

# Clicker Beware

6 things to keep in mind if you buy supplements online.

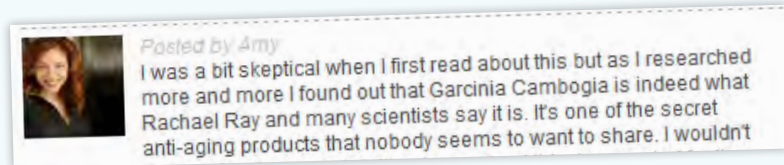


BY DAVID SCHARDT

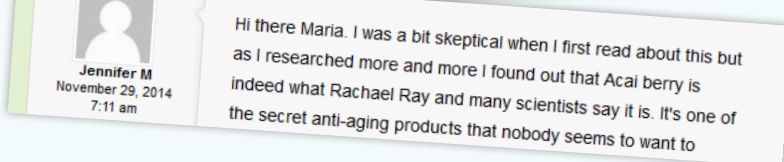
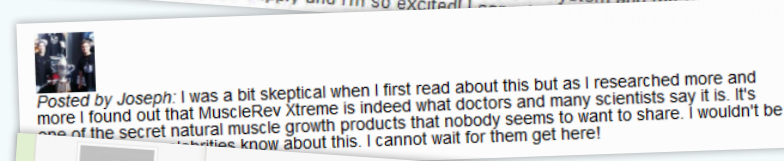
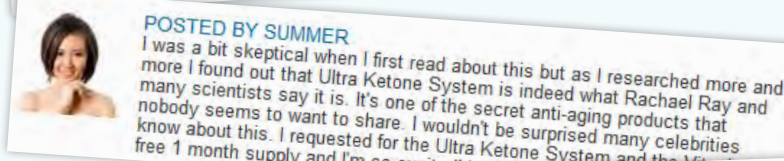
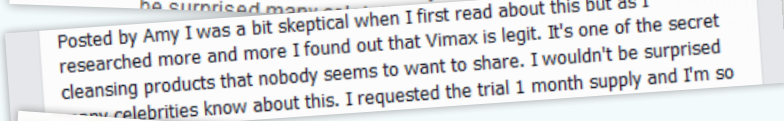
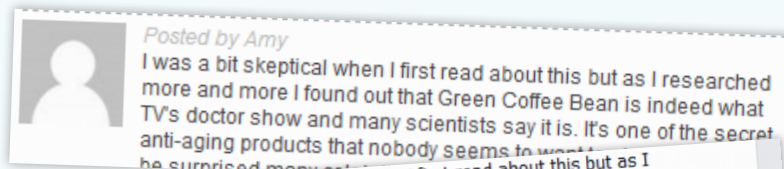
The Internet is teeming with bogus news sites where fake reporters and fake testimonials cite fake research to hawk samples of expensive, worthless supplements. But don't worry. With luck and persistence, you may be able to stop the monthly charges to your credit card.

## 1 Many testimonials are phony

Here's "Amy," gushing about the "secret anti-aging product" Garcinia cambogia on some fake news site.



Amy shows up on hundreds of other websites, admitting that she was also "a bit skeptical" about Green Coffee Bean. And about Vimax. Then there's "Jennifer," who's skeptical about Acai berry, and "Joseph," who's skeptical about MuscleRev Xtreme, and "Summer," who's skeptical about Ultra Ketone System. We could go on.



## 2 Free samples can be costly



To get your 14-day sample of Instaflex, just give a credit card number to cover the \$4.99 shipping and handling. But if you don't cancel within 18 days from the day you

ordered the sample, your card will be charged \$75 for the next month's supply...and \$75 every 30 days after that until you cancel.

Is two weeks long enough to decide if Instaflex works? Not according to the company's own study.



## 3 Many "studies" are worthless

"Clinically proven" can mean something...or, as in this case, nothing. Greek Island Labs' "clinical study" didn't compare Natural Joint with a placebo, so it wasn't capable of showing whether the supplement works.

**Clinically Proven at one of the Nation's Top Laboratories:**

"Greek Island Lab's Natural Joint, when used in accordance with intended package directions demonstrated statistically significant **reduction in joint problems** by an average of **51.1%** within the **first 5 days** of use with a maximum of 83.3% observed. Statistically significant **improvements in joint mobility** averaging **47.4%** and **flexibility** averaging **46.2%** were also observed. Further, these phenomena were documented and confirmed during the course of the study."

[\(Click Here To View 5 Day Clinical Study Overview.\)](#)

"After 28 days Greek Island Lab's Natural Joint demonstrated an average **reduction in joint discomfort of 82.2%**. Statistically significant **improvements in joint mobility**

## 4 It's worth reading the small print

"Testimonials are based on the experiences of a few people and you are not likely to have similar results." Umm...

