

February 2024

Dear Honorable Members of the Maryland Health and Government Operations Committee,

My name is Jad Abdel Nour, and I am a high school senior writing to urge your support of Maryland House Bill 0739. Growing up in an increasingly digital world, I've witnessed how diet culture has impacted the youth mental health crisis, especially with the rise of social media.

People often want quick fixes, but these solutions aren't always the best. That's especially the case for youth taking over-the-counter diet pills with the misguided belief that they will change their physique. Sadly, companies frequently use deceptive claims to exploit children's insecurities about their weight and their bodies.

In a study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (Geller, 2015)¹, researchers estimate that 23,000 people of all ages in the United States are treated in emergency departments across the country every year due to injuries associated with dietary supplements. Having the Maryland Department of Health create a list of diet pills that is accessible to consumers is crucial due to the significant health risks associated with these products as a result of toxic ingredients and interactions with other medications. Even more troubling, predatory supplement companies target youth with deceptive claims about the safety and efficacy of these products, claiming users will achieve a perfect body.

After observing my friends and peers struggle with their body image and confidence, I've become passionate about advocating to make knowledge about diet pills, such as a list of these products, accessible to consumers.

Pursuing a healthier lifestyle and habits, a friend started going to the gym and eating more nutritious foods that make her feel good. Unsatisfied with her results from other weight control methods and influenced by her social media idols, she turned to a diet pill in hopes of achieving a "perfect" body. She was also drawn in by the marketing of this product, promising that she would lose more weight and burn more calories. After she told me about her use, I immediately informed her about the health risks and to stop using them. In our conversation, she shared how she didn't know of and never thought about any harmful side effects because of the captivating marketing of helping her lose weight. During her period of this product usage, she experienced heartburn, dehydration, and nausea, and she developed unhealthy weight-control behaviors and body image issues, including body dysmorphia and constant weight checks.

Seeing these products readily available without restrictions normalizes their use and downplays their serious health risks. This perpetuates the deceptive claims and sneaky marketing tactics made by manufacturers, such as you'll be able to lose a certain number of pounds in a specific time frame. These products can adversely affect young bodies by causing insomnia, contributing to depression and mood swings, and straining the liver and kidneys, which could lead to further damage.

By enacting this legislation, we take a proactive step towards fostering a healthier environment and positive self-image among youth and creating a safer space for those with eating disorders. Given my own experiences and observations, it's clear that young individuals are susceptible to societal pressures and often make decisions without fully understanding the risks associated with these products.

As a high school student, I am exposed to the daily mental health toll these supplements foster. I ask you to please vote in favor of House Bill 0739 to require the Maryland Department of Health to create a list of diet pills that is accessible to consumers. This is a vital first step in protecting the health of Maryland youth. Thank you for your time and for listening to my concerns.

Citations:

¹ (Geller, Andrew I., et al. "Emergency Department Visits for Adverse Events Related to Dietary Supplements." *New England Journal of Medicine*, vol. 373, no. 16, 2015, pp. 1531–1540, <https://doi.org/10.1056/nejmsa1504267>.)