

Beware of Online Cancer Fraud

While health fraud is a cruel form of greed, fraud involving cancer treatments can be particularly heartless—especially because fraudulent information can travel around the Web in an instant.

“Anyone who suffers from cancer, or knows someone who does, understands the fear and desperation that can set in,” says Gary Coody, R.Ph., the National Health Fraud Coordinator and a Consumer Safety Officer with the Food and Drug Administration’s (FDA) Office of Regulatory Affairs. “There can be a great temptation to jump at anything that appears to offer a chance for a cure.”

Medicinal products and devices intended to treat cancer must gain FDA approval before they are marketed. The agency’s review process helps ensure that these products are safe and effective.

Nevertheless, it’s always possible to find someone or some company hawking bogus cancer “treatments.” Such “treatments” come in many forms, including pills, tonics, and creams. “They’re frequently offered as natural treatments and ‘dietary supplements,’” says Coody. Many of these fraudulent cancer products even appear completely harmless, but may cause indirect harm by delaying or interfering with proven, beneficial treatments.

“Advertisements and other promotional materials touting bogus cancer ‘cures’ have probably been around as long as the printing press,” says Coody. “However, the Internet has compounded the problem by providing the peddlers of these often dangerous products a whole new outlet.”



Promotions for bogus cancer ‘cures’ are nothing new, but the Internet is providing a whole new outlet. Shown: two bogus treatments recently purchased online by FDA staff, and a 1957 FDA warning.

FDA Press Release
www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2008/NEW01852.html

187 Fake Cancer ‘Cures’ Consumers Should Avoid
www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/factsheets/fakecancerures.html

CDER: Fake Cancer Cures
www.fda.gov/cder/news/fakecancerures.htm

Unproven ‘Remedies,’ False Promises

Coody cites black salves as one of the fake cancer “remedies” that indeed have proven to be harmful. “Although it is illegal to market these salves as a cancer treatment, they are readily available online,” he says.

The salves are sold with false

promises that they will cure cancer by “drawing out” the disease from beneath the skin. “However, there is no scientific evidence that black salves are effective,” says Janet Woodcock, Director of FDA’s Center for Drug Evaluation and Research (CDER). “Even worse, black salves can cause direct harm to the patient.”

The corrosive, oily salves “essentially burn off layers of the skin and surrounding normal tissue,” says Woodcock. “This is not a simple, painless process. There are documented cases of these salves destroying large parts of people’s skin and underlying tissue, leaving terrible scars.”

Another unproven “remedy” that has been hawked for decades is an herbal regimen known as the Hoxsey Cancer Treatment. “FDA has taken regulatory and enforcement action against this discredited course of therapy beginning in the 1950s,” says Coody.

“There is no scientific evidence that it has any value to treat cancer,” he adds. “Yet consumers can go online right now and find all sorts of false claims that Hoxsey treatment is effective against the disease.”

Red Flags

Coody says that firms engaged in cancer treatment or prevention fraud often use exaggerated and bogus claims to promote these products. He adds that consumers should recognize the following phrases as red flags:

“Treats all forms of cancer”

“Skin cancers disappear”

“Shrinks malignant tumors”

“Non-toxic”

“Doesn’t make you sick”

“Avoid painful surgery, radiotherapy, chemotherapy, or other conventional treatments”

“Treat Non Melanoma Skin Cancers easily and safely”

“Unproven claims are also found in unverified testimonials, research results, or even in product and website names,” says Coody.

He offers important points that consumers seeking cancer treatments should keep in mind:

- Always consult with your health care professional before starting

Signs of Health Fraud

All consumers seeking information about any health product or medical treatment should be familiar with the following signs of health fraud:

- Statements that the product is a quick and effective cure-all or a diagnostic tool for a wide variety of ailments.
- Suggestions that a product can treat or cure serious or incurable diseases.
- Claims such as “scientific breakthrough,” “miraculous cure,” “secret ingredient,” and “ancient remedy.”
- Impressive-sounding terms, such as “hunger stimulation point” and “thermogenesis” for a weight loss product.
- Claims that the product is safe because it is “natural.”
- Undocumented case histories or personal testimonials by consumers or doctors claiming amazing results.
- Claims of limited availability and advance payment requirements.
- Promises of no-risk, money-back guarantees.
- Promises of an “easy” fix for problems like excess weight, hair loss, or impotency.

a new treatment or adding one to existing therapies. “Some products may interact with your medicines or keep them from working the way they are supposed to,” says Coody.

- Understand the difference between fraudulent drug products and what FDA calls “investigational drugs.” Investigational drugs undergo clinical testing to determine if they are safe and effective for their intended uses. Fraudulent products, on the other hand, are unapproved and typically have never been clinically tested or reviewed by FDA for safety and effectiveness. Marketing them is a violation of federal law.

“There are legal ways for patients to access investigational drugs,” says Coody. “The most common way is by taking part in clinical trials. But patients can also receive investigational drugs outside of clinical trials in some cases.” For more details on this, visit www.fda.gov/oashi/speedaccess.html.

Agencies Take Action

FDA and the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), in collaboration with other North American government agencies, have announced a new initiative to prevent these deceptive products from reaching consumers. Coody says that as part of the joint

campaign, FDA and FTC have sent approximately 135 warning letters and two advisory letters to firms that market these products online.

The initiative originated not only from consumer complaints, he says, but also from a Web surf for fraudulent cancer products by FDA and members of the Mexico-United States-Canada Health fraud working group (MUCH). [FDA](#)

For More Information

FDA Press Release
www.fda.gov/bbs/topics/NEWS/2008/NEW01852.html

FDA: Cracking Down on Health Fraud
www.fda.gov/fdac/features/2006/606_fraud.html

FDA’s Cancer Liaison Program
www.fda.gov/oashi/cancer/cancer.html

National Cancer Institute: Clinical Trials
www.cancer.gov/clinicaltrials

Competition Bureau Canada’s Project False Hope
www.competitionbureau.gc.ca/epic/site/cb-bc.nsf/en/02614e.html

FTC Announces Operation False Hope
www.ftc.gov/curious