

AgePage

Beware of Health Scams

You see ads for miracle drugs everywhere these days—supplements that claim to stop or reverse aging, or make aches and pains disappear like magic! You might even see statements like, “This treatment cured my cancer in 1 week.” They appear to offer hope, but they aren’t true.

Today, there are more ways than ever to sell untested products—online, TV, radio, magazines, and newspapers are just a few examples. Actors portray doctors and patients on infomercials. You might even get an email urging you to try a product. It can be hard to tell what’s an ad.

The problem is serious. Untested remedies may be harmful. They may get in the way of medicines prescribed by your doctor. They may be expensive and a waste of money. And, sometimes, using these products keeps people from getting the medical treatment they need.

False Hopes

Why do people fall for these sales pitches? Unproven remedies promise false hope. Ads where people say they have been cured do not prove that a product works. They offer solutions that appear to be quick and painless. At best, these treatments are worthless. At worst, they are dangerous.

Health scams set their sights on people who are scared or in pain. It’s easy to see why a person might be tempted to believe in the promise of a miracle remedy. Living with a chronic health problem is hard.

Health scams usually target diseases that may have treatments for symptoms but currently have no cures. You may see ads for:

◆ **Anti-aging therapies.** Our culture places great value on staying young, but aging is normal. Pills or other treatments for endless youth have not been scientifically proven to slow or reverse the aging process. Eating a healthy diet, not smoking, and getting regular exercise or staying physically active are ways to really help prevent some of the diseases that occur with age. In other words, making healthy choices offers you the best chance for aging well.

◆ **Arthritis remedies.** You may see claims that treatments with magnets,

Clinical Trials: Evaluating Treatments

The best way for scientists to find out if a treatment works is through a clinical trial. A clinical trial is a research study in people. It might test ways to prevent, screen, diagnose, or treat a disease. Some studies compare how well different treatments work.

Visit NIH Clinical Research Trials and You (www.nih.gov/health/clinicaltrials) to learn about clinical trials.

copper bracelets, chemicals, special diets, radiation, and other products can cure arthritis. This is highly unlikely. Unproven arthritis remedies can be easy to believe because symptoms of arthritis tend to come and go. There is no cure for most forms of arthritis. Rest, exercise, heat, and some drugs help many people control their symptoms. If you are thinking about any new treatment, such as a diet, a device, or another arthritis product, talk with your doctor first.

◆ **Cancer cures.** Scam artists prey on a fear of cancer. They promote treatments with no proven value. There is no one treatment that cures all types of cancer. By using unproven methods, people with cancer may lose valuable time and the chance to benefit from a proven,

effective treatment. This delay may lessen the chance of controlling or curing the disease.

◆ **Memory aids.** Many people worry about losing their memory as they age. So-called smart pills, removal of amalgam dental fillings, and some brain training programs are examples of untested approaches that falsely promise to keep or improve memory.

◆ **Dietary supplements.** Americans spend billions of dollars each year on dietary supplements. They are sold over-the-counter, without a prescription, and include vitamins and minerals, amino acids, herbs, and enzymes. The Federal Government does not consider dietary supplements to be medicines and does not monitor them in the same way it does prescription medicines. Most dietary supplements are not fully tested to make sure they are safe and do what they promise. While some vitamins may be helpful, supplements may be bad for people taking certain medicines or with some medical conditions. Be wary of claims that a supplement can shrink tumors, solve impotence, or cure Alzheimer's disease. Talk to your doctor before starting any supplement.

◆ **Health insurance.** Some companies offer health insurance coverage that promises more than it intends to

deliver. When you think about buying health insurance, remember to find out if the company and agent are licensed in your State. The website www.healthcare.gov can help.

How Can You Protect Yourself From Health Scams?

Be skeptical. Question what you see or hear in ads or online. Newspapers, magazines, movies, and radio and TV stations do not always check to make sure the claims in their ads are true or say if a celebrity is being paid to endorse a product. Ask your doctor, nurse, other healthcare provider, or pharmacist about a product before you buy it. Don't let a salesperson talk you into making a snap decision. Look for red flags in ads or promotional material that:

- ◆ Promise a quick or painless cure
- ◆ Claim the product is made from a special, secret, or ancient formula
- ◆ Offer products and services only by mail or from one company
- ◆ Use statements or unproven case histories from so-called satisfied patients
- ◆ Claim to be a cure for a wide range of ailments

- ◆ Claim to cure a disease (such as arthritis or Alzheimer's disease) that hasn't been cured by medical science
- ◆ Promise a no-risk, money-back guarantee
- ◆ Offer an additional free gift or a larger amount of the product as a special promotion
- ◆ Require advance payment and claim there is a limited supply of the product

Two Federal Government agencies work to protect you from health scams. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) can help you spot fraud and misleading ads. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) protects the public by assuring the safety of prescription drugs, biological products, medical devices, food, cosmetics, and radiation-emitting products. If you have questions about a product, talk to your doctor. Getting the facts about healthcare products can help protect you from health scams.

For More Information

Here are some helpful resources:

Federal Trade Commission

FTC Complaint Assistant

1-877-382-4357 (toll-free)

1-866-653-4261 (TTY/toll-free)

www.ftc.gov

Food and Drug Administration

Room 5377, Building 32
10903 New Hampshire Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20993
1-888-463-6332 (toll-free)
www.fda.gov

National Cancer Institute

BG 9609 MSC 9760
9609 Medical Center Drive
Bethesda, MD 20892-9760
1-800-422-6237
(1-800-4-CANCER/toll-free)
www.cancer.gov

National Institute of Arthritis and Musculoskeletal and Skin Diseases

Information Clearinghouse
1 AMS Circle
Bethesda, MD 20892-3675
1-877-226-4267 (toll-free)
1-301-565-2966 (TTY)
www.niams.nih.gov

U.S. Postal Inspection Service

Criminal Investigations Service Center
Attention: Mail Fraud
433 West Harrison Street, Room 3255
Chicago, IL 60699-3255
1-877-876-2455 (toll-free)
<https://postalinspectors.uspis.gov>

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)
www.nia.nih.gov
www.nia.nih.gov/espanol

To sign up for regular email alerts about new publications and other information from the NIA, go to www.nia.nih.gov/health.

Visit www.nihseniorhealth.gov, a senior-friendly website from the National Institute on Aging and the National Library of Medicine. This website has health and wellness information for older adults. Special features make it simple to use. For example, you can click on a button to make the type larger.



**National Institute
on Aging**

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