How to Protect Yourself From Cancer Treatment Fraud

When researching cancer treatments, you will likely come across advertisements for products or services that claim to prevent, treat, or cure cancer. The claims made on the Internet and on TV often sound like they are cures for cancer. However, before investing time and money in any of them, it?s important to evaluate the claims carefully and talk with your doctor.

Products that are not approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) to treat cancer are unlikely to help, and some may even cause harm or interfere with chemotherapy and other treatments prescribed by your doctor. On the other hand, conventional treatments, such as surgery, chemotherapy, and radiation therapy, have been rigorously tested in clinical trials [1] (research studies in people) and found to be safe and effective. After a treatment has been tested in clinical trials, the FDA must approve it to treat cancer. Learn more about drug development and approval [2].

When talking about cancer treatment fraud, it is important to distinguish between complementary and alternative therapies. Complementary therapies [3] are treatments used in addition to standard cancer therapy that are backed by evidence that they help treat cancer or improve a person?s quality of life. They include yoga, meditation, acupuncture, art therapy, music therapy, massage, and dietary and herbal supplements. Alternative therapies on the other hand, are treatments used instead of a standard treatment.

Signs of likely fraud

According to the FDA and the U.S. Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the following often indicate that an advertised ?remedy? is a fraud:

- The ad says it will cure any type of cancer. No single treatment will work for everyone or for every type of cancer.
- The ad uses ?personal testimonies? that claim the product works. These people may be paid actors, but even if they aren?t, personal stories are unreliable and unscientific evidence of the product?s effectiveness.
- The ad offers a money-back guarantee. Getting money back is not proof of effectiveness.
- The wording in the ad sounds technical. The advertiser may expect you to be impressed, but it?s not proof that the product will do what it says.
- The ad claims that the product is a ?natural? remedy. Many ?natural? substances are harmful to people, such as poison ivy, so this claim doesn?t mean it will help or that it won?t harm you.
- The ad states that supplies are limited and/or you have to pay in advance.

Other phrases to watch out for are ?scientific breakthrough,? ?miraculous cure,? ?secret ingredient? or ?ancient remedy.? These terms may sound impressive, but advertisers can easily use these terms without offering any proof to support their claims

If you see a deceptive ad or think you have been misled by one for a product that claims to treat or cure cancer, find out how to file a complaint [4]. By doing so, you may be helping to protect other people with cancer from a fraudulent product.

Examples of fraud in cancer

Whenever an advertiser claims that a product not approved by the FDA as a cancer treatment will, in fact, treat or cure cancer, the advertiser is committing fraud. Here are some examples:

Hoxsey Therapy. This product consists of two types of herbal mixtures that are taken by mouth and applied to the skin.

The claim: It removes toxins (harmful substances) from the body, strengthens the immune system, and helps the body get rid of tumors.

The facts: There is no scientific evidence that this product is effective in treating cancer, and no clinical trials have been published in medical journals. If taken in large doses, it can burn the skin and cause diarrhea, nausea and vomiting, and rashes. In some cases, it causes cancer to grow. The FDA banned the sale and marketing of this treatment in 1960.

Black salves. Also called escharotics, these are pastes composed of different ingredients that are applied to skin cancers or over the sites of tumors inside the body.

The claim: The salves are said to kill cancer cells and ?draw out? cancer from beneath the skin.

*The facts:*There is no scientific evidence that black salves are effective in treating cancer, and no clinical trials have been published in medical journals. Black salves can burn, eat through, and scar the skin.

Shark cartilage. This tissue is extracted from the heads and fins of sharks. It is usually taken by mouth.

*The claim:*Shark cartilage contains proteins that stop angiogenesis, the formation of new blood vessels, which helps tumors to grow.

The facts: Clinical trials [5] of shark cartilage to date have not shown any benefit in treating cancer. It can cause nausea, and, in high doses, hypercalcemia (increased levels of calcium in the blood). The FDA has not approved shark cartilage as a cancer treatment.

Gerson therapy. This plan consists of a vegetarian diet with raw, organic vegetable and fruit juice consumed every hour during the day, along with enemas using coffee and castor oil.

The claim: It cleanses and detoxifies the body by correcting deficiencies and imbalances of nutrients and enzymes, so that the body can ?fight off? the cancer.

The facts: There is no scientific evidence that this therapy is effective in treating cancer. It can cause flu-like symptoms and may cause a tumor to grow and become painful. Coffee enemas may cause infections, dehydration, constipation, colitis (inflammation of the colon), electrolyte imbalances (improper levels of important minerals in the body), and possibly death.

Coral calcium. This is calcium that supposedly is extracted from coral reefs in the oceans.

The claim: It ?neutralizes? toxins in the body and can reverse and cure all forms of cancer.

The facts: There is no scientific evidence that coral calcium is effective in treating cancer. Coral often contains traces of non-beneficial substances such as manganese, uranium, lead, and mercury.

Essiac tea. This is a mixture of herbs blended together to make a tea.

The claim: It strengthens the immune system, cleanses the blood, promotes cell repair, restores energy levels, and detoxifies the body. Earlier promoters claimed that the tea changes tumors into normal tissue.

*The facts:*Research by the FDA, the National Cancer Institute, American Cancer Society, and Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center has found no scientific evidence that this tea is effective in treating cancer, and no clinical trials have been published in medical journals. Essiac tea may cause constipation, diarrhea, headaches, low blood sugar, nausea and vomiting, and kidney and liver damage. If injected, it may cause serious complications, and even death.

Other examples of alternative treatments that claim to treat cancer are products that include the following ingredients: bloodroot (a plant), cesium (an element), ellagic acid (a compound from raspberries, strawberries, and walnuts), Cat?s claw (a plant), amygdalin (also called laetrile, a naturally occurring substance in nuts, plants, and some fruits), and various mushrooms. Get a list from the FDA of fake cancer ?cures? to avoid [6].

Ask your doctor first

The most important thing to do when considering any complementary or alternative cancer treatment is to talk with your doctor first. Get this list of questions to ask your doctor about complementary and alternative treatments [7].

More Information

Complementary and Alternative Medicine Research News [8]

Evaluating Cancer Information on the Internet [9]

Medical News: How to Know If It?s Accurate [10]

Additional Resources

FTC: Cure-ious? Ask [11]

FDA: Beware of Online Cancer Fraud [12]

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center: About Herbs, Botanicals, and Other Products [13]

Quackwatch.org [14]

Links:
[1] http://www.cancer.net/node/24863
[2] http://www.cancer.net/node/24505
[3] http://www.cancer.net/node/25011
[4] http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/microsites/curious/report.shtml
[5] http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/pdq/cam/cartilage/patient/page2
[6] http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/GuidanceComplianceRegulatoryInformation/EnforcementActivitiesbyFDA/ucm171057.htm
[7] http://www.cancer.net/node/25041

[8] http://www.cancer.net/node/25073
[9] http://www.cancer.net/node/24514
[10] http://www.cancer.net/node/24593
[11] http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/microsites/curious/index.shtml
[12] http://www.fda.gov/ForConsumers/ConsumerUpdates/ucm048383.htm
[13] http://www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/11570.cfm
[14] http://www.quackwatch.org/