

Health Claims & Realities

When it sounds too good to be true

Though our reasons may all be different, most people want to be healthier in some way. We want less stress and more energy, less weight and more fitness, less effort and more result. It can be hard to face the idea of making sacrifices to reach our long-term health goals. But making permanent lifestyle changes is usually what's required to get healthy and stay healthy.

One of the pitfalls we fall prey to is looking for the "quick fix," and marketers know this about us. We are bombarded with ads for so-called "healthy" foods, weight-loss supplements that will drop the fat while we continue to eat as always, dietary supplements that will give us energy or reduce hot flashes, and the latest new piece of exercise equipment – guaranteed to give us an abdominal "six pack" of muscle



Urban Legends, Hoaxes, & Half-Truths: Getting the Facts

With the Internet, text messaging, cell phones, and other fast-moving technology, information can be circulated quickly; but be careful about your source – not all health information is true. People have become experts at making information look like it is credible and playing on human emotion to get their information circulated for kicks or crime. One of the best ways to find out if a story is true is to first look at the following website: <http://snopes.com/>.

If someone sends you a message that your shampoo is causing cancer or their lotion reduces hot flashes, see the <http://snopes.com> website before taking their advice. You just might save yourself from throwing away a lot of money and ending up on yet another marketer's mailing list, not to mention avoiding fraud and identity theft. (Also see: <http://www.quackwatch.org/04ConsumerEducation/urbanlegends.html>.)

tone in just 5 minutes a day. Testimonials from people, with pictures of their former and new selves, draw us into the "quick and painless" possibilities. The truth is, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Before you consider buying into any product or program that claims to be healthy or give you healthy results, get the facts. Consider the following points, and avoid buying into products (including books, remedies, pills, supplements, or programs) if they:

- make claims that seem too good to be true;¹
- claim a quick, dramatic, or painless cure;^{1,2}
- claim a special, secret, or ancient formula or ingredient;^{1,2}
- talk about a "miracle" drug or product that will effectively treat

- a wide variety of ailments;^{1,3}
- claim to be a "scientific breakthrough" (often stating that the medical establishment overlooked or suppressed the information);^{2,3}
- claim to be a cure for aging or a cure for a disease that is not yet understood by medical science;¹
- are advertised by testimonials or undocumented case histories¹ by "satisfied customers";^{3,4}
- are available only by mail or from an exclusive supplier;³
- claim hard things (losing weight, stopping smoking) are easy;⁵
- emphasize that "natural" is better;
- are the only site or source making such claims;²
- pressure with limited time offers;
- use a sensational writing style (e.g., lots of exclamation points);²
- use a lot of technical jargon or impressive-sounding terms, like

“thermogenesis” or “hunger stimulation point”;^{4,6}

- offer a “free” gift or larger amount of the product as a “special promotion”;¹
- require advance payment and claim limited availability of the product;¹
- promise no-risk “money-back guarantees”;^{3,6,7}
- claim persecution by the medical profession.

Making healthy change may not be easy, but the benefits are worth it. Don’t fall into the trap of thinking you can do it the “quick and easy” way. Take small steps that allow you to have success often along the way as you reach your long-term goals to becoming healthy and staying that way.

For credible resources to guide you toward healthy changes, see the “[Healthy Resources](#)” fact sheet.

Will the Real Remedy Please Stand Up?

The healthy truth

Whether you’re looking for a short cut to lose weight or a cure for a serious ailment, health fraud trades on false hope.⁶ Not only might you waste money, but unproven remedies may be harmful; they can keep people from seeking and getting needed medical treatment and advice.^{1,6}

If you have a serious ailment – such as arthritis, diabetes, a heart condition, or cancer – always seek the advice and care of your health care professional. For those areas where we are often trying to improve – such as exercising, eating, and smoking – the next few sections will point us to the truth about making behavior changes in these areas of our lives and give us tips to help us make better, more informed decisions as consumers.

Exercise Claims

The “No Sweat” Fallacy

TRUTH: “There’s no such thing as a no-work, no-sweat way to a healthy, toned body. Deriving the benefits of exercise requires doing work”⁵... although, it doesn’t have to feel like work.