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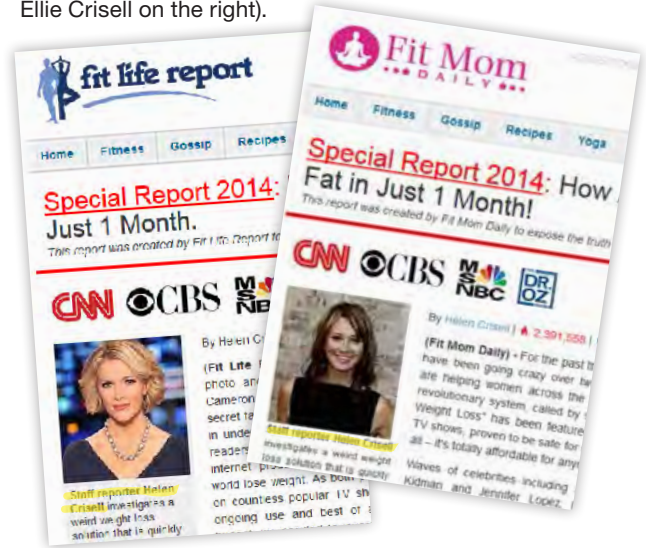
\*\*Results may vary. These statements have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure, or prevent any disease. **Testimonials are based on the experiences of a few people and you are not likely to have similar results.** "Dr. Binette believes in the product so much, he is now an official spokesperson for Greek Island Lab's Natural Joint™ Research Studies Cited: New England Journal of Medicine, Glucosamine Study, Harvard University

"Because this product is new, we gave one box of AZO Bladder Control to individuals associated with i-Health, so that we could share product testimonials." Surprise! Everyone at Bladder Control's manufacturer loved it.

Because this product is new, we gave one box of AZO Bladder Control to individuals associated with i-Health, so that we could share product testimonials. Each testimonial was given from the sole opinion and experience of the individual and are representative of the results experienced by users of AZO Bladder Control.

## 5 "News" sites may be fake

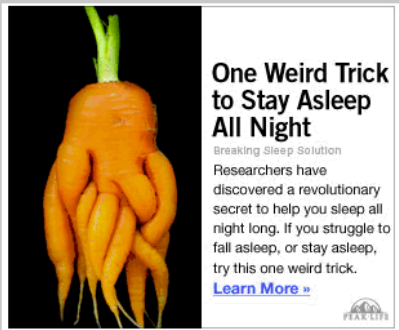
These are not real news websites. They have nothing to do with CNN, CBS, MSNBC, or Dr. Oz. And "staff reporter Helen Crisell" doesn't exist (that's a photo of Fox News' Megyn Kelly on the left, and of the BBC's Ellie Crisell on the right).



## 6 Most "tricks" aren't there to help you

Ever click on one of those "One Weird Trick" or "One Weird Old Tip" ads? The simple sketch or odd photo makes them stand out. Most eventually try to get you to buy some overpriced supplement. For example:

Clicking on this ad...



...takes you to this website...



...which sells Somnapure for the "highly discounted" price (including shipping) of \$75 a month (automatically charged to your credit card if you don't cancel within 18 days of ordering your "free" two-week supply).



A three-month supply of melatonin—the ingredient in Somnapure with the best evidence of helping reset the body's clock—costs \$5 at drugstore.com.

That's about twice what Somnapure costs at GNC...and more than four times what you can get it for on Amazon.



# The Green Coffee Caper

**I**t's not often that you get a glimpse into the underbelly of the world of supplement marketing. But here, thanks to the U.S. Federal Trade Commission, is a blow-by-blow account of how an unproven compound raked in millions. The only losers? The consumers who shelled out good money for it.

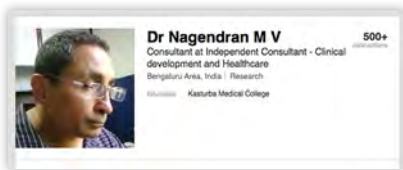
1  
2010

Applied Food Sciences of Austin, Texas, wants to sell its green coffee bean extract to supplement manufacturers as a weight-loss aid.



2  
2010

AFS hires Mysore Nagendran, a researcher in Bangalore, India, to run a clinical trial of the extract. Nagendran recruits 16 overweight adults to take the company's extract (in a higher and lower dose) and a placebo for six weeks each (with a two-week break between each of the three six-week periods). The participants are instructed to cut calories and exercise.



