

AgePage

Health Quackery: Spotting Health Scams

You see the ads everywhere these days — “Smart Drugs for Long Life” or “Arthritis Aches and Pains Disappear Like Magic!”

or even testimonials claiming, “This treatment cured my cancer in one week.” It’s easy to understand the appeal of these promises.

But there is still plenty of truth to the old saying, “If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!”

Quacks — people who sell unproven remedies — have been around for years. Today they have more ways than ever to peddle their wares. In addition to TV, radio, magazines, newspapers, infomercials, mail,



and even word-of-mouth, they now can use the internet — websites offer miracle cures; emails tell stories of overnight magic. Sadly, older people are often the target for such scams. In fact, a government study found that most victims of health care fraud are over age 65.

The problem is serious. Unproven remedies may be harmful. They may also waste money. And, sometimes, using these remedies keeps people from getting the medical treatment they need.

What Do Quacks Promise?

Unproven remedies promise false hope. Often they offer cures that are painless or quick. Why do people fall for these sales pitches? After all, at best these treatments are worthless. At worst, they are dangerous. One reason health care scams work is that they prey on people who are frightened or in pain. Living with a chronic health problem is hard. It’s easy to see why people might fall for a false promise of a quick and painless cure.

You may see unproven remedies in products for:

Anti-Aging. Claims for pills or treatments that lead to eternal youth play on the great value our culture places on staying young. But, aging

is normal. A product may smooth your wrinkles, but no treatments have yet been proven to slow the aging process. Eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise, and not smoking are your best bets to help prevent some of the diseases that occur more often with age. In other words, making healthy lifestyle choices can increase your chances of aging well.

Arthritis Remedies. Unproven arthritis remedies can be easy to fall for because symptoms of arthritis tend to come and go. You may believe the remedy you are using is making you feel better when, in fact, it is just the normal ebb and flow of your symptoms. You may see claims that so-called treatments with herbs, oils, chemicals, special diets, radiation, and other products cured arthritis. This is highly unlikely. Individual testimonials alone do not guarantee that a product is effective. Instead, scientific studies proving that a treatment works are needed. While these products may not hurt you, they are costly and aren't likely to help much either. There is no cure for most forms of arthritis, but rest, exercise, heat, and drugs can help many people control their symptoms. If you are thinking about a new treatment, talk with your doctor first.

Cancer Cures. Quacks prey on people's fear of cancer. They promote treatments with no proven value — for example, a diet dangerously low in protein or drugs such as Laetrile. By using unproven methods, people with cancer may lose valuable time and the chance to receive a proven, effective treatment. This delay may lessen the chance for controlling or curing the disease.

Memory Aids. Many people worry about losing their memory as they age. They may wrongly believe false promises that unproven treatments can help them keep or improve their memory. So-called smart pills, removal of amalgam dental fillings, and brain retraining exercises are all examples of untested approaches that claim to help memory.

How Can You Protect Yourself From Health Scams?

Be wary. Question what you see or hear in ads or on the internet. Newspapers, magazines, radio, and TV stations do not always check to make sure the

claims in their ads are true. Find out about a product before you buy. Don't let a sales person force you to make a snap decision. Check with your doctor first.

Remember stories about the old snake oil salesman who traveled from town to town making claims for his fabulous product? Well, chances are today's quack is using the same sales tricks. Look for red flags in ads or promotional material that:

- ◆ Promise a quick or painless cure,
- ◆ Claim to be made from a special, secret, or ancient formula — often only available by mail or from one sponsor,
- ◆ Use testimonials or undocumented case histories from satisfied patients,
- ◆ Claim to be effective for a wide range of ailments,
- ◆ Claim to cure a disease (such as arthritis or cancer) that is not yet understood by medical science,
- ◆ Offer an additional “free” gift or a larger amount of the product as a “special promotion,” or
- ◆ Require advance payment and claim limited availability of the product.

For More Information

If you have questions about a product, talk to your doctor or contact one of the organizations below. Get the facts about health products and protect yourself from health care hoaxes.

National Cancer Institute (NCI) Cancer Information Service (CIS)

Phone: 1-800-4-CANCER

(1-800-422-6237)

TTY: 1-800-332-8615

<http://cis.nci.nih.gov>

National Arthritis, Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases Information Clearinghouse (NIAMS)

1 AMS Circle

Bethesda, MD 20892

Phone: 1-877-22-NIAMS

(1-877-226-4267 – toll-free)

TTY: 301-565-2966

www.niams.nih.gov

Council of Better Business Bureaus (CBBB)

4200 Wilson Boulevard

8th Floor

Arlington, VA 22203

Check the telephone book for the number of your local chapter.

www.bbb.org

Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

Room 421

600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW

Washington, DC 20580

Phone: 1-877-FTC-HELP

(1-877-382-4357—toll-free)

TTY: 1-800-326-2996

www.ftc.gov

U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA)

5600 Fishers Lane

Rockville, MD 20857-0001

Phone: 1-888-INFO-FDA

(1-888-463-6332—toll-free)

www.fda.gov

U.S. Postal Inspection Service (USPS)

Office of Investigation

Washington, DC 20206-2166

Check the telephone book for the number of your local postal inspector.

www.usps.com/postalinspectors/fraud/

Quackwatch, Inc.

Quackwatch, Inc, is a nonprofit corporation making information available to combat health-related frauds, myths, fads, and fallacies.

www.quackwatch.org

For more information on health and aging, contact:

National Institute on Aging Information Center

P.O. Box 8057

Gaithersburg, MD 20898-8057

1-800-222-2225 (toll-free)

1-800-222-4225 (TTY toll-free)

To order publications (in English or Spanish) or sign up for regular email alerts, visit: *www.niapublications.org*.

The National Institute on Aging website is *www.nia.nih.gov*.

Visit NIHSeniorHealth.gov (*www.nihseniorhealth.gov*), a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This simple-to-use website features popular health topics for older adults. It has large type and a ‘talking’ function that reads the text out loud.



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