

By NATASHA
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WHEN Samantha Pressdee logged on to the internet and bought herbal diet pills, her aim was to drop from a size 12 to a size ten for a forthcoming dance audition.

'There was a roll of fat around my stomach I wanted rid of,' she says. 'I'd done research into the brand of pills I was buying, called Trimspa, and they had glowing reviews. I bought a three-month supply for £90, and thought they would be the miracle cure I was looking for.'

'What led me to take this brand of pills was seeing them endorsed by a celebrity on TV. I thought if someone like that person takes them, then they must be really, really good.'

But, hours after taking her first tablet, Samantha, 28, a dancer from Wednesbury, West Midlands, was beginning to see the changes to her personality that three months later would result in her becoming so paranoid and delusional she was sectioned under the Mental Health Act. She did lose weight — two stone in the first month — but largely because the diet pills put her in such a manic state that she was barely able to eat and sleep.

It's easy to understand why Samantha was tempted by the promise of quick and easy weight loss from simply taking a pill. The UK diet industry is worth more than £1 billion — fuelled by young women desperate to shift a few pounds and by the more than 13 million adults who are expected to be obese by 2012.

Online, hundreds of weight loss pills are available to buy from as little as £14.99 for a month's supply, describing themselves as anything from 'fat magnets' to 'multi-pronged fat attackers'. Some claim users can lose 20lbs in 20 days.

But Dr Ian Campbell, medical director of the charity Weight Concern, is sceptical that such pills give any result at all. 'The only drug that we use in this country for weight loss is Orlistat, which is available in the prescription drugs Xenical and Alli,' he says. 'We don't use other drugs for the simple reason that they are either unsafe or they don't work.'

'There are a multitude of weight loss pills that can be bought over the counter or online, but none of them has any evidence of long-term effectiveness.'

RAYMOND DIXON, an addiction specialist from the Capio Nightingale hospital, London, agrees. 'Most websites selling diet pills are nothing but a big con,' he says. 'They often look very credible. But, in reality, there are no medical professionals involved.'

'Many websites don't feature health warnings or vet the shopper before they buy and it's impossible to know if the site you are looking at is reliable or a front set up by someone who wants to make quick money flogging pills.'

'A recent study of a number of pills bought online, including diet pills, revealed some to be fakes and others to have been cut with ingredients including talcum powder and lead-based ingredients.'

Samantha was to discover too late that the tablets she'd started taking in December 2006 contained the Chinese herb Ephedra.

This has been banned by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for use in diet pills because of the serious effects it can have on people's mental and physical health, including raised blood pressure and stroke risk.

Worryingly, it's still available online. 'Because Trimspa was labelled as herbal, I thought the pills were harmless and I never

Tempted by internet diet pills? They plunged this woman into paranoia



PICTURE: ALISTAIR HEAP

Anguish: Samantha Pressdee had to be hospitalised

even thought about reading up on every ingredient,' says Samantha.

'When I woke up the morning after starting the pack, I was really hyper. I remember frantically cleaning the house — pulling out drawers and rearranging them and cleaning behind cupboards.'

'I didn't think much about it, I just thought I was in the mood for cleaning. I'd just moved back in with my parents in Birmingham and they noticed the difference immediately, although they had no idea I'd been taking diet pills.'

Over the following weeks, Samantha's behaviour escalated as she continued to take three of the pills a day. She says: 'My temper became short. My brother said something to me and I ended up throwing my plate of food on the floor. Afterwards, I'd feel remorseful and was unable to explain my behaviour.'

'Then, after about three weeks of taking the tablets, I had a terrifying episode on a train to London. The driver made an announcement about the next station and I felt sure he was talking about me.'

'I stood up and started shouting at all the other passengers. I got off the train at Milton Keynes, and wandered around for a few hours talking to strangers and sending bizarre text messages. I ended up paying almost £100 for a taxi for the rest of my journey to London.'

I was also getting very confused. I would do things like put ornaments in the fridge. But I didn't make the connection with the diet pills and I was oblivious to quite how bad my behaviour was.'

Naturally, Samantha's parents were becoming increasingly concerned. They took her to her GP twice and called their local mental health team. She was diagnosed with stress, but her parents, unsatisfied with the diagnosis, took Samantha to the mental health unit at the local hospital on two further occasions, only to be sent home again.

'The problem was that although I'd have moments when I'd flip out, I could appear very normal,' says Samantha. 'So each time I was assessed, it appeared there was nothing wrong. I didn't make the connection with the tablets and

was pleased I was losing weight.' Then, in March 2007, three months after starting the tablets, Samantha had her most severe episode. After listening to a voicemail from a friend, she became convinced that someone was 'coming to get her'.

SHE says: 'I started screaming, hitting walls and shouting: "Don't worry, we're covered". Mum and Dad called the mental health crisis team, who arrived with an ambulance, and they spotted the diet pills in my room.'

'I was taken to A&E, where I was in such a state I stripped off all my clothes and walked around naked. I then tried to escape through the window and ended up being wrestled to the floor by staff.'

'I was sectioned there and then. In the report made about my behaviour, it says I was saying I'd been blessed with special powers, but I don't remember any of it.'

Over the next few days, Samantha was sedated with sleeping tablets and given mood stabilising drugs.

She spent two weeks in a mental health unit and, after being discharged, was treated at home and visited every day by a specialist nurse for three months.

'The doctors said I'd had a manic episode bought on by the tablets,

and that I was lucky to have not been left with any long-term psychiatric problems,' says Samantha.

'About three months later, I was pretty much back to normal — but nothing could take away from the humiliation.'

'I felt foolish for having bought the pills online and humiliated when I met up with friends who'd seen me when I was psychotic.'

'I lost some friends through it, as I'd done terrible things. I still have flashbacks over what happened, especially those horrific few hours before I was sectioned.'

Dr Campbell says: 'What happened to Samantha is extreme, but Ephedra is an amphetamine-like compound that is well known to be capable of causing all sorts of problems with the heart, blood pressure as well as state of mind.'

'The bottom line is that if people think they need medication to lose weight, they should do it with the support of their GP.'

'Anything else is guaranteed to be at best ineffective, and at the worst, risky.'

'They are sentiments with which Samantha agrees. 'I had no idea diet pills could pose any health risk, let alone lead to having the sort of breakdown I did. It horrifies me how easily these tablets are available. I feel lucky to be back to good health.'

'No amount of weight loss could ever be worth what I went through. I would never even contemplate taking such a product again.'

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