Extension News Column

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Date: Oct. 13
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Re: Pinching Pennies to run Monday, Oct. 19
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We’ve all seen the ads that say “revolutionary scientific breakthrough,” “alternative to drugs or surgery” or “miracle cure.” What the ads ought to say is, “Danger! Health fraud alert!”

Since the times of the snake oil salesman, we’ve been faced with trying to determine what is true and what is deceptive. When it comes to our health, however, it isn’t always easy to separate truth from fiction.

The real danger in these “miracle” products is not that they cost you money but that sometimes they can actually harm you. For example, relying one of these products may keep you from getting treatment and medication that actually works.

Sometimes these fraudulent treatments or products actually have harmful ingredients. When the FDA tested the ingredients in a weight-loss supplement that had been seized, it discovered that it contained ephedrine. Ephedrine alkaloids are adrenaline-like stimulants that can have potentially dangerous effects on the heart, and they were banned in the U.S. in 2004.

The Food and Drug Administration offers the following ideas to help you identify scams:

Only one product is needed: Be suspicious of any product that claims it cures everything. A recent scam involved a dietary supplement that would help you lose weight as well as cure dementia and a score of other diseases. Good treatments are rarely all inclusive.

Personal testimonies are included: These claims are easy to make up and provide no substantiation. Saying “my tumors are gone” is not a substitute for hard, clinical evidence. Read carefully to make sure clinical trials have been conducted. Don’t fall for the fraudulent claims or numbers.
Rapid results: Serious health problems don’t go away in days. Ads that claim you can “lose 30 pounds in 30 days” or “shrink cancers in days” are not only improbable, they are impossible.

All natural: Remember that there are many all-natural products that are poisonous to the body, such as poisonous mushrooms and snake venom. Not only do we have no definition for what “natural” means, because it isn’t tested, we don’t know if there are other, possibly dangerous, ingredients in the product. The FDA has found numerous products labeled all natural that contain loads of harmful and artificial products.

It’s a miracle: If you see a claim for a new miracle cure or scientific breakthrough, steer clear. If there truly was a cure, television and newspapers would be touting the benefits.

Conspiracy theories: There are those people who say that “the drug industry Is keeping this product a secret” or “the government is keeping this under wraps,” but this is far from the truth. Both the drug companies and the government would love to announce that we have a cure for any chronic disease.

Health fraud scams often relate to the real problem areas in our everyday health, such as weight loss, sexual performance, memory loss, cancer, diabetes, heart disease and arthritis. If you are ever tempted to buy a “miracle” product, take time to call your doctor or a health care provider first. These professionals are usually aware of all the latest treatments. If there is any promise to a product, they will know. These are the people you pay to protect your health. Trust them to do it.

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