Exercise can be very enjoyable if you start slow, choose something you like, and use motivational strategies to keep you going. Before you jump into the next fitness fad, the Federal Trade Commission offers this advice:

- Ignore claims that an exercise machine or device can provide long-lasting, easy, “no-sweat” results in a short time. You can’t get the benefits of exercise unless you exercise. It is virtually impossible to achieve major changes in appearance in a few days or weeks, such as losing “7 inches in 7 days.”
- Question claims that a product can burn fat off a particular part of the body or “spot” reduce. Achieving a major change in your appearance requires sensible eating and regular exercise that works the whole body. In general, exercise equipment that works the whole body or major parts of it probably helps you burn more calories than devices that work only one part of the body – and the more you use the equipment, the more calories you’ll burn.
- Read the ad’s fine print. Advertised results may be based on more than just using a machine; they also may be based on restricting calories – this is often stated in the fine print or as a footnote. In fact, exercise and diet together *are* much more effective for achieving a healthy, toned body than either tactic alone.
- Be skeptical of testimonials and before-and-after pictures from

“satisfied” customers. Their experiences “may not be typical.” Again, read the fine print.

- Do the calculations when you read statements like “three easy payments of ...” The advertised cost may not include shipping, handling, sales tax, or delivery and set-up fees. Find out the details before you order.
- Get details on warranties, guarantees, and return policies. A “30-day money-back guarantee” may not sound as good if you have to pay shipping on a bulky piece of equipment you want to return.
- Check out the company’s customer and support services. Call to get an idea of how easy it is to reach a company representative and how helpful he or she is.^{5,8}

After you’ve evaluated advertised claims, but before you make a final purchase, check the following:

- Will the equipment help you achieve your desired goals (e.g., build strength, increase endurance, enhance health, etc.)?
- Will you stick to the program? Think of all the yard sales stocked with unused exercise equipment, and decide if you are ready to commit to this activity on a regular basis.
- Try out the equipment at a gym or recreation center, and check consumer and fitness magazines that rate/test exercise equipment. Though claims for a piece of equipment may be valid, if it is uncomfortable, hard to use, or you don’t like doing it, chances are it will gather dust and not help you burn calories.⁵

Food & Supplement Claims

The “magic pill” fallacy

TRUTH: A healthy diet consists of a variety of nutrient-rich foods emphasizing fruit, vegetable, whole grain, and low-fat sources of vitamins and minerals.

TRUTH: Dietary supplements should not replace a healthy diet.

“Federal law allows for certain claims to be made in the labeling of food and supplements. These include claims approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that show a strong link, based on scientific evidence, between a food substance and a disease or health condition. These approved claims can state only that a food substance *reduces the risk* of certain health problems – not that it can *treat or cure* a disease. Two examples of *approved* claims are: “The vitamin folic acid may reduce the risk of neural tube defect-affected pregnancies,” and “Calcium may reduce the risk of the bone disease osteoporosis.”⁶

Dietary supplements also may carry claims in their labeling that describe the effect of a substance in maintaining the body’s normal structure or function, as long as the claims don’t imply the product treats or cures a disease. **The FDA does not review or authorize these claims.** An example of such a claim is, “Product B promotes healthy joints and bones.” When a dietary supplement is promoted with a claim like this, the claim must be accompanied with the disclaimer, “This statement has not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration. This product is not intended to diagnose, treat, cure or prevent disease.”⁶

To learn more, see the FDA’s “Claims that can be Made for Conventional Foods and Dietary Supplements” at www.cfsan.fda.gov/~dms/hclaims.html.⁶

Many of us are interested in food and dietary supplements for their potential medical/health benefits. For this reason, we’ve created the following “[Guide to Credible Food, Supplement, and Alternative Medicine Information](#)” fact sheet.

If you are thinking of taking a dietary supplement (whether it’s a vitamin, mineral, herb, extract, etc.), the FDA urges you to *check your assumptions*.¹¹

- #1 Questionable Assumption: “Even if a product may not help me, it at least won’t hurt me.” It’s best not to assume that this will always be true. When consumed in high enough amounts for a long enough time, or in combination with certain other substances, all chemicals can be toxic, including nutrients, plant components, and other biologically active ingredients.



