

Nutri/System Is Dropping Fen-Phen Drug

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The New York Times, September 4, 1997, Thursday, Late Edition

Dateline: Philadelphia, Sept. 3

A national weight-loss chain is discontinuing a drug combination known as fen-phen amid concern that the popular diet drug may cause heart valve damage and high blood pressure.

The chain, Nutri/System Weight Loss Centers plans to switch thousands of patients from fen-phen—a combination of fenfluramine and phentermine—to the new combination of phentermine and the antidepressant Prozac within the next 30 days, company officials said.

Two months ago the Mayo Clinic reported 24 cases of heart valve damage by users of fen-phen. A week ago, the Food and Drug Administration reported 58 more cases and ordered new warning labels. The F.D.A. stopped short of recommending that patients not use the pills, but it urged doctors to be cautious.

“We know the risk is very small, but we felt that it was in the best interests of the customers to offer them the best available program,” said Joseph J. DiBartolomeo, vice president for scientific affairs with Nutri/System, which is based here.

Both of the appetite suppressants in fen-phen are approved by the F.D.A. for short-term use in dieting, although not specifically for use together.

Like fen-phen, phen-pro has its skeptics. “The problem is we just don’t know if they’re safe or not safe,” said Dr. Lewis J. Rubin, head of pulmonary medicine at the University of Maryland Medical School.