6 Tip-offs to Rip-offs: Don't Fall for Health Fraud Scams

The US Food and Drug Administration has published a paper on how we as consumers and avoid getting ripped off by health fraud scams. This paper provides the information for this CEC course presented by AASDN. Below is a reprint of the information. You can also obtain more information by clicking on http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm341344.htm?source=govdelivery.

Topics:

- Not Worth the Risk
- A Pervasive Problem
- Tip-Offs

Bogus product! Danger! Health fraud alert!

Health fraud scams refer to products that claim to prevent, treat, or cure diseases or other health conditions, but are not proven safe and effective for those uses.

Health fraud scams waste money and can lead to delays in getting proper diagnosis and treatment. They can also cause serious or even fatal injuries.

You’ll never see these warnings on health products, but that’s what you ought to be thinking when you see claims like “miracle cure,” “revolutionary scientific breakthrough,” or “alternative to drugs or surgery.”

Health fraud scams have been around for hundreds of years. The snake oil salesmen of old have morphed into the deceptive, high-tech marketers of today. They prey on people’s desires for easy solutions to difficult health problems—from losing weight to curing serious diseases like cancer.

According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), a health product is fraudulent if it is deceptively promoted as being effective against a disease or health condition but has not been scientifically proven safe and effective for that purpose.

Scammers promote their products through newspapers, magazines, TV infomercials and cyberspace. You can find health fraud scams in retail stores and on countless websites, in popup ads and spam, and on social media sites like Facebook and Twitter.

Not Worth the Risk

Health fraud scams can do more than waste your money. They can cause serious injury or even death, says Gary Coody, R.Ph., FDA’s national health fraud coordinator. “Using unproven
treatments can delay getting a potentially life-saving diagnosis and medication that actually works. Also, fraudulent products sometimes contain hidden drug ingredients that can be harmful when unknowingly taken by consumers.”

Coody says fraudulent products often make claims related to:

- weight loss
- sexual performance
- memory loss
- serious diseases such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, arthritis and Alzheimer’s.

**A Pervasive Problem**

Fraudulent products not only won’t work—they could cause serious injury. In the past few years, FDA laboratories have found more than 100 weight-loss products, illegally marketed as dietary supplements, that contained sibutramine, the active ingredient in the prescription weight-loss drug Meridia. In 2010, Meridia was withdrawn from the U.S. market after studies showed that it was associated with an increased risk of heart attack and stroke.

Fraudulent products marketed as drugs or dietary supplements are not the only health scams on the market. FDA found a fraudulent and expensive light therapy device with cure-all claims to treat fungal meningitis, Alzheimer’s, skin cancer, concussions and many other unrelated diseases. Generally, making health claims about a medical device without FDA clearance or approval of the device is illegal.

“Health fraud is a pervasive problem,” says Coody, “especially when scammers sell online. It’s difficult to track down the responsible parties. When we do find them and tell them their products are illegal, some will shut down their website. Unfortunately, however, these same products may reappear later on a different website, and sometimes may reappear with a different name.”

**Tip-Offs**

FDA offers some tip-offs to help you identify rip-offs.

- **One product does it all.** Be suspicious of products that claim to cure a wide range of diseases. A New York firm claimed its products marketed as dietary supplements could treat or cure senile dementia, brain atrophy, atherosclerosis, kidney dysfunction, gangrene, depression, osteoarthritis,
dysuria, and lung, cervical and prostate cancer. In October 2012, at FDA’s request, U.S. marshals seized these products.

- **Personal testimonials.** Success stories, such as, “It cured my diabetes” or “My tumors are gone,” are easy to make up and are not a substitute for scientific evidence.

- **Quick fixes.** Few diseases or conditions can be treated quickly, even with legitimate products. Beware of language such as, “Lose 30 pounds in 30 days” or “eliminates skin cancer in days.”

