

Diets aids removed from market

WASHINGTON (AP) — Two of the nation's most popular diet drugs were pulled off the market Monday after the government uncovered disturbing new evidence that they could seriously damage patients' hearts.

The Food and Drug Administration urged millions of dieters to immediately stop taking Redux, also known as dexfenfluramine, and Pondimin, also known as fenfluramine.

Pondimin is one-half of the widely popular fen-phen diet combination; the other half, phentermine, appears safe when used by itself, the FDA said.

But doctors said phentermine, the sole remaining prescription diet drug, has only mixed results — and they predicted a surge of patients distraught both at the possibility their hearts were damaged and at losing their treatments.

"We are anticipating lots of very desperate patients that need help," said Dr. John Foreyt, an obesity expert at Baylor College of Medicine.

"Obesity does kill," said Dr. Richard Atkinson of the American Obesity Association, who said many Redux and Pondimin users will regain their weight.

The FDA asked Wyeth-Ayerst Laboratories, which sells Redux here and whose parent company makes Pondimin, to withdraw the drugs because of new evidence that they damage heart valves, and the firm agreed.

The U.S. decision prompted the French company, Servier, that sells fenfluramine and dexfenfluramine abroad to withdraw the drugs worldwide.

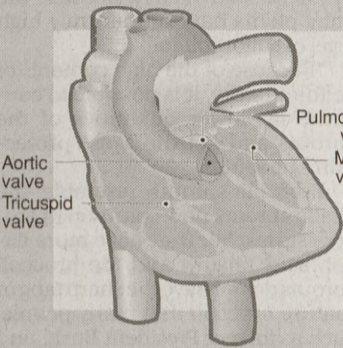
The FDA had been struggling to determine the drugs' risk since it and the Mayo Clinic uncovered the first cases in July. Last week, the FDA analyzed heart tests on 291 dieters and found almost a third — 92 people —

Diet drugs recalled

The Food and Drug Administration today recommended that two popular diet drugs be withdrawn from the market after being linked with serious heart damage.

Heart valves

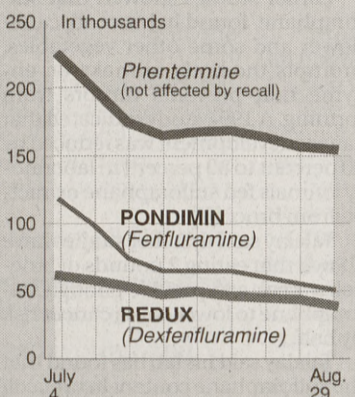
In a study of 291 patients who took the drugs, 30 percent had abnormal echocardiograms and developed problems with their aortic and mitral valves.



Source: The Human Body, The Heart; IMS America

Diet drugs

Total weekly prescriptions, 1997



had damaged heart valves, even though they had no symptoms.

That's much higher than anticipated. Less than 1 percent of the general population has such damage to their aortic or mitral valves, said Dr. Richard Bowen of Naples, Fla., who tested 200 of the patients.

Most of the valves leaked blood, a condition that over time can enlarge the heart and seriously weaken it.

Also, the FDA analyzed 25 patients who happened to have had their hearts tested before ever taking diet pills — and after taking the pills, about a third were newly diagnosed with valve damage.

Those patients are in addition to 99 other fenfluramine or Redux users whose doctors have reported to FDA actual symptoms of heart damage, such as shortness of breath, chest pain or swollen ankles. Three of them died, and 17 underwent heart surgery.

The newest findings show the drugs "present an unacceptable risk," said FDA Acting Commissioner Dr. Michael Friedman.

Wyeth-Ayerst's Dr. Marc Deitch called the withdrawal "the most prudent course of action." But he said there is still not definitive proof that the drugs are to blame, and said Wyeth-Ayerst will within a few weeks begin studying whether obese people are naturally more prone to valve disease.

Meanwhile, dieters can return unused portions of the drugs for a refund.

Dieters should see their doctors for close heart monitoring, Atkinson said. But not everyone will need an echocardiogram, a sophisticated test that shows heart function and costs between \$500 and \$1,000, he cautioned.

Rains help quench fire in California

RUNNING SPRINGS, Calif. (AP) — Rain pushed north by Hurricane Linda helped slow a wildfire that forced hundreds of evacuations as it burned 1,500 acres and 11 homes in the San Bernardino Mountains.

Hours of rain were generated Sunday by moisture drawn into the region by Hurricane Linda, hundreds of miles of the Southern California coast. The blaze some 60 miles east of Los Angeles was mostly contained early Tuesday.

The storm "really did us some good," said Candace Vialpando, a spokeswoman for the San Bernardino National Forest. "The rain they got up there this afternoon really made a difference."

About 300 people stayed in two evacuation centers Saturday night and many more may have sought shelter with friends and relatives, Vialpando said. But most were allowed back into their homes.

Marci Syme and her husband had fled and now fear their house was burned.

"We know the mountain pretty well," she said. "It looks like it's gone, but I won't deal with that until I have to look at it."

The fire damaged or destroyed 11 permanent homes and weekend cabins and two outbuildings.

The blaze broke out Saturday at a gun range, though it wasn't clear whether it was sparked by a bullet or a shot striking a rock.

Weld gives up race for Mexico ambassador

WASHINGTON (AP) — William Weld gave up his battle to be ambassador to Mexico on Monday with a scathing attack on Washington politics and a defiant declaration that he wouldn't "go on bended knee" before Jesse Helms or anyone else.

"Washington sure is a funny town," Weld said during a White House news conference in which he criticized a Senate system in which a conservative fellow Republican could block even a hearing on his nomination.

"I can go back to New England, where no one has to approach the government on bended knee to ask it to do its duty," said Weld, who resigned as governor of Massachusetts in July to pursue the Mexico City post. "I've had enough of Washington for the next little while."

President Clinton accepted Weld's withdrawal during a meeting in the Oval Office and didn't try to talk him out of it, White House officials said. Instead, the president scored the rejection of Weld without a hearing.

"At a time when we have been making strides towards a bipartisan foreign policy, the treatment that my nominee received reflected the divisiveness that does not well serve the American people," Clinton said in a statement.

The president didn't appear at Weld's side at the news conference, but the former governor said Clinton had strongly supported him from the start.

Helms, R-N.C., the conservative chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, refused to hold

a nomination hearing for the more moderate Weld. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., supported Helms, saying Weld "didn't handle himself well."

"His conduct during this episode has been baffling to me," Lott said.

"I've had enough of Washington for the next little while."

WILLIAM WELD
FORMER MASS. GOVERNOR

"There's another agenda here I have not quite figured out."

Weld, who plans to back to the private sector, probably in investment banking, has been mentioned as a possible presidential candidate in 2000. He has frequently criticized Washington's way of doing business, a common strategy for candidates.

The White House said it would take time to find another nominee as ambassador to Mexico, a job that has been vacant since June.

"In many senses our review process is back at the starting point now," spokesman Mike McCurry said.

Helms, forced by several of his committee members to convene a special meeting on Weld last Friday, used the forum to catalogue scores of cases in which nominees didn't get hearings. His unshakable stance, coupled with Lott's renewed backing on Sunday, seemingly all but ended Weld's chances.

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