

Miracle Health Claims & Dietary Supplements



**Add a Dose of
Skepticism**



Miracle Health Claims

People spend billions of dollars a year on health-related products and treatments that not only are unproven and often useless, but also sometimes are dangerous. The products promise quick cures and easy solutions for a variety of problems, from obesity and arthritis to cancer and AIDS. But the “cures” don’t deliver, and people who buy them are cheated out of their money, their time, and even their health. That’s why it’s important to learn how to evaluate claims for products related to your health.

Produced in cooperation with the Food and Drug Administration

Are You a Target for Health Fraudsters?

You’ve seen miracle claims for products related to health. It’s no wonder. People spend billions of dollars a year on fraudulently marketed health-related products and treatments that not only are unproven and often useless, but sometimes also are dangerous.

Health fraud trades on false hope. It promises quick cures and easy solutions for a variety of problems, from obesity and arthritis to cancer and AIDS. But the “cures” don’t deliver. Instead, people who buy them are cheated out of their money, their time, and even their health. Fraudulently marketed health products can have dangerous interactions with medicines people are already taking, and can keep them from getting a proper diagnosis and

treatment from their own health care professional. Many unapproved treatments are expensive, too, and rarely covered by health insurance.

Health fraudsters often target people who are overweight, have serious conditions like cancer, or conditions without a cure, like:

- multiple sclerosis
- HIV/AIDS
- diabetes
- arthritis
- Alzheimer’s disease

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation’s consumer protection agency, and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) say it’s important to learn how to evaluate health claims, especially if you have a serious condition.

Cancer

If you or someone you love has cancer, you may be curious about supposed “miracle” cancer-fighting products — like pills, powders, and herbs — that you’ve seen advertised or heard about from family and friends. Scammers take advantage of the feelings that can accompany a diagnosis of cancer. They promote unproven — and potentially dangerous — substances like black salve, essiac tea, or laetrile with claims that the products are both “natural” and effective. But “natural” doesn’t mean either safe or effective, especially when it comes to using these products for cancer. In fact, a product that is labeled “natural” can be more than ineffective: it can be

downright harmful. What's more, stopping or delaying proven treatment can have serious consequences.

The truth is that no single device, remedy, or treatment can treat all types of cancer. All cancers are different, and no one treatment works for every cancer or every body. Even two people with the same diagnosis may need different treatments. That's one more reason to be skeptical of websites, magazines, and brochures with ads for products that claim to treat cancer, and to decide on treatments with your health professional.

People with cancer who want to try an experimental treatment should enroll in a legitimate clinical study. The FDA reviews clinical study designs to help ensure that patients are not subjected to unreasonable risks.

For information about cancer treatments, contact the American Cancer Society. You can find your local chapter at cancer.org.

For free publications on cancer research and treatment, or to learn about clinical trials, call the National Cancer Institute's Cancer Information Service at 1-800-4-CANCER (1-800-422-6237) or visit cancer.gov.

HIV and AIDS

Although proven treatments can extend and improve the quality of life for people with AIDS, so far there is no cure for the disease. If you've been diagnosed with

HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, you may be tempted to try untested drugs or treatments. But trying unproven products or treatments — like electrical and magnetic devices and so-called herbal cures — can be dangerous, especially if it means a delay in seeking medical care.

For example, the herb St. John's Wort has been promoted as a safe treatment for HIV. But there's no evidence that it is effective in treating HIV; in fact, studies have shown that it interferes with medicines prescribed for HIV.

You also may have considered home test kits. But claims for these products could be misleading. Safe, reliable HIV testing can be done only through a medical professional or a clinic, or through the Home Access Express HIV-1 Test System, the only FDA-approved system for home use.

The U.S. government has a toll-free HIV/AIDS Treatment Information Service, 1-800-HIV-0440 (1-800-448-0440), which is staffed by English- and Spanish-speaking health information specialists. Learn more at [AIDS.gov](https://www.aids.gov).

To find a nearby HIV testing center, visit [hivtest.org](https://www.hivtest.org), a website of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Arthritis

There's no shortage of people selling unproven arthritis remedies, which include thousands of dietary supplements and so-called natural cures like mussel extract, desiccated liver pills, shark cartilage, CMO (cetylmyristoleate), honey and vinegar mixtures, and gimmicks like magnets

and copper bracelets. But these remedies aren't backed adequately by science to demonstrate relief.

