by the body's need to nurture a child outweighing the need to perform historically macho tasks, like fighting a rival suitor.

Of course, many of the symptoms associated with low testosterone, such as fatigue, could come from other sources. For instance, erectile dysfunction is more often caused by cardiovascular disease than by low T.

A normal level of testosterone is 300 to 1,100 nano-

grams per deciliter of blood; a test is normally given twice - in the morning, when levels are at their highest, and after fasting. A low reading means the testicles aren't producing enough testosterone, but most of the time the problem originates in the brain, Levin said: There's a mix-up in signals from either the hypothalamus or the pituitary gland, which tell the testicles when to make more.

The best evidence is that only about 2 percent of the U.S. male population ages 40 to 79 are below the minimum T threshold. But a study published in June in JAMA Internal Medicine showed that prescriptions for men 40 and older shot up 300 percent between 2001 and 2011. About one-

quarter of them had not received a testosterone test at all.

Although a study in Germany last year chronicled consistent weight loss among study subjects who had testosterone by injection (not available in the United States), there's little research on the long-term effects of T replacement in men who don't already have low levels.

CHECK THE LABEL

The industry leader in synthetic testosterone is AndroGel, a name similar to Andro400 (androgens are male sex hormones, testosterone being the major one). The gel, developed by Solvay Pharmaceuticals and approved by the FDA in 2001, is rubbed directly on the skin. It comes in two

concentrations, 1 percent and 1.62 percent, and children and women are cautioned against touching the areas that aren't clothed or washed off after the higher-concentration version is applied. The website also warns that using 1.62 could reduce a man's sperm count. The site encourages men with symptoms of hypogonadism to consult with their physicians and "ask to be evaluated," including possibly getting a blood test.

Other products include several gels: Axiron (by Eli Lilly, approved in 2010), which is applied to the underarm; Testim (by Auxilium, 2002); Bio-T-Gel (by BioSante, 2012); and Fortesta Gel (by Endo, 2010). Testopel (Slate, 2008) is a pellet inserted beneath the

skin that lasts three to four months; and Androderm (Watson, 2011) is a low-dose patch applied daily.

By contrast, the supplement-makers tend to be less explanatory about their products. Andro400 contains Eurycoma longifolia, a flowering plant native to Indonesia. Another supplement, Troxyphen, has caffeine and green coffee bean extract among its ingredients, as well as Testofen, the brand name for an extract sold by an Anaheim-based company called Gencor.

Peter Jenkins, manager of the customer-support team for Andro400, says Eurycoma longifolia works by stimulating the hypothalamus and the pituitary, helping the body raise its own levels of testosterone.

"It's actually been used by indigenous populations for hundreds of years for medicinal purposes to treat malaria and pre-diabetes," Jenkins said. "It's a very unique herb. What it's also been known for, for years in Southeast Asia and much more broadly worldwide, is its aphrodisiac qualities."

Jenkins said synthetic testosterone carries "risks" and "negative side effects," one of which is that it could result in the body further reducing its own production of natural testosterone. Levin, the UCI physician, said that claim was absurd.

Jenkins says, however, it's often difficult to pinpoint a man's actual testosterone level, because many testing methods are imprecise. But even an accurate number might not tell the whole story. If a middle-age man has a lower reading than an 18-year-old, it might not be so terrible.

"There's got to be some real symptoms, that we are convinced can be due to the loss of testosterone, before I begin an investigation," he said. "Generally, our feeling is that if you're in the 200 (nanogram) range, you're clearly hypogonadal, if you have accompanying symptoms. If you don't have symptoms, that may be age-appropriate production for you."

CONTACT THE WRITER:
714-796-2221 or
lhall@ocregister.com



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“It's just a bunch of nonsense. So people can claim whatever they want, and nobody will hold them to the truth.”

DR. ELLIS LEVIN

CHIEF OF ENDOCRINOLOGY, DIABETES AND METABOLISM AT UC IRVINE'S SCHOOL OF MEDICINE, ON NONPRESCRIPTION PRODUCTS BILLED AS TESTOSTERONE BOOSTERS

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