



The New Jersey Police Chief

The Official Publication of the New Jersey State Association of Chiefs of Police

Vol. 18, No. 2 • February 2012

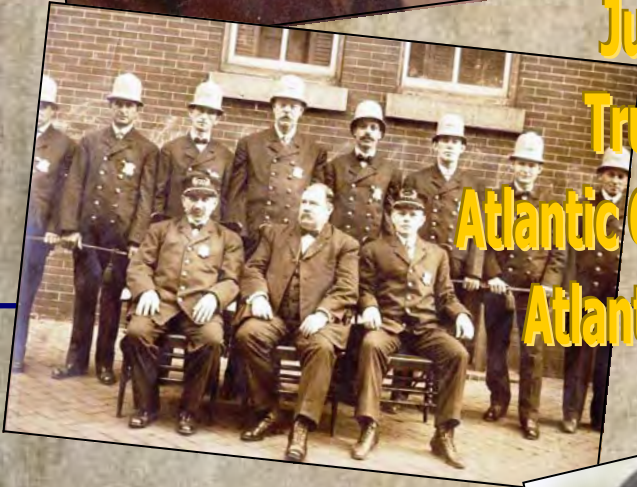
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The Sprinkle Diet: Not so Sensa-ble

*By Matt Brzycki, Assistant Director of Campus Recreation, Fitness
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In an attempt to lose weight, many people resort to products that aren't proven to be effective. Add Sensa to the list. Sensa – aka the Sprinkle Diet, though technically not a diet – is the brainchild of Alan Hirsch, a medical doctor who's the founder and director of the Smell & Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago.

The basic premise is to sprinkle scent-enhancing crystals on food in the same manner as you would salt or pepper. Supposedly, the crystals – referred to as "tastants" – enhance the smell of the food and con your brain into thinking that you're full so that you eat less and lose weight.

Hirsch tried this once before. In 2004, the crystals were marketed as Sprinkle Thin. The company that sold the product went out of business the following year and the concept lay dormant until 2008 when it was resurrected as Sensa.

The ingredients that are in Sensa raise an eyebrow. The first one that's listed on the box is maltodextrin, a food additive that's made from starch. Other ingredients include tricalcium phosphate (an anti-caking agent), silica (a food additive in powdered foods) and natural and artificial flavors along with soy and milk ingredients. None of these ingredients are associated with losing weight.

Sensa is repeatedly touted as being "clinically proven" and two studies are cited in this regard. However, neither study has been published in a peer-reviewed journal. This means that the studies didn't go through a rigorous peer-review process in which experts in a related field do an impartial review of the manuscripts to determine whether or not the studies should be published.

Hirsch claims that the larger of the two studies was peer reviewed by the Endocrine Society. But this isn't true. In 2008, he presented the results of the study at the Endocrine Society's 90th Annual Meeting; this doesn't qualify as peer review. In fact, when questioned by ABC News about Hirsch's claim, the Society stated that it was "surprised and troubled by the promotional nature of his presentation."

Frankly, the study wouldn't survive the rigors of the peer-review process; it's teeming with design flaws and lacking in crucial details. In the study, 2,537 subjects were assigned to either an experimental group (who used the crystals) or a control group (who didn't use the crystals). In order to draw meaningful conclusions from a study, the subjects should be randomly assigned to groups – rather than be selected or chosen for a certain group – and the groups should be roughly the same size. But in this study, there's no mention of how the subjects were assigned to their respective groups. And initially, the experimental group had 2,437 subjects while the control group had 100 subjects.

Of no small importance is the fact that 1,001 subjects dropped out of the study, all from the experimental group. And remember, these were the subjects who sprinkled the crystals on their food. No reasons are given as to why such an enormous number of subjects dropped out. Did they do so because the crystals didn't produce a meaningful loss of weight? Did they do so because of adverse side effects? Nor is there any mention of their results before they dropped out. Did they actually gain weight?

A glaring flaw in the study is that the subjects weighed themselves and reported their own results. Reliance on self-reported data raises questions about the validity of the study. How accurate were their scales? Did they use the same scale for each weigh-in? Did they weigh-in at the same time of day while wearing the same clothing?

What's more, studies of this nature should have a placebo group. This is needed to rule out the so-called placebo effect in which positive results are produced due to the expectation that using the crystals will be effective.

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Note: A placebo is a substance that contains no active ingredients; it should be similar in appearance, taste and smell to the product being investigated – in this case, the crystals – so that the subjects can't distinguish between the product and the placebo.

Let's not forget, too, that this study of Sensa was conducted by an individual who developed the product and has a large financial stake in its sales. There's absolutely no chance that this could bias the results of the study. Riiiiight.

In short, this study might not be acceptable as a high-school science project. A professor from the University of Maryland goes so far as to say that the research is "beyond worthless."

The second study on Sensa is designed better, perhaps in response to the heavy criticism that was directed at the first study. Here, the subjects were randomized into two groups; one of the groups received a placebo; and the researchers and subjects were "blinded" as to who was receiving which treatment. However, the study still lacks many important details. For example, it's said that the study was conducted by an independent, third party but the identity isn't revealed. In addition, very little data is given about the subjects' demographics; absent is important information such as their age, height, weight, BMI and so on. (Curiously, only 6% of the subjects dropped out of this study compared to nearly 40% in the first study.)

On a related note, according to his biography, Hirsch has been published more than 200 times. This includes such prestigious publications as *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. A 12-page document of his "Published Research" notes 11 citations in that journal from 1988 to 2010. Of the 11 citations, nine were reviews of other author's books; the other two were letters to the editor. Needless to say, book reviews and letters to the editor don't count as "published research" and listing them as such can only be viewed as an attempt to deceive.

Sensa doesn't come cheap. Right now, a one-month "starter kit" costs \$59.00 and a six-month weight-loss system "that's clinically proven to help you lose 30.5 pounds" will set you back \$289.00. The company is offering a "free" 30-day trial but it comes with an automatic enrollment plan. And if you don't return the product within 30 days, you'll see an additional charge appear on your credit-card statement for \$89.99.

In 2011, class-action lawsuits were filed in California (April) and Texas (November) against the marketers of Sensa. In California, the complaint asserts that "The sales pitch is false, misleading and unsubstantiated because there is no competent and reliable scientific evidence to substantiate these claims."

Bottom line: These scent-enhancing crystals don't pass the Sniff Test.

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