

COMMENTARY

Serious issues in peptides peddling for youth online



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They are an absolute sensation on social media, ubiquitous, pervasive, and just about everywhere on TikTok.

Influencers peddle them, followers ask about them, and they have generated more than 230 million TikTok views as of May among people looking for relief from medical ailments.

“They” are peptides, short chains of amino acids, the building blocks of proteins that are created naturally in our bodies.

To be sure, synthetic forms of peptides that have been approved by the FDA and managed by physicians have had significant health benefits for patients suffering from problems spanning obesity to diabetes. But many peptides don’t have FDA approval, have been peddled irresponsibly on an online gray market, and, as my students and I found in a study of how social media influencers promote peptides on Tik-Tok, the messages can be incomplete and deceptive. It’s a serious problem. A team of undergraduate Cleveland State University School of Communication students — Hannah Gunter, Jack Dominick, Allison Komosa, Alexis Zeidner and Aida Calo — and I systematically analyzed more than 130 videos promoted by female and male influencers, including the popular streamer Clavicular, for a paper we are presenting at the university’s undergraduate student research conference next month.

We found that influencers called on their fit, lean and attractive bodies to promote peptides, with some three-quarters of posts from female gym influencers claiming peptides led to significant improvements after they took the drug.

“Peptides really do have us aging in reverse,” one young, bikini-clad female influencer claimed without offering a shred of evidence for this highly questionable claim.

What concerned us was that as few as 15% of videos from self-proclaimed medical experts encouraged users to seek advice from a physician, and only 10% of these influencers’ videos mentioned serious side effects that could occur from peptides.

But side effects are real and can be severe. They include accelerated heart rates, vision problems and intense stomach pain.

Janice Bending, an older woman, confessed that after two days of taking a weight-management peptide, “I started having problems with

diarrhea and nausea. I felt like I couldn't leave the house, I got so sick from it.”

Yet in the wild, wild West of peptide-pushing persuasion peddlers, peptides are panaceas that can repair DNA and heal wounds faster, despite the fact that influencers rarely substantiate these claims with empirical data.

Indeed, social media influencers have been playing fast and loose with the facts, words and the law.

Although peptides that are dietary or medical supplements do not have to be approved by the FDA, they have become so widely touted on social media that people are likely using them for purposes for which they were not intended, raising serious health issues.

And peptide promoters can elide legal regulations by calling their peptides “for research use only,” since the FDA does not technically regulate research-based chemicals — in this way exposing consumers to risks they have no way of knowing about.

Rather than lifting restrictions on unproven peptides that had been banned for safety reasons, as the FDA is likely to do, the FDA should double down and require companies to demonstrate that medical peptides do what they claim, as well as regulate sales of unapproved peptide products to minors on social media.

The Federal Trade Commission should strictly enforce rules that require influencers to disclose that they have a financial relationship with a peptide brand.

As always, people yearn for a quick fix. Peptides promise to be that fix, but they're not. We need rules to protect us from ourselves.

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