



Medical Quackery

Sure-cures for medical problems, whether chronic or terminal, drain millions of dollars from consumers' wallets each year. They also keep thousands of consumers from seeking evidence-based remedies for treatable medical conditions.

TV infomercials, unsolicited emails and magazines, internet, newspaper and radio advertisements often make fabulous claims, use official-sounding titles and showcase testimonials from enthusiastic customers.

Today's snake oil sellers try to convince you they have discovered new solutions to age-old problems. They use national advertising campaigns to deceptively sell "miracles" they cannot produce – potions and products for health, beauty, vitality and happiness.

Spotting a scam

Take caution if looking to buy a health-related product that is being promoted by one of the following sales pitches:

- Does the promoter use testimonials that sound too good to be true?
- Does the ad promise "a quick and easy cure?"
- Does the promoter use key words such as "miraculous," "exclusive," "secret," or "ancient"?
- Is the product said to contain mysterious and exotic ingredients from far-away places?
- Is the product advertised as available from only one source requiring payment in advance?
- Is the product advertised as effective for a wide range of ailments or for undiagnosed pain?
- Does the ad include an endorsement from a celebrity without any expertise?
- Does the promoter suggest that doctors or the government are conspiring to keep an effective cure out of your hands?



When evaluating an offer, do not rely on promises of a "money-back guarantee." Be aware that many fly-by-night operators will never be there to respond to a refund request.

"Free" offers

Be wary of "free" trial offers. The trial period will often be far too short for you to determine whether the product makes a difference, and the promoter will probably stick you with an excessive, nonrefundable charge for shipping and handling. It may be difficult to cancel your trial, and you may even be responsible for additional "refill" shipments of the product if you do not, or cannot, cancel on time. Also beware of negative option billing which is where the company continues to send you the product and you are responsible to pay until you contact the company to terminate the order.

Protect yourself

Protect your health and your wallet by taking the following precautions:

- Do not trust your health to a salesperson, ad or TV infomercial. Take the time to find a credentialed primary health care provider that you can trust to give you sound medical advice.

- Do not believe claims that a “secret” or “miracle drug” will work wonders on a wide variety of ailments.
- Do not buy medical devices, bracelets or other products without first consulting your doctor or other appropriate health professional.
- Be skeptical of claims of immediate, dramatic weight loss or recaptured youth or sexual function.
- Do not buy any product based on the seller’s claim that the purchase will be covered by Medicare or other insurance.

Always discuss your medical problems with your primary health care provider. If you cannot get the information or help you need, you should try to find a new provider before looking to advertisements for cures.

Why health fraud schemes work

Health fraud, or quackery, is a practice that sells false hope. It preys on persons who are suffering from diseases that may have no complete medical cures, such as arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and certain forms of cancer.

Wishful thinkers who want shortcuts to weight loss or improvements to personal appearance are also vulnerable to this form of fraud. Medical quacks profit when they convince people that their products are an easy path to better health and personal attractiveness.

At best, “miracle cures” are a financial rip off. At worst, quackery endangers health and postpones relief by diverting people from seeking proper medical diagnoses and treatment of serious illnesses.

The bogus products themselves can even cause health problems. Many of these products have been pulled from store shelves in recent years because they were found to contain illegal drug ingredients that had not been tested or approved by the federal Food & Drug Administration. These drugs may not be effective or safe.

When you have a question about the value of a product you have seen advertised, you should first take a healthy dose of skepticism and then ask your primary health care provider.

For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection.

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Wisconsin Department of Agriculture,
Trade and Consumer Protection
Bureau of Consumer Protection
2811 Agriculture Drive, PO Box 8911
Madison, WI 53708-8911

Email: DATCPWisconsinPrivacy@wi.gov

Website: datcp.wi.gov

(800) 422-7128 TTY: (608) 224-5058

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