

AgePage

Beware Of Health Scams

You see the ads everywhere these days—“Smart Drugs” for long life or “Arthritis Aches and Pains Disappear Like Magic!” or even statements claiming, “This treatment cured my cancer in 1 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!”

Health scams and the marketing of unproven cures have been around for many years. Today, there are more ways than ever to sell these untested products. In addition to TV, radio, magazines, newspapers, infomercials, mail, tele-marketing, and even word-of-mouth,



these products are now offered over the Internet—with websites describing miracle cures and emails telling stories of overnight magic. Sadly, older people are often the target of such scams.

The problem is serious. Untested remedies may be harmful. They may get in the way of medicines prescribed by your doctor. They may also waste 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. They offer cures that appear to be painless or quick. At best, these treatments are worthless. At worst, they are dangerous. Health scams 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. The best way for scientists to find out if a treatment works is through a clinical trial.

These scams usually target diseases that

Clinical Trials: Evaluating Treatments

A clinical trial is a research study that tests how well new medical approaches work in people. Studies try to find ways to prevent, screen, diagnose, or treat a disease. Clinical trials may also compare treatments.

have no cures, like diabetes, arthritis, and Alzheimer's disease. You may see ads for:

◆ **Anti-aging medications.** Our culture places great value on staying young, but aging is normal. Despite claims about pills or treatments that lead to endless youth, no treatments have been proven to slow or reverse the aging process. Eating a healthy diet, getting regular exercise, and not smoking are proven ways to help prevent some of the diseases that occur with age. In other words, making healthy lifestyle choices offers you the best chance 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 magnets, copper bracelets, chemicals, special diets, radiation, and other products cure arthritis. This is highly unlikely. Ads where people say they have been cured do not prove that a product works. Some of these products could hurt you, aren't likely to help, and are often costly. There is no cure for most forms of arthritis. Rest, exercise, heat, and some drugs help many people control their symptoms. Don't trust ads where people say they have been cured. This kind of statement probably doesn't tell the whole story. If you are thinking about any new treatment, such as 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—for example, a diet dangerously low in protein or drugs such as laetrile. Remember: 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. 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 certain brain-retraining exercises are some examples of untested approaches.

◆ **Dietary supplements.** Americans spend billions of dollars each year on dietary supplements. These supplements are sold over-the-counter and include vitamins and minerals, amino acids, herbs, and enzymes. Most dietary supplements do not undergo government testing or review before they are put on the market. 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 target people who are unable to get health insurance. They offer 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.

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 salesperson talk you into making a snap decision. Check with your healthcare provider first.

Remember the old stories about the snake oil salesman who traveled from town to town making wild claims for his fabulous

product? Well, chances are that today's scam artists are using the same sales tricks. 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 can help you spot fraud. The Food and Drug

Administration 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:

Council of Better Business Bureaus

4200 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 800
Arlington, VA 22203-1838
1-703-276-0100
www.us.bbb.org

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

10903 New Hampshire Avenue
Silver Spring, MD 20993-0002
1-888-463-6332 (toll-free)
www.fda.gov

National Cancer Institute

Public Inquiries Office

6116 Executive Boulevard

Suite 300

Bethesda, MD 20892-8322

1-800-422-6237

(1-800-4-CANCER, toll-free)

www.cancer.gov/aboutnci/cis

**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

<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)

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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 have the text read out loud or to make the type larger.



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Human Services

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