- **“All natural.”** Some plants found in nature (such as poisonous mushrooms) can kill when consumed. Moreover, FDA has found numerous products promoted as “all natural” but that contain hidden and dangerously high doses of prescription drug ingredients or even untested active artificial ingredients.

- **“Miracle cure.”** Alarms should go off when you see this claim or others like it such as, “new discovery,” “scientific breakthrough” or “secret ingredient.” If a real cure for a serious disease were discovered, it would be widely reported through the media and prescribed by health professionals—not buried in print ads, TV infomercials or on Internet sites.

- **Conspiracy theories.** Claims like “The pharmaceutical industry and the government are working together to hide information about a miracle cure” are always untrue and unfounded. These statements are used to distract consumers from the obvious, common-sense questions about the so-called miracle cure.

Even with these tips, fraudulent health products are not always easy to spot. If you're tempted to buy an unproven product or one with questionable claims, check with your doctor or other health care professional first.

This article appears on [FDA's Consumer Updates page](https://www.fda.gov/consumers), which features the latest on all FDA-regulated products.

For More Information

- Health Fraud Scams
- [FDA Voice Video Blog-- Don't Get Scammed: Beware of Health Fraud](https://www.fda.gov/consumers)
- [FDA Health Fraud Videos](https://www.fda.gov/consumers)
- BeSafeRx: Know Your Online Pharmacy
- [Buying Medical Devices and Diagnostic Tests Online](https://www.fda.gov/consumers)
- [National Consumer Protection Week](https://www.fda.gov/consumers)
- [National Consumers League’s Fraud.org](https://www.fda.gov/consumers)

Related Consumer Updates

- [Don't Be Fooled By Health Fraud Scams](https://www.fda.gov/consumers)
- Beware of Fraudulent Flu Products
- The Possible Dangers of Buying Medicines over the Internet
- [Buying Medicines Online? Be Wary, FDA Says](https://www.fda.gov/consumers)
- Health Fraud Awareness (video)
Scam Alert: Beware of Bogus FDA Agents
6 Tip-offs to Rip-offs - Quiz

1. Define health scam fraud
2. What are the dangers of health scam fraud
3. List four of the more popular fraudulent products
4. According to the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), when is a health product considered fraudulent?
5. Describe how fraudulent products can cause harm.
6. Why is it so difficult for the FDA to contain the sale of fraudulent products?
7. List the 6 tip offs to rip offs.
8. Provide details concerning 3 of the tip offs to rip offs
9. Provide details concerning the other 3 tip offs to rip offs.
10. What can consumers do if they question whether a product is a rip off?

1. The definition of health scam fraud is:

   When a product claims to prevent, treat, or cure diseases or other health conditions, but are not proven safe and effective for those uses
   When a product claims a money back guarantee
   When a product claims to be free

2. The FDA has found numerous products promoted as “all natural” but that contain hidden and dangerously high doses of prescription drug ingredients or even untested active artificial ingredients.

3. Dangers of health scam fraud include:
   Health fraud scams waste money
   Health fraud scams and can lead to delays in getting proper diagnosis and treatment
   Health fraud scams can also cause serious or even fatal injuries
   All of the above (A,B,C)

4. Claims like “The pharmaceutical industry and the government are working together to hide information about a miracle cure” are always true.
   False

5. The most fraudulent products include:
   weight loss, sexual performance
   memory loss
   serious diseases such as cancer, diabetes, heart disease, arthritis and Alzheimer’s
   All of the above (A,B,C)

   True

7. If consumers suspect a product is a rip-off they can:
   Check with the product manufacturer
   Check with their doctor or other health care professional
   Check the internet for testimonials
Check with family members

8. Consumers should suspect rip-off when they see:
   New discovery
   Scientific breakthrough
   Secret ingredient
   **All of the above (A,B,C)**

9. Real cures can be identified through widely reported professionals journal, media and internet sites, prescribed by health professionals, and not buried in print ads or TV infomercials.
   True

10. Consumers should beware language such as, “Lose 30 pounds in 30 days” or “eliminates skin cancer in days.”
    True

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