For up-to-date accurate information on arthritis treatments and alternative therapies, call the Arthritis Foundation at 1-800-283-7800, or visit arthritis.org.

Avoiding Shady Sellers and Practitioners

It's easy to see why some people believe product claims, especially when successful treatments seem elusive. But pressure to decide on-the-spot about trying an untested product or treatment is a sure sign of a fraud. Ask for more information and consult a knowledgeable doctor, pharmacist, or other health care professional. Promoters of legitimate health care products don't object to your seeking additional information — in fact, most welcome it.

The same goes if you're considering a clinic that requires you to travel and stay far from home for treatment: check it out with your regular doctor. Although some clinics offer effective treatments, others:

- Prescribe untested, unapproved, ineffective, and possibly dangerous “cures”
- Employ health care providers that may not be licensed or have other appropriate credentials

For information about a particular hospital, clinic, or treatment center contact the state or local health authorities where the facility is located. If the facility is in a foreign

country, contact that government's health authority to see that the facility is properly licensed and equipped to handle the procedures involved. For information about facilities in Mexico, contact the Secretary of Health (Secretaria De Salud) in the Mexican state where the facility is located.



Dietary Supplements

Dietary supplements may seem like harmless health boosters. But while some have proven benefits, many don't. Unlike drugs, dietary supplements aren't evaluated or reviewed by FDA for safety and effectiveness, and even "natural" supplements can be risky depending on the medicines you take or the medical conditions you have. In recent years, hundreds of supplements also have been found to be tainted with drugs and other chemicals. Always talk to your doctor before you take a new supplement, and avoid any supplement claiming it's a "cure."

What's a Dietary Supplement?

Dietary supplements include:

- vitamins and minerals
- herbs
- amino acids
- animal extracts
- enzymes
- probiotics

They come in a number of forms, including capsules, liquids, and powders. But while dietary supplements might seem similar to drugs, and some even have drug-like effects, there's a big difference: Dietary supplements don't undergo FDA review for safety and effectiveness before they're sold.

Are Dietary Supplements Safe?

Dietary supplements aren't always safe or harmless. Even "natural" supplements can be risky for people on certain medicines or with certain medical conditions, and some supplements have been found to be tainted with drugs or other chemicals. *See Tainted Products.*

Even "traditional remedies" with a long history of use aren't guaranteed to be safe in all cases.

Substances for which safety concerns have been raised include:

- comfrey
- chaparral
- lobelia
- germander
- aristolochia
- ephedra (ma huang)
- L-tryptophan
- germanium
- magnolia-stephania, and
- stimulant laxative ingredients, like those found in dieter's teas.

Comfrey, for example, contains certain alkaloids that can cause serious liver damage, and aristolochia can cause kidney failure.

Even some vitamins and minerals, when taken in inappropriate amounts, can cause problems. For example, too much vitamin A can reduce bone mineral density, cause birth defects, and lead to liver damage, according to the National Academy of Sciences.

Always read labels and package inserts and follow product directions. But remember that dietary supplement labels

and ingredients aren't evaluated by FDA before they're sold. Check with your health care professional — your best and most important source on whether a supplement is safe for you.

Visit www.fda.gov/Food/RecallsOutbreaksEmergencies/SafetyAlertsAdvisories for warnings and other safety information related to dietary supplements.

Supplements Claiming to be Cures

Promises for a quick cure or solution for a serious health problem may be hard to resist — but supplements claiming to shrink tumors, cure insomnia, cure impotency, treat Alzheimer's disease, or prevent severe memory loss aren't proven. Besides cheating you out of your money, they also may hurt your health.

Under Federal law, dietary supplements can't be promoted for the treatment of a disease because they aren't proven to be safe and effective.

Treat weight loss products with suspicion too. Claims that you can eat all you want and still lose weight effortlessly just aren't true. To lose weight — and keep it off — you have to eat fewer calories and increase your activity.

Other tip-offs to a fraud include:

Claims that one product does it all and cures a wide variety of health problems:

“Proven to treat rheumatism, arthritis, infections, prostate problems, ulcers, cancer, heart trouble, hardening of the arteries and more.”

Suggestions the product can treat or cure diseases:

“Shrinks tumors,” “Cures impotency,” or “Prevents severe memory loss.”