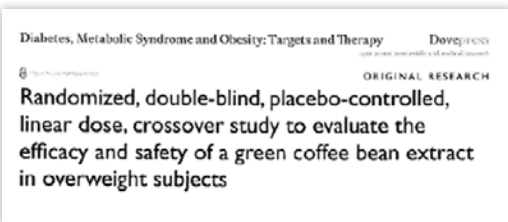
3  
2010

Nagendran repeatedly changes the weights of the participants, mixes up when they got the green coffee or the placebo, and changes the final weights of 11 of the 16. He also calls the trial "open label." That means the participants knew whether they were getting the extract or the placebo, which makes the study worthless. The FTC later concludes that Nagendran's study either "was never conducted or suffers from flaws so severe that no competent and reliable conclusions can be drawn from it."

4  
2011

Nagendran is unable to get his study published in a scientific journal. So Applied Food Sciences hires two University of Scranton professors to rewrite the results and present it as their own research. Nagendran gives them two contradictory versions of his data, and he changes the final weights of 6 of the 16 participants. The two professors accept Nagendran's account and don't ask to see the raw data.

5  
Jan 2012



The Scranton professors succeed in getting the rewritten paper published in the journal *Diabetes, Metabolic Syndrome and Obesity*. The paper claims that participants who took

the green coffee extract lost an average of almost 20 pounds, and that 6 of the 16 dropped from overweight to normal weight.

6  
Apr 2012



Dr. Mehmet Oz announces to his television viewers that "a staggering, newly released study" reveals that green coffee bean extract "may hold the secret to weight loss that you've been waiting for."

People who took the extract "lost an astounding amount of fat and weight—17 pounds in 22 weeks—by doing absolutely nothing extra in their day," Oz marvels. "Could this be the magic weight loss bean to help melt away unwanted pounds?"

7  
May 2012

**Dr. Oz Show Highlights GCA® Green Coffee Bean Extract from Applied Food Sciences Inc., Proven in Recent Human Study to Lower Body Mass Index and Aid in Weight Management**

After a ground breaking study was presented at the American Chemical Society Meeting in San Diego (March 2012) green coffee bean extract is becoming all the buzz in weight management products. With staggering results participants in the study lost an average of 10% of their body weight without changing diet or exercise. This phenomenal green coffee extract GCA® from Applied Food Sciences was highlighted on the Dr. Oz show.

Applied Food Sciences quickly swings into action, issuing a press release highlighting Dr. Oz's praise of its green coffee bean extract. AFS uses the results of the suspect study to market the extract to supplement manufacturers.

8  
May 2012

Less than two weeks after Oz's show, NPB Advertising, a Tampa, Florida, company, begins using aliases to register websites—with names like coffeebeanstoloseweight.com and greencoffeeweightcontrol.com—to sell free trials of the supplement. It sets up phony news sites like dailyconsumeralert.org, with a fictitious journalist who reports losing 27 pounds with the product. The sites feature clips of Dr. Oz praising green coffee. NPB pays people \$200 each to write bogus testimonials about how they lost weight with the supplement.



From 2012 to 2014, NPB and its business partners sell more than half a million bottles of green coffee bean extract for \$30 to \$48 each, grossing \$16 to \$26 million. (A monthly dose of the extract can be bought for as little as 50 cents wholesale plus shipping from Chinese manufacturers.)

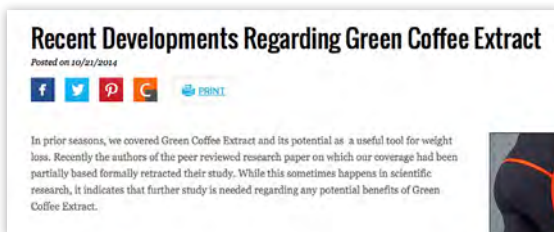
11  
Oct 2014

The two Scranton professors retract their paper, without accepting any blame. The FTC “took it apart and found some flaw with a couple of things,” the lead author explains to the *Scranton Times-Tribune*. “We decided to retract it because there was too much negative publicity.”



12  
Oct 2014

Dr. Oz announces the retraction of the study on his website. “This sometimes happens in scientific research,” he notes. Oz also removes from the website all footage from his shows in which he touts the benefits of green coffee bean extract.



9  
Dec 2012

Consumers start complaining.



13  
2015

Websites continue to promote green coffee bean extract.



10  
May 2014

The FTC charges NPB Advertising with making “false and unsupported advertising claims,” and with failing to clearly disclose that its news sites and testimonials were fake. The case is still pending.



The FTC charges that Applied Food Sciences used its study—which it should have known was fatally flawed, notes the agency—to make “false and unsubstantiated weight-loss claims” to sell its extract and ultimately deceive consumers. The company pays \$3.5 million to settle the case.

Sept 2014

