

Conjugated Linoleic Acid [CLA]

With promises of safe fat loss and an end to yo-yo dieting coupled with assurances about a totally natural product backed up by good science its not surprising that many 'dieters' and body builders are reaching for supplements containing CLA (conjugated linoleic acid) to lose the flab.

If you can pop a pill and lose fat without having to 'diet' or exercise then surely that's a good thing....isn't it? Err no, definitely not.

Popping pills to lose fat doesn't tackle the broader issues of why someone is overweight. Eating a healthy balanced diet and being active will do so much more for you than just losing weight. There are benefits to overall well being, to being more mentally alert, to improving self confidence and self esteem and to reducing the risk of diseases like cancer, diabetes, heart disease and stroke. A single pill could never do all that!

There has been increasing interest in the health benefits of CLA following lots of studies using animals. The results of the studies show that animals given CLA supplements have had less cancer, diabetes and heart disease. They have also had lower body fat and improved immune functions.

These are very impressive results, but they don't necessarily mean the same benefits will be seen in humans. There has been much less research about CLA in humans, but more and more is being done. As always the research is contradictory; some groups of overweight people have demonstrated fat loss and muscle gain whilst others have found no effect on body weight, body fat or muscle mass.

French researchers found that women with the highest intake of CLA had a 74% lower risk of breast cancer than women who consumed the least amount of CLA. Swedish researchers have found that taking CLA supplements increased inflammation and free radical production. This could actually have a negative impact on health and disease risk.

Some studies have reported negative effects on blood cholesterol levels, which may affect heart health and adverse effects on insulin, which may affect the risk of diabetes.

CLA is an omega-6 polyunsaturated fat which is found naturally in foods from grass fed cows and sheep – beef, lamb and their respective dairy products; milk, butter, cheese and yogurt. Levels in food however may not be in sufficient amounts to have a beneficial effect (if indeed there is any beneficial effect).

Supplement companies have jumped on the CLA band wagon and produced very convenient supplements.

Respected scientists who have reviewed all the research on CLA in humans though think that taking CLA supplements is probably not a good idea until more research is done and we can be more confident about its long-term effects.