

Health Fraud and What You Can Do To Protect Yourself

Every year Americans spend more and more money on what they hope will be healthy resolutions to their chronic diseases. Sometimes these diets, supplements, and programs lead to positive changes in health and wellness. But all too often, the only change that is made is in lower bank balance. Even worse, these quick fix schemes can sometimes actually put people at risk of serious health concerns.

What is Health Fraud?

Health fraud is defined as deceitfully promoting for financial gain a health remedy that has not been proven to work. Health fraud has become a major concern in the US and especially with older adults in the past several years and has grown to be a multi-million dollar problem. Why? Primarily because today's consumers are much more involved in their own care and there is renewed interest in home treatments. In addition, skyrocketing health care costs make seeking traditional treatments very costly. These combine to increase demand for products and services that promote health.

Health Fraud...

Gives false hopes. Unsound nutrition advice, products or services won't prevent or cure disease. For the best advice, contact your physician and a registered dietitian.

Is never a substitute for reliable health care. Proper health care can be delayed if you follow bad advice. You may lose something you can't retrieve -- time for effective treatment.

May lead to unneeded expense. Even under the best of circumstances, some products and services simply don't work. Why waste your hard-earned money on something that has no effect?

May lead to potential harm. Unsound nutrition advice, products or services can put your health at risk. Large doses of some vitamins and minerals, in the form of dietary supplements, can have harmful side effects. For example, excessive vitamin K is risky if you take blood-thinning drugs.

What can you do?

Below are some tips that can help you in identifying health fraud and where you can go for sound nutrition information.

Do your homework. Find out more before you purchase a nutrition product, treatment or service.

Seek advice from reliable sources. It's not easy to distinguish nutrition facts from misinformation. Contact a local registered dietitian.

Report nutrition fraud. If you suspect that a statement, product or service is false, discuss it with the appropriate government agency or file a complaint.

What are the consequences? Health fraud takes advantage of consumers and carries significant economic and health risks including:

What are the warning flags of health fraud?

Any of these should make you suspicious:

Sketchy or dubious credentials of the person who is promoting the product or program. Qualified individuals have legitimate credentials and these can be verified by credentialing organizations.

Recommendations that promise a quick fix. Any change that needs to be made to improve health and wellness takes time and effort. There are just no quick fixes!

Claims that sound too good to be true. Claims that sound too good to be true are just that!

Simplistic conclusions drawn from a complex study. The study should be cited so that you can review it for yourself. Also, legitimate studies are published in mainstream scientific journals.

Recommendations based on a single study. The old expression, “one study is as good as no study” is so true. Any solid scientific study can be reproduced by other researchers in other labs.

Statements refuted by reputable scientific organizations or the government. Reputable scientific organizations and the government are eager to share treatments and programs that work! If they don't support a fraudulent claim, it is because it has been proven to be dangerous and does not work.

Lists of "good" and "bad" foods. There are no “bad” foods -- only foods that you might have to limit consumption of. Diets that recommend that you avoid certain foods.

Recommendations made to help sell a product. Always beware when the promoter of a program has a financial interest or is selling a product to you.

What can you do?

Your best defense is to stay informed, ask questions and never commit to anything when pressured or on a whim. In addition, The Federal Trade Commission and the Food and Drug Administration have produced a brochure, *'Miracle' Health Claims: Add a Dose of Skepticism*, to help consumers understand the consequences of and learn how to identify health fraud. You may view the brochure online at www.ftc.gov/bcp/conline/pubs/health/frdheal.htm or you can call 877-382-4357 or write to:

Consumer Response Center
Federal Trade Commission
600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20580

This article was prepared with materials from the following websites: The American Dietetic Association and the Federal Trade Commission.