8 things patients should know about peptides

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The statement is as clear as could be, yet people are ignoring the warning.

“Not for human consumption,” appears on a wide range of peptides being sold commercially online. Whether people see the precaution and choose to ignore it or don’t notice it in the first place, the desire to improve their own health is actually putting themselves at risk.

How severe the risk is remains to be seen.

“That label is there because they [manufacturers] are really only using that product for research only, and it hasn’t gone into clinical trials or clinical phases where humans have used the product,” said Anthony Tam, MD, a family medicine and sports medicine doctor with Henry Ford Health. “That should raise some red flags for you to understand that, hey, this isn't something that everyone is taking on a day-to-day basis, and there isn't a lot of data to know what could happen if you do take it.”

Peptide injections as an overarching category are not inherently bad. While there are many different types, they broadly can be separated into those approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and those that are not FDA-approved. It’s the ones that are not approved that are particularly concerning, Dr. Tam said.

Dr. Tam explained the benefit of FDA-approved peptides, how social media influencers are impacting unapproved peptide use, risks associated with using unapproved peptides, and why people are turning to peptides in the first place on the latest episode of the AMA podcast “Health vs. Hype.”

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“Health vs. Hype” takes on medical misinformation, viral health trends, DIY medicine, and common health myths to help listeners understand what’s real, what’s risky, and what’s backed by science. Host Trace Dominguez fact-checks popular health claims, explains how medical misinformation spreads, and reveals the real-world consequences of getting it wrong.

Henry Ford Health is part of the AMA Health System Member Program that provides enterprise solutions to equip leadership, physicians and care teams with resources to help drive the future of medicine.

Peptides most often taken by injection

“The most popular route that we're seeing today, they're primarily injections, so needle- and syringe-based,” Dr. Tam said. “The newer form that's come out is the pill form ... but the primary route of administration is by injection.”

Peptides act as messengers in the body

“Peptides are short-chain amino acids, and they basically … tell us to do different processes,” he said. “Some of those different processes include how we metabolize things, how we grow, how we repair our appetite. It can be a number of different things.”

Like vitamins, but with one big difference

“Multivitamins and peptides can be compared to a supplement—it's something that is in my body already, so I'm just adding more of it to help with something that's going on,” Dr. Tam said. “The one thing is that with vitamins and a multivitamin, we have tons of studies to show recommended doses or when to use vitamins in general.”

“Some good examples are vitamin D,” he said. “We get vitamin D through sunlight and through the foods that we eat, and we can check levels to see if they're low because sometimes people can feel fatigued when their vitamin D is low. We have recommendations on appropriate dosing of vitamin D to help replenish those levels.

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Similarly with iron. Iron is something that occurs in our body, we eat it naturally with the foods that we have, and for some people with low blood counts or iron deficiency, it can cause fatigue or tiredness. We have set protocols that we can use to dose iron appropriately to replenish those levels. However, with these newer [unapproved] peptide injections, we don't have those studies."

Unapproved peptides carry risks

"Non-FDA-approved peptide injections, those are the ones that we're really seeing being heavily influenced on social media right now," Dr. Tam said. "The big thing about the non-FDA-approved peptides is that there's some concerns about the safety effect profile and also the routes in which we can get these peptides, which can be concerning."

"It's great that people are super invested in wanting to improve their overall health—that's never a bad thing," he said. "I want to make sure that you're doing it in a safe way. When we're thinking about these peptides, we're exogenously giving an excess amount of something that's in our body, and so there's always some type of extra process that's occurring. The questions that always pop into my mind [are] if you are taking it, how is your body processing it? Is there something else going on that's happening that's overstressing your body that could lead to other issues?"

"The other side of it is the sourcing and obtaining the product," Dr. Tam said. "When there isn't heavy oversight … the question is, does this clear fluid in this vial, does it really contain everything that I'm looking for, or are there other products in there? Are there contaminants? Was it clean where they put the vials together? … You want to make sure that what you're putting into your body is safe."

With the synthetic peptide market expanding quickly, the American Medical Association (AMA) in November adopted policy to address mounting concerns that synthetic peptides that have not been approved by the FDA lack the safety, efficacy, and quality evidence necessary to support their use. Per the new policy, the AMA has urged the Department of Health and Human Services (PDF) to immediately rescind administrative policies, or directives that ease restrictions on compounding and distributing synthetic peptides that

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lack FDA approval.

“We should not bypass the science and put patients at risk by making them guinea pigs for unapproved drugs,” AMA President Willie Underwood III, MD, MSc, MPH, said in a statement. “If these substances are safe and effective, the evidence should demonstrate that through the FDA’s rigorous review process.”

The AMA communicated on the same issue with the FDA back in July (PDF). The Association will also collaborate with federal agencies, state medical boards and state boards of pharmacy to enforce strict regulatory oversight and pursue swift enforcement actions against compounding pharmacies, direct-to-consumer telehealth platforms, and online dispensaries distributing unapproved synthetic peptide formulations that lack FDA regulatory review.

It’s unknown whether peptides can help grow hair

“The data just isn't there on the human studies. So yes, we can see it in our lab studies and our animal studies, but there just haven't been large clinical trials to really show that we can repeat the same results within humans and that it can be safely used without any short-term or long-term side effects,” Dr. Tam said.

GLP-1s are a type of peptide showing big benefits

“We're noticing even now with the GLP-1 injections that there's reportedly more benefits than just weight loss and controlling diabetes,” he said. “Now we're seeing studies that are looking at how GLP-1s can possibly improve brain health. We're also looking to see how it's helping with obstructive sleep apnea [and] helping fatty liver disease.

“Once we get those hard-hitting studies that say that we can safely use it [unapproved peptides] and we can safely replicate it with more and more subjects and more and more humans in these studies, then as doctors, we can be like, ‘Hey, I definitely recommend taking this because I think it'll really benefit you.’ But I can't safely say that right now.”

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Learn with the AMA about five things that patients should know about GLP-1 medications.

Peptide side effects are largely unknown

“If you're injecting yourself through the skin, obviously having skin reactions or irritation from that can always occur,” he said. “Anecdotally, we've noticed people sort of recognizing having headaches or GI side effects with nausea, vomiting, diarrhea [and] constipation.

“We notice that some people have also developed other GI side effects like pancreatitis or gallbladder issues,” Dr. Tam said. “Those are things that have to be monitored or are consulted with a doctor, especially to make sure that you're taking it appropriately. When we're thinking about these newer peptides, we're sort of in the unknown. … We just want to make sure that your organs are appropriately functioning as they should when we're using these types of materials.”

He added that more needs to be known about peptides before fully understanding their value and benefit. “It's always cool to see how science advances and how we're trying to find different ways to improve our health,” Dr. Tam said. “I just think we need to make sure that (unapproved peptides are) safe for us to use. So my hope is that our research can catch up with the trends, and we can provide recommendations on how to use them safely.”

Do research and talk to your doctor

“Asking questions [and] doing your research are all really appropriate steps to take to make sure that what you're putting in your body is appropriate,” he said. “Whether it's doing your own due diligent research or even scheduling an appointment and asking questions to your doctor about it, I think all of those things are good and safe measures to take before considering or starting something” such as unapproved peptide injections.

The AMA has launched a campaign to fight health misinformation and encourage people to turn to the source they can trust—their doctor. The campaign asks one simple question: “Did you ask your doctor?”

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