Words like scientific breakthrough, miraculous cure, exclusive product, secret ingredient, or ancient remedy.

“A revolutionary innovation formulated by using proven principles of natural health-based medical science.”

Misleading use of scientific-sounding terms:

“Molecule multiplicity,” “glucose metabolism,” “thermogenesis,” or “insulin receptor sites.”

Phony references to Nobel Prize winning technology or science:

“Nobel Prize Winning Technology,” or “Developed by two times Nobel prize winner.”

Undocumented testimonials by patients or doctors claiming miraculous results.

“My husband has Alzheimer’s disease. He began eating a teaspoonful of this product each day. And now, in just 22 days, he mowed the grass, cleaned out the garage, weeded the flower beds, and we take our morning walk again.”

Limited availability and a need to pay in advance.

“Hurry. This offer will not last. Send us a check now to reserve your supply.”

Promises of no-risk “money-back guarantees.

“If after 30 days you have not lost at least 4 pounds each week, your uncashed check will be returned to you.”

FDA's Rules for Health Claims

What kinds of claims can companies make on food and supplement labels? FDA-approved claims:

- Must be based on significant scientific evidence that shows a strong link between a food substance and a disease or health condition.
- Can state only that a food substance reduces the risk of certain health problems – not that it can treat or cure a disease. For example: “Calcium may reduce the risk of the bone disease osteoporosis. “

Dietary supplements also can carry claims about the effect of a substance on maintaining the body's normal structure or function – “Product B promotes healthy joints and bones” – but must include the disclaimer: “This statement has not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent disease.”

Learn more at

www.fda.gov/food/IngredientsPackagingLabeling/LabelingNutrition/ucm111447.htm.



Tainted Products

In the last few years, the FDA has discovered hundreds of “dietary supplements” containing drugs or other chemicals, particularly in products for weight loss, sexual enhancement, or bodybuilding.

The “extra ingredients” generally aren’t listed on the label, but could cause serious side effects or interact in dangerous ways with medicines or other supplements you’re taking. People have suffered strokes, acute liver injury, kidney failure, and pulmonary embolisms (artery blockage in the lung); some people have died.

Tainted supplements often are sold with false and misleading claims like “100% natural” and “safe.” To recognize tainted products, look for:

- products claiming to be alternatives to FDA-approved drugs or have effects similar to prescription drugs
- products claiming to be legal alternatives to anabolic steroids
- marketing materials primarily in a foreign language
- promises of rapid effects or results

Find more on tainted products marketed as dietary supplements at www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm236774.htm.

Other Resources

Health Fraud

FDA resources to help you avoid health fraud.

Dietary Supplements

An overview of dietary supplements and other consumer information from the FDA.

Buying Medicines and Medical Products Online

Tips and precautions for buying medical products online.

Office of Dietary Supplements

Information from the National Institutes of Health about dietary supplements.

How to Report a Potential Problem

To report a health product you believe is advertised falsely, contact the FTC at 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357) or online at [ftc.gov/complaint](https://www.ftc.gov/complaint). You also can contact your state Attorney General's office ([naag.org](https://www.naag.org)), your state department of health, or your local consumer protection agency ([consumeraction.gov](https://www.consumeraction.gov)).

To report a fraudulently labeled product, call your local FDA office (www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/ConsumerComplaintCoordinators/default.htm).

To report an adverse reaction or illness that may be related to the use of a supplement or other health care product, call a doctor or other health care provider immediately. You also may want to report your reaction

or illness to FDA MedWatch. Call 1-800-FDA-1088 (1-800-332-1088) to request a report form, or file a complaint online at www.fda.gov/Safety/MedWatch/HowToReport/ucm085568.htm.

Patients' names are kept confidential.

Food and Drug Administration

The FDA regulates over \$1 trillion worth of products, which account for 25 cents of every dollar spent annually by American consumers. It is part of FDA's job to see that the food we eat is safe and wholesome, and that the medicines and medical devices we use are safe and effective. For more information, call toll-free, 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332), or visit www.fda.gov.

Federal Trade Commission

The FTC works 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 get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261.

Watch a video, *How to File a Complaint*, at consumer.ftc.gov/media to learn more. The FTC enters consumer complaints into the Consumer Sentinel Network, a secure online database and investigative tool used by hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.



Federal Trade Commission
consumer.ftc.gov
October 2011