

BODY NEWS

By Kristin Cobb

Flat-Stomach Pill

A substance in brown seaweed may help reduce abdominal fat. When chemistry professor Kazuo Miyashita and his colleagues at Hokkaido University in Japan fed obese mice this compound, called fucoxanthin, the mice produced high levels of a protein involved in fat burning, and they shed 2 to 5 percent of their body fat, mostly from the abdomen. (Mice fed a control diet

showed no change.) Fucoxanthin also increased the mice's levels of DHA—an omega-3 fatty acid believed to promote brain and heart health—as effectively as fish-oil supplements, the study found. Brown seaweed is often added to Asian soups and salads, but the fucoxanthin content is too low to cause significant weight loss, Miyashita says. He is developing a supplement pill, which he expects to finish by the end of the year.

Skin-Lightening Debate

Safety concerns about skin creams that contain hydroquinone—a common treatment for discolorations such as age spots—have prompted the FDA to consider banning their sale without a prescription. In high doses, hydroquinone can produce permanent blue-black stains on the skin; it also causes cancer in rats and mice. “Evidence is accumulating that hydroquinone may be far more dangerous than previously thought,” says Wiete Westerhof, a dermatology professor at the University of Amsterdam in the Netherlands. Its availability has been restricted in Europe since 2001, but many American dermatologists oppose the ban, which would also require prescription hydroquinone products to pass a new review. In 50 years, fewer than 30 cases of the skin-staining condition, ochronosis, have been reported in the United States, and hydroquinone has never been linked to cancer in people, says Pearl E. Grimes, clinical professor of dermatology at the University of California—Los Angeles, who adds that no other skin-lightening ingredient is as effective or well-researched. The ruling, expected early this year, will be announced at fda.gov.

A New Cavity Fighter

Yogurt contains healthy bacteria that are thought to improve digestion and bad breath. Now German scientists have cultivated a new strain of yogurt bacteria that fights tooth decay, and they have put it into gum, toothpaste, and mouthwash. The organism binds to cavity-causing bacteria and prevents them from sticking to the teeth. In early tests, the gum reduced bad bacteria in the mouths of volunteers by 50 percent. The gum or related products could become available as soon as this year, says Christine Lang, CEO of OrganoBalance in Berlin. Standard yogurt does not contain the cavity-fighting bacteria, so it cannot substitute for the gum, but she advises eating yogurt regularly for its other benefits.

33%

of 25- to 34-year-old women studied had age spots.

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