

Research: Pill may shift fat, not melt it

WILLIAMSBURG, Virginia (Reuters) -- Scientists are unlikely to find one magic pill for shedding pounds and an effective obesity-fighter may not help people lose weight, but rather just move it elsewhere on their bodies, researchers said.

Even though a person's weight would stay the same, a shift of body fat away from the waistline would make him or her healthier because extra abdominal fat is linked to higher risks of heart attacks and strokes.

That may disappoint some people in a society seemingly obsessed with looking thin and could dampen interest in such a drug, scientists said.

"It will take some education ... if there's an anti-obesity drug that may not change your body weight but makes you healthier," Andrew Swick, director of metabolic diseases for drug giant Pfizer Inc., said at an obesity conference sponsored by Time magazine and ABC News in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Researchers have focused on the goal of helping people shed pounds. But "what are the real clinical benefits? Are we saving cases of diabetes? Are we saving cases of (heart attacks)?" asked Jean Pierre Despres, director of cardiology research at Laval Hospital Research Center in Quebec.

Obesity is a growing health problem. Nearly two-thirds of people in the United States are overweight and half of them are considered obese, according to government statistics. Obesity raises the risk of heart attacks, some cancers and other health problems and adds billions of dollars to health-care costs.

Past efforts to develop diet drugs have yielded mixed results. The "fen-phen" cocktail was pulled from the market amid worries it could cause heart damage.

Using drugs to treat obesity likely will require a combination of medicines hitting different targets that tell the body to lose weight, said Peter Corr, Pfizer's senior vice president for science and technology.

Researchers are studying signals in the brain that make people hungry and others in the gut that tell the brain the stomach is full. Other approaches include trying to block absorption of certain foods or stimulating metabolism.

"We shouldn't think there's going to be a magic pill out there," Corr said.

Pfizer is studying more than 40 molecular targets associated with weight gain, Corr said. Two medicines are being tested in people and others are in early animal studies.

In one case, Pfizer created mice that lacked a gene involved in regulating body weight. Mice without the gene ate as much as mice with the gene, but the ones without the gene gained less weight, Swick said.

Pfizer is trying to develop a drug that mimics that effect.