

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

Virtual “Treatments” Can Be Real-World Deceptions

Washington, D.C. — Unscrupulous marketers are using cyberspace to peddle “miracle” treatments and cures to vulnerable consumers. Many of their ads, which feature exotic potions and pills, strange magnetic or electrical devices, special curative diets, or “newly discovered” therapies, contain questionable claims about the effectiveness and safety of these products or services. So says the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which found the misleading or deceptive ads while surfing the Internet.

Misleading offers for products and treatments for heart disease, cancer, AIDS, diabetes, arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and other medical conditions could be costly in several ways, according to the FTC. Consumers could lose their money and increase their health risk, especially if they delay or forego proper medical treatment. There also is the risk that these products may have dangerous interactions with other medicines. The FTC advises consumers to consult their doctor, pharmacist, other healthcare professionals, or public health organizations before purchasing any product or treatment with a claim that sounds too good to be true.

The FTC cautions consumers who have a serious or chronic illness to be wary as they consider ads for products or services to treat their conditions — whether the pitches are made on the Internet, television or radio, or in newspapers, magazines, or brochures — and to ask themselves one very important question: If a medical breakthrough really has occurred in the treatment of a serious illness, would the news be announced first in an ad?

How can you tell if an advertising claim for a “miracle” health-related product is likely to be phony, exaggerated, or unproven? The FTC says these tip-offs generally signal a rip-off:

- Claims that a product is a “scientific breakthrough,” “miraculous cure,” “secret ingredient” or “ancient remedy.”
- Claims that the product is an effective cure for a wide range of ailments. No product can cure multiple conditions or diseases.
- Claims that use impressive-sounding medical terms. They’re often covering up a lack of good science.
- Undocumented case histories of people who’ve had amazing results. It’s too easy to make them up. And even if true, they can’t be generalized to the entire population. Anecdotes are not a substitute for valid science.
- Claims that the product is available from only one source, and payment is required in advance.
- Claims of a “money-back” guarantee.
- Claims that the medical profession or research scientists are conspiring to suppress the advertised product to keep their market share.
- Websites that fail to list the company’s name, physical address, phone number or other contact information.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint, or to get free information on any of 150 consumer topics, call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357), or use the complaint form at www.ftc.gov. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.