



BEWARE DIETARY SUPPLEMENT SCAMS AND ‘MIRACLE’ HEALTH CLAIMS

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

SINCE THE FRONTIER DAYS, WHEN POPULAR legend has it that so-called snake oil salesmen roamed Texas in covered wagons, slick scam artists have tried to make a living selling “miracle” cures to common ailments. Aided by the Internet and direct marketing schemes, that timeless profession still thrives today. So Texans should keep an old adage in mind before they open their wallets: if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

Texans hoping to lose weight without good nutritional habits and exercise, or cure an ailment without a doctor should think twice before spending their hard-earned money on unproven products, treatments or devices. The odds are that their shortcut will cost more and deliver less than a conventional method.

Products that promise a quick fix to problems such as weight loss, diseases or perceived body imperfections are particularly popular among scam artists. To avoid wasting their money, Texans should seek advice from healthcare professionals.

According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), health fraud scams often target individuals who are overweight or have serious, incurable conditions such as cancer, AIDS or arthritis. Unfortunately, desperate customers are most likely to fall prey to marketers that boast of products with sophisticated-sounding ingredients like enzymes, amino acids and even

common herbs.

One well-known defendant sold 15 products nationwide with names such as Altovis, Enzyte, Mioplex, Numovil, and Suvaril. The company used advertising gimmicks like the “Smiling Bob” Enzyte commercials and others that resembled advertisements for genuine, FDA-approved drugs. “Free product trials” were offered to get customers’ private information, which it later used to ship products and bill consumers without their consent. After investigating the situation, the Office of the Attorney General (OAG) filed an enforcement action and the company agreed to stop the deceptive trial offers.

Any weight-loss product that purports to shave off pounds while customers eat excessively is false and misleading. Losing weight requires taking in fewer calories or burning more calories through exercise (or both). The same applies for supplements — none can cure arthritis or cancer, and certainly not in five days. Texans should be cautious of any claims stating that dietary supplements can shrink tumors, cure insomnia or prevent memory loss. For companies to legitimately make such claims, they must follow the FDA’s pre-market testing and review process required for new drugs.

In other cases, over zealous marketing companies will overstate an otherwise legitimate product’s ability to cure a common ailment. For example,

Airborne Health, Inc., marketed its dietary supplements as over-the-counter remedies for illnesses. But, the FDA, which is charged with approving and regulating drugs – including over-the-counter products – has not recognized any Airborne product as a drug. The OAG joined with more than 30 other states and pursued Airborne for improperly marketing its products and overstating their medicinal qualities. The states reached an agreement with Airborne, and the company agreed to refrain from claiming that its dietary supplements cure or prevent diseases.

Texans may be throwing away hard-earned money, or in some cases exposing themselves to health risks by using unregulated, unproven, non-FDA-approved products and supplements. Consumers should also be aware that some vitamins and minerals, if consumed in excessive quantities, can also cause health problems. To actually protect their health and well-being, customers should read all labels and package inserts, follow directions, check with healthcare professionals and exercise regularly.

To report a health product that Texas consumers believe is being advertised falsely, contact the FTC toll-free at (877) 382-4357 or online at www.ftc.gov and click on “File a Complaint Online.” Texans can also file a complaint with the OAG by calling (800) 252-8011 or visiting www.texasattorneygeneral.gov.

POINTS TO REMEMBER



“MIRACLE” DRUG & SUPPLEMENT SCAMS

- If you take a prescription medicine, always consult your healthcare professional before starting a dietary supplement.
- Claims that sound too good to be true, usually are.
- Weight loss cannot be achieved without reducing calories, increasing exercise, or both.
- Be wary of companies that collect personal or financial information before sending you a free trial.

Federal Trade Commission

(877) FTC-HELP or (877) 382-4357
www.ftc.gov

Food and Drug Administration

(888) INFO-FDA or (888) 463-6332
www.fda.gov

Office of the Attorney General

(800) 252-8011
www.texasattorneygeneral.gov



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