

Health products you don't need

From cough syrup to joint-care supplements – our experts examine the evidence behind the claims

Across the UK, we spend £3 billion on over-the-counter pharmacy products each year. But Which? bought a range of popular remedies and found claims that our experts believe aren't backed up by enough evidence to convince us to buy them – and, in some cases, there's no robust evidence at all.

For example, our expert panel examined the published evidence for three cough medicines and concluded that there is 'no robust evidence' that they do what it says on the bottle.

You may be getting more than you bargained for, too. Benlyn 'Tickly Coughs' active ingredients are glycerol and liquid sugar, but

it contains other sugars too. In total, per 10ml dose, that's a generous 1.5 teaspoons of sugar. If an adult took this medicine at maximum dose for a week, it would be the equivalent of eating the sugar contained in five Mars bars.

WHERE'S THE EVIDENCE?

While it's important that consumers can choose products that work for them as individuals, we do believe that companies should be upfront with their evidence where they make claims.

Boots declined to send us the evidence for its Cold and Flu Relief tablets, as did the manufacturer of Adios slimming pills and Benlyn for cough medicines. These companies told us that the regulator, Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), thoroughly reviews the clinical



Benlyn and Covonia cough medicines

We chose three cough medicines, including a tickly and chesty remedy from the bestselling Benlyn range, and a herbal Covonia syrup. Our experts found no compelling evidence that any of them work, even to relieve symptoms.

Benlyn Chesty Coughs (Non-Drowsy) £5.41 for 150ml

THE COMPANY SAYS 'Benlyn Chesty Coughs works deep down to loosen phlegm, clear bronchial congestion, and make your cough more productive.'

OUR EXPERTS SAY The company provided no evidence of effectiveness. The evidence base on the active ingredient guaifenesin consists of generally low-quality studies.

Benlyn Tickly Coughs (Non-Drowsy) £4.77 for 150ml

THE COMPANY SAYS 'Soothing effect. Relieves tickly, dry coughs.'

OUR EXPERTS SAY The active ingredients are sugar alcohol (glycerol) and liquid sugar (sucrose). This medicine contains other sugars, too, such as black treacle. Their effectiveness is unproven and, in total, Benlyn is around half sugar: 7.7g per 10ml dose.

Covonia Herbal Mucus Cough Syrup £5.39 for 150ml

THE COMPANY SAYS

'The herbal active ingredients are expectorants and help to loosen troublesome mucus, so it's easier to clear.'

OUR EXPERTS SAY No research to back up the claims was given, referring to 'remedies that have long been tried and tested'. We found no studies showing all the benefits claimed.

Seven Seas Jointcare Be Active £12.45 for 30 tablets

THE COMPANY SAYS 'Keep really active with this everyday plan to look after your joints.'

OUR EXPERTS SAY The active ingredients in this supplement are at well below effective levels, and the dose of fish oil is inadequate to reduce inflammation. The European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) reviewed the evidence and concluded that claims linking the active ingredients glucosamine, chondroitin and omega 3 to joint health are not substantiated, and must be removed from products by December. Seven Seas Ltd said that packs will comply by EFSA's deadline.

evidence that their respective products work, as they are licensed medicines.

However, while the paracetamol in the Boots product undoubtedly works, our experts could not see why the dose was lower than usual (400mg instead of 500mg per tablet). And they say that the need for extras – in this case the decongestant phenylephrine, vitamin C and caffeine at the levels in this product – is not clearly proven by independent research. Instead of spending £1.85, you could buy a 16p packet of paracetamol (500mg strength), and drink a mug of coffee if you want a caffeine lift.

An MHRA spokesperson said: 'All medicines licensed in the UK have demonstrated efficacy: it is a legal requirement for the licence-holder to be able to justify, at all times, the efficacy of the medicinal product.' For licensed cough

medicines, our experts aren't convinced that the evidence is robust. But, for any medicine, companies don't have to share evidence that they've supplied to the MHRA with others.

TAKE ACTION

It's important that however a product is regulated, you should be confident that the company has done robust research and that you can trust its claims. We believe that all companies must be transparent, so that we can scrutinise what's really behind the claims and make a truly informed decision. If you're not convinced by a product's claims, you can ask

the pharmacist to explain the risks and benefits of its ingredients, or suggest an alternative.

OUR EXPERT PANEL

Our expert panel, selected for their clinical and academic expertise, were: Catherine Collins, chief dietician; Dr Anthony Cox, lecturer in pharmacy; Prof. Edzard Ernst, Emeritus professor of complementary therapy; Prof. Peter Houghton, professor in pharmacognosy; Dr Frank King, medicinal chemist; Dr Margaret McCartney, GP; Mr Nilesh Sojitra, consultant plastic surgeon. At least two experts examined the evidence for each product.



TELL US WHAT YOU THINK We've found widely available pharmacy products making claims that our experts don't think stack up. Are you suspicious of the claims made on health products? Share your thoughts at www.which.co.uk/healthclaims



Bach Rescue Remedy Spray £6.90 for 10ml **THE COMPANY SAYS**

'To comfort and reassure; provides support at times of emotional demand... relief for those everyday stressful moments'

OUR EXPERTS SAY The claims are not substantiated by the literature supplied by the company, or more recent research. Rescue Remedy has been tested by a sufficient number of independent investigators and was found to be no more effective in relieving stress than a placebo. The active ingredients' concentrations are extremely dilute and unlikely to have any effect.

Bio-Oil £8.99 for 60ml **THE COMPANY SAYS**

'A specialist skincare product formulated to help improve the appearance of scars, stretch marks and uneven skin tone... highly effective for ageing and dehydrated skin.'

OUR EXPERTS SAY The research isn't robust and doesn't show sufficient evidence to back up the claims. Our expert thinks that any effect on scarring is likely to be from massage and hydration (you could rub in a much cheaper moisturising product, containing liquid paraffin, for example). There is no strong evidence that the scar will end up looking better with Bio-Oil than with cheaper moisturiser.

Boots Cold and Flu Relief Tablets £1.85 for 16 tablets **THE COMPANY SAYS**

'For the relief of symptoms of colds and flu including fever, aches and pains, blocked nose and sinus pain.'

OUR EXPERTS SAY Paracetamol is proven to work for mild to moderate pain, but these capsules each contain 400mg, rather than the more usual 500mg – a lower dose than usually recommended. The vitamin C's effectiveness at the given dose is not proven, and the phenylephrine (decongestant) is not clearly beneficial. While larger caffeine doses may have a small proven effect on pain, its use for colds and flu is less clear.

Adios Slimming Tablets £10.69 for 100 tablets **THE COMPANY SAYS**

'A licensed herbal remedy traditionally used as an aid to slimming. Help(s) speed up weight loss by acting on the body's metabolism.' Active ingredients: plant extracts – boldo, butternut, dandelion root and fucus.

OUR EXPERTS SAY The trials reviewed weren't robust enough to prove that Adios is an effective slimming aid. For example, we saw no trial where one group of patients receives the herbal remedy plus suggested calorie controlled diet, while the second group is treated with a placebo plus diet.