

Bogus Promises – Health Fraud Scams

Would you go to a cardiologist who did not have a license to practice medicine just because someone said they thought they were nice? That's not much different than taking the advice of commercials and consultants who are trying to sell you a health supplement with claims of having amazing results. In this age of concern about GMOs and hormones in our food, I find it amazing that so many people are willing to take supplements or use other "health" products that have little or no merit for their effectiveness and are not regulated for their content or claims. As consumers work to be more informed about their diet and overall health, they also need to be aware that there is a significant amount of nutrition misinformation and fraudulent claims attached to health products.

Health fraud is defined as misrepresentation of health claims and can range from a self-proclaimed medical expert who has discovered a so-called "miracle cure," to a food supplement or drug that is promoted with unsubstantiated health claims. According to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), a health product is fraudulent if it has not been deceptively promoted as being effective against a disease or health condition but has not been scientifically proven safe and effective for that purpose. These health products are promoted in a variety of ways: media, internet, magazines, and more.

Not only do these scams waste your money, they can actually contain ingredients that may have a negative effect on your health. The U.S. FDA has warned consumers that some of these products can actually lead to illness, injury, and even death.

In a fact sheet published by Colorado State University Extension (no. 9.350), *"Nutrition Misinformation: How to Identify Fraud and Misleading Claims"*, shares that consumers should be on the lookout for these top ten red flags for misleading claims:

1. Recommendations that promise a quick fix. There are few diseases or health conditions that can be treated quickly, even with researched and proven products. Language such as "Removes unsightly skin discoloration in a matter of hours" should raise your suspicions and urge you to ask questions.
2. Dire warnings of danger from a single product or regimen. These approaches are designed to play on people's emotions and raise their anxiety about personal health and nutrition choices.
3. Claims that sound too good to be true. You should hear alarms ringing when you see phrases such as "a scientific breakthrough" or "secret ingredient". In truth, when advancement is made in treating a serious illness or disease, it is widely reported through the media, prescribed by health professionals, and backed by the Federal Drug Administration. Don't trust the single claim from the company or firm that is promoting the product. Without these various levels of accountability, it is obvious they are promoting for profit, not for improving the overall human condition.
4. Simplistic conclusions drawn from a complex study. Do your research to determine if the product you are considering provides effective results. The FDA's Health Fraud website is a great place to start your research:

www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ProtectYourself/HealthFraud

5. Recommendations based on a single study. Reliable health products must undergo rigorous and long-range research study in order to be considered reliable. Although a firm may claim they have done research, look in to how the research was conducted. They may have simply polled their family and claim it as “research.”
6. Dramatic statements that are refuted by reputable scientific organizations.
7. Lists of “good” and “bad” foods. Variety is important in healthy eating. Excluding a single food or category of foods is not the solution to your health concerns. Consult with your doctor or a dietician to identify a food plan that will work best for your situation.
8. “Spinning” information from another product to match the producer’s claims. Riding on the shirttails of another product is not an uncommon marketing approach. We all tend to gravitate toward things we know and are comfortable. Marketers are using this human tendency to talk you in to something you may not otherwise try out.
9. State that research is “currently underway,” indicating that there is no current research. Again, doing your research is important. You would want to check on the credentials and proven record of a heart surgeon before undergoing open-heart surgery, right? If you are looking online for information about a health product or dietary supplement, tap in to web addresses that end in .edu (an educational institution), .gov (government agency), or .org (non-profit.) These sites are much more reliable than those ending in .com or .net (which are commercial or network websites.)
10. Non-science based testimonials supporting the product, often from celebrities or highly satisfied customers. Personal testimonies are fairly easy to make up and not a substitute for sound science. Just because a person claims that the product worked “great” for them, doesn’t mean it is a true statement.

Health fraud is a real problem. People are looking for an easy fix and quick cure for illnesses that may have taken years to develop. There is limited enforcement of laws and regulations that prevent a person or company from marketing a product that is labeled “dietary supplement.” Unfortunately, there are also those who claim themselves to be nutritionists who have less than credible credentials. These factors help contribute to the multi-billion dollar industry that targets unaware consumers.

The old adage “If it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is” holds true when it comes to many supplemental health products. For reliable and research-based information about health and wellness, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!