

Those Pick-Me-Ups Might Put You



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“I’ve been known to use the substance ephedrine when I felt tired and wanted an extra burst of energy,” admitted IT1(AW/SW) Craig Crim. As he explained, “Ephedrine stimulates the central nervous system and is available over the counter. You find it in most diet products and bodybuilding supplements that boast fat loss and energy. It’s also used in decongestants and asthma medicines.”

On one occasion, though, Petty Officer Crim’s “pick-me-up” nearly put him down—for the count. It happened when he couldn’t find his normal brand: Mini-Thins. “I bought Yellow Jackets, instead,” he said, “and took three—my usual dosage of Mini-Thins.” He noted the recommended dosage is two, but added, “I always take three because your body builds up a tolerance.”

About 30 minutes after taking the three Yellow Jackets, IT1 Craig realized he had made a mistake. “I started feeling very weak, and I broke out in a cold sweat,” he explained. “I checked the back of the package and learned that I just had taken four times the recommended dosage of Yellow Jackets. What was supposed to have been an exciting night out on the town turned into a night on my knees—praying that I’d live to see morning.”

In Petty Officer Crim’s own words, “The moral of this story is simple: Just because a substance is legal doesn’t mean it isn’t lethal. I could have prevented this scary experience if I had read the back of the package.”

A little research revealed, as Petty Officer Crim also suggested in the article he sent me, that much controversy surrounds the drug ephedrine. I learned Petty Officer Crim indeed had good reason to be concerned when he realized how badly he had overdosed. Some people who took a few too many aren’t around today to tell their stories.

One such individual was a 24-year-old boy who was getting his pep pills at a local gas station. “I knew he was taking it,” said his mother. “He was using it so he wouldn’t sleep as much. He constantly was packing himself with caffeine and this stuff.”

One March, though, he popped the small, white pill for the last time. The official cause of death was listed as “ephedrine overdose.” An autopsy showed no other drugs in the boy’s system.

Afterward, a spokesman with the Food and Drug Administration said that more than 900 injuries and 40 deaths related to ephedrine—also called Ma Huang or herbal ecstasy—had been reported. “Problems range from dizziness and tremors to heart attacks or strokes,” he said.

Another case involved a 16-year-old boy who died from a heart attack after allegedly taking some of the Yellow Jackets like Petty Officer Crim took. The teenager reportedly had started taking these supplements during the wrestling season to give him an edge.

Ephedrine isn’t physically addictive, but it can be psychologically addictive, which means



Some young people prefer staying alert, rather than following this young woman's example and getting some rest.

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people like the buzz they get from it and take more. Soon, they are taking larger and larger doses to get the same effect because their bodies adjust to the amount they're getting—just like Petty Officer Crim. Here are signs to watch for in people abusing this drug:

- hyperactivity
- lack of appetite
- secretiveness or withdrawal from family
- nausea or vomiting
- dizziness
- headaches

Thousands of adverse health reports, along with studies in the *New England Journal of Medicine* and at the Mayo Clinic, connect the drug ephedrine with heart attacks, strokes and high blood pressure. Despite this evidence, however, the task of getting affected products off the market is not an easy one.

Part of the problem stems from a 1994 federal law, which prohibits the FDA from regulating dietary supplements the same way it does pharmaceuticals. The agency requires drug manufacturers to prove their products are safe and effective. But the burden of proof is reversed for dietary supplements: Before they can be removed from the market, the FDA must prove they aren't safe, and it may be another four years or longer before that happens.

Another part of the problem is that companies who make dietary supplements claim scientific studies show their products are "safe and effective" when taken as directed

by adults. A senator, however, took exception with one company that claimed it had received no reports of adverse health effects from its products. The senator noted the same company had handed the FDA copies of more than 13,000 such reports, which detailed three deaths, 20 heart attacks, and 24 strokes.

A lawyer representing the company countered, "Conclusions about these adverse health events are based on 'unverified telephone calls.'" The lawyer repeatedly denied scientific proof exists to show that ephedrine causes harm. "We need science, not junk science," he said. He went on to note the company he represents favors FDA regulations that would ban promoting ephedrine products as "street drug" alternatives, limit sales to adults, mandate warning labels, and require reporting of adverse health effects.

Meanwhile, witnesses testify that young people, particularly athletes, buy ephedrine supplements because companies promote the idea their products improve performance or control weight. Some young people use the supplements to stay alert after long study sessions or to sharpen reflexes on the ball field. Unfortunately, very few ever take the time to read the labels' important warnings in small type—the fact these supplements also constrict blood vessels, elevate blood pressure, and raise pulse rates. ■

If you want pep pills, you usually don't have to look any farther than a local gas station.

