



Hoodia for Weight Loss: Dispelling the Hype October 2006

Hoodia gordonii is a large, spiky plant native to the Kalahari Desert of Southern Africa. For thousands of years, members of the local San Bushmen tribe have eaten the plant to stave off hunger and thirst during lengthy hunting expeditions.¹ Its appetite-suppressing properties have been attributed to the molecule P57. P57 is thought to exert its effect by causing neurons within the satiety center of the hypothalamus to fire rapidly, as they normally would in response to raised blood glucose levels.^{1,4} In turn, the brain is tricked into thinking that the body is physically full, even when it is not. Hoodia appears to be non-stimulating.²

Evidence for the efficacy of Hoodia is currently very limited. In 2001, Phytopharm, the company with patent rights to hoodia extract, conducted a double-blind, placebo-controlled trial of hoodia in humans. After 15 days, subjects receiving hoodia were consuming 1000 fewer calories per day.^{2,3} Although the findings seem encouraging, the sample size was very small (19 participants) and Phytopharm chose not to publish the results.

The safety of hoodia is even less established. No adverse reactions were identified in the study.^{3,4} Unfortunately, long-term effects could not be observed due to the short duration. The possibility for drug interactions is also completely unknown.¹ Phytopharm is conducting research to better determine the safety and efficacy of hoodia before bringing a product to the market.³ It is anticipated to be a number of years before we know the results of these trials.

Hoodia weight loss products are now widely available in stores and over the internet. However, not a single product containing hoodia has been approved by Health Canada. Without this regulation, there is no guarantee that products contain the amount of hoodia claimed on the label or that these products are not contaminated with unlisted ingredients. Meanwhile, Phytopharm, the only company *legally entitled* to market hoodia, has yet to do so.

So, should you suggest hoodia to patients who want to lose weight? It would certainly not be recommended during pregnancy or lactation, since the potential for harm is unknown. And this is just one of many unknowns. Until hoodia products become regulated and more is known about safety and efficacy, it might be best to steer patients clear.

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