

Ephedra banned by feds

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The Bush administration yesterday banned the dietary supplement ephedra — the first time the feds have put the kibosh on an herbal fat fighter.

The government's move came a month after New York imposed its own ephedra ban — and as millions of overweight Americans were resolving today to shed weight in 2004.

"There are far better, safer ways, to get in shape," said Food and Drug Administration chief Mark McClellan.

Ephedra, which works by revving up the metabolism, is used by an estimated 17 million Americans annually.

It has been blamed for 155 deaths, including that of Baltimore Orioles pitcher Steve Bechler in February.

Still, New York health food stores reported that customers continue to clamor for ephedra — never mind that it has been blamed for scores of heart attacks, seizures and strokes.

"We still have many customers coming in looking for ephedra," said salesman Tanto Kris

at the Queens Health Emporium in Fresh Meadows, where one bottle of Solaray brand ephedra remained on the shelves. "Most of them look like athletes."

Rathana Reach, manager of the Quantum Leap Natural Food Market in Fresh Meadows, said customers still want ephedra "but we don't sell it."

The FDA ban came eight years after the agency began receiving reports that ephedra could be dangerous.

"The time to stop taking these products is now," Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson said. "They are simply too risky to be used."

Once a favorite of fatties and bodybuilders, ephedra is particularly risky for anyone with heart disease or high blood pressure or people engaging in strenuous exercise.

McClellan said the FDA has started notifying ephedra manufacturers that the ban goes into effect in 60 days. Patrick Rea, a researcher for the trade magazine Nutrition Business Journal, said they already got the message.

"In 2003, sales of ephedra supplements fell 60% because of the bad publicity," he said. "Companies have already been switching customers to ephedra-free products."

Government watchdogs like Sidney Wolfe of the Public Citizen called the FDA decision "cowardly."

"The FDA waited until the supplement manufacturers stopped making dietary products with ephedra," said Wolfe.

Now, Wolfe fears manufacturers will replace ephedra with other potentially dangerous herbs like bitter orange, which react badly with some prescription medicines.

"And they can do this because the dietary supplement law does not require them to produce any proof of safety," he said.

With T.J. Quinn

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MIKE ALBANS DAILY NEWS

BUSY SCENE Police and firefighters (r., opposite page) converge at scene of fire on Glover St. in the Bronx yesterday morning. Above, they tend to an unidentified person who was injured in the suspicious blaze. Two people died in tragedy and several were injured. At left, a neighbor watches the events unfold from across the street.

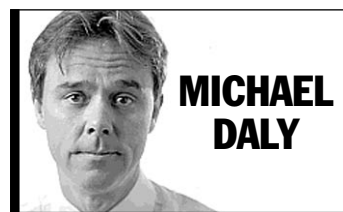
Firebug this time

Terrorism is terrorism, be it flying two airliners into the World Trade Center or pouring gasoline in a Bronx hallway and setting a fire that kills two people, one a woman who has moved back home while her husband is with the Army in Iraq.

Among those rescued by firefighters at the Westchester Square blaze yesterday morning were two others who were in critical condition. These included a 2-year-old boy known for his exuberant smile.

"Indiscriminate, wanton destruction," Fire Lt. Jim McCaffrey said.

McCaffrey was standing outside the charred three-family brick building on Glover St. The stairway to the top floor had



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been doused with gasoline twice in the past month.

The first time was on Thanksgiving night. Police and firefighters evacuated the adjoining building. A spray container filled with gasoline was found four doors down.

Investigators figured the person may have lost his nerve and fled before setting the gasoline in the stairway alight. He may also have been interrupted. Or

he may have intended to give the Cassanova family on the top floor only a scare.

One of the Cassanova daughters, 20-year-old Maria Cruz, was already subject to the hour-by-hour fear that comes with having your husband in a faraway war. She planned to live with her mother only until February, when Roberto Cruz was due to return from Baghdad.

According to neighbors, a relative was so alarmed by the first gasoline incident that she urged the family to move in with her. The relative is supposed to have wondered aloud, "What if they come back?" She meant whoever poured the gasoline.

The family remained on Glover St.; 41-year-old Brenda Cassanova, her two daughters and

FAST FACTS

■ Ephedra is an herb that has been linked to serious health problems and 155 deaths.

■ It is found in about 200 dietary supplements sold over the counter for weight control, muscle building and boosting energy.

■ The chemicals in ephedra act like speed and raise the metabolism. It makes the heart beat faster and can cause a serious rise in blood pressure.

■ Ephedra is banned in New York, Illinois and California and by the NFL, NCAA and International Olympic Committee.

■ In China, ephedra has been used for 4,000 years to treat respiratory infections.

Source: The Associated Press

