

How the Federal Trade Commission Is Fighting Cancer Treatment Scams

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A diagnosis of cancer can bring feelings of fear and anxiety, tempting many people to turn to unproven remedies. Chances are that your patients are sorting through mountains of information and facing many decisions about various treatment options. And they may be curious about supposed miraculous cancer-fighting products—pills, powders, herbs, and more—that they have either seen advertised or heard about from family and friends. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, tells people that it is a good idea to be skeptical—most of these products are scams, and when a person is battling cancer, that is the last thing he or she needs.

In an effort to both shut down businesses that promote bogus cancer treatments and cures and alert people to their telltale signs, the FTC is using enforcement and education. A new site (<http://ftc.gov/curious>) features a short video, questions for patients to discuss with their medical team, warning signs of a scam, and a list of resources on cancer treatments from several federal agencies. The central message of the campaign is: It is best to talk to the physician treating your cancer about any products you would like to try. Patients and their families need to hear that, in many cases, a product can have serious repercussions: It will not treat the cancer—and it could be harmful.

The FTC has tied its education campaign to the latest in a series of law enforcement actions challenging the deceptive advertising of bogus cancer cures. The enforcement effort began with the FTC and its colleagues at the US Food and Drug Administration and the Competition Bureau of Canada surfing the Internet to get a picture of what people were finding online as they searched for cancer-related information, products, and services.

According to Richard Cleland, JD, assistant director of the Division of Advertising Practices of the FTC, the investigators found plenty of sites making questionable claims. “We found sites that were peddling products with ingredients where there's little or no scientific evidence to demonstrate effectiveness for treating or curing cancer,” Cleland said, “including essiac teas and other herbal mixtures, laetrile, mushroom extracts, and black salve, which is known to be a corrosive ointment.”

Following the surf, the FTC sent letters to a total of 112 Web sites, letting them know that they needed to have competent and reliable scientific evidence to back up the claims they had made. When the FTC checked back soon after sending the warning letters, it found that nearly 30% of the sites had either removed the problematic cancer treatment claims or shut down

altogether. “We reviewed the rest of the sites again to determine whether we had grounds to bring cases, or to refer the information to the FDA or the Competition Bureau,” Cleland said. “All but two of the FTC's 11 cases have been resolved, with one headed for an administrative trial.”

How can your patients tell if a Web site is hawking a hot new product, old-fashioned snake oil, or something in between? Consider sharing these tips for spotting a scam:

(1) No one treatment works for every cancer or every body. That is one reason it is best to be skeptical of any Web site with ads for products that claim to treat cancer. All cancers are different. Even two people with the same diagnosis may need different treatments.

(2) Natural does not always mean effective. Scammers take advantage of the feelings that can accompany a diagnosis of cancer. They promote unproven—and potentially dangerous—remedies like black salve, essiac tea, or laetrile with claims that the products are both natural and effective. But natural does not mean safe or effective when it comes to using these treatments for cancer. In fact, a product labeled natural can be ineffective and even harmful.

(3) Bogus marketers often use trickery and vague language to take advantage of people. Testimonials on Web sites with ads for products that claim to cure or treat cancer can seem honest and heartfelt, but they can be completely fake; in fact, they may not disclose that actors or models have been paid to endorse the product. Even when testimonials come from people who have taken the product, personal stories are not reliable as evidence of effectiveness.

(4) Lots of technical jargon may sound impressive, but by itself, it does not prove effectiveness. Patients should understand that big words from a medical dictionary are no substitute for the plain-language facts from the treatment team they trust.

(5) A money-back guarantee does not prove that a product works. Even if the money-back guarantee is legitimate, it is not a reliable substitute for scientific evidence that a treatment is safe or effective.

The “Curious? Ask.” education campaign by the FTC gives people tools to evaluate the sites they may come across in researching and planning for their treatment, including questions to ask their treatment team about products they are considering. The FTC says physicians are the best source of information about whether and how a product works, and whether there is any research to support its effectiveness and safety. Patients may want to talk about the possible risks, adverse effects, or benefits in their specific case, or whether the product will interfere with their current treatment plan. They also may be looking for complementary treatments or products that could reduce discomfort or symptoms.

If you have a patient who may have been misled by Web sites or online ads for a product that claims to treat or cure cancer, tell him or her to file a complaint with the FTC at <http://ftc.gov/complaint>. Other ways to help include:

- Share the campaign resources with your own network.
- Check out <http://ftc.gov/curious> and download or embed a 90-second video that shows the signs of a cancer treatment scam, or grab the Web buttons and free content for your practice’s Web site or newsletter.

- Encourage your colleagues, medical and patient blogs, or listservs to link to the site.
- Order free bookmarks at <http://ftc.gov/curious> and distribute them to your patients.
- Print out this consumer alert flyer and make it available to your patients: <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/alerts/alt079.pdf>.

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