- #2 Questionable Assumption: “When I see the term ‘natural,’ it means that a product is healthful and safe.” Consumers can be misled if they assume this term assures wholesomeness or that these food-like substances necessarily have milder effects, which make them safer to use than drugs. The term “natural” on labels is not well defined and is sometimes used ambiguously to imply unsubstantiated benefits or safety. For example, many weight-loss products claim to be “natural” or “herbal,” but this doesn’t necessarily make them safe. Their ingredients may interact with drugs or may be dangerous for people with certain medical conditions.

- #3 Questionable Assumption: “A product is safe when there is no cautionary information on the product label.” Dietary supplement manufacturers may not include warnings about potential adverse effects on their product labels. If consumers want to know about the safety of a specific dietary supplement, they should directly contact the brand’s manufacturer. It is the

manufacturer’s responsibility to determine that the supplement it produces or distributes is safe and that there is substantiated evidence that the label claims are truthful and not misleading.

- #4 Questionable Assumption: “A recall of a harmful product guarantees that all such harmful products will be immediately and completely removed from the marketplace.” A product recall of a dietary supplement is voluntary. While many manufacturers do their best, a recall does not necessarily remove all harmful products from the marketplace.¹¹

Talk with your doctor, dietician, or pharmacist.

Some dietary supplements may interact with prescription and over-the-counter drugs, have unwanted effects during surgery, or have other serious adverse effects that need to be reported to the FDA (by phone at 1-800-FDA-1088 or online at <http://www.fda.gov/medwatch/how.htm>).

Weight Loss Claims

The “quick & easy” fallacy

TRUTH: The best way to lose weight is to eat fewer calories and increase your physical activity so you burn more energy.⁹

TRUTH: The faster you lose weight, the more likely you’ll gain it back. Experts recommend a goal of about a pound a week.¹⁰ For most people, that means cutting about 500 calories a day from your diet, eating a variety of nutritious foods, and exercising regularly.⁹

“The use of deceptive, false, or misleading claims in weight loss advertising is rampant and potentially dangerous. Many supplements, in particular, are of unproven value or have been linked to serious health risks.”¹² When evaluating a weight-loss product or

program for yourself, be aware of claims that say they:

- **cause weight loss of two pounds or more a week for a month or more without dieting or exercise.** Achieving a healthy weight takes work. Take a pass on any product that promises miraculous results without the effort.



- **cause substantial weight loss, no matter what or how much the consumer eats.** Beware of any product that claims that you can eat all you want of high-calorie foods and still lose weight. Losing weight requires sensible food choices.
- **cause permanent weight loss.** Even if you're successful in taking the weight off, permanent weight loss requires permanent lifestyle changes. Don't trust any product that promises once-and-for-all results without ongoing maintenance.
- **block the absorption of fat, carbs, or calories to enable consumers to lose substantial weight.** Medical experts agree that there's simply no magic non-prescription pill that will allow you to block the absorption of fat, carbs, or calories. The key to curbing your craving for those "downfall foods" is portion control. Limit yourself to a smaller serving or a slimmer slice.
- **safely enable consumers to lose more than three pounds per week for more than four weeks.** Losing weight at the rate of 1–2 pounds a week is the most effective way to take it off and keep it off. At best, products promising lightning-fast weight

loss (e.g., lose 30 pounds in 30 days) are false. At worst, they can be harmful to your health.

- **cause substantial weight loss for all users.** Your habits and health concerns are unique. There is simply no one-size-fits-all product guaranteed to work for everyone. Team up with your health care provider to design a personalized nutrition and exercise program suited to your lifestyle and metabolism.
- **cause substantial weight loss by wearing it on the body or rubbing it into the skin.** You've seen the ads for diet patches or creams that claim to melt away the pounds. Don't believe them. There's nothing you can wear or apply to your skin that will cause you to lose weight.^{9, 12, 13}

Tobacco Claims

The "safe smoking" fallacy

TRUTH: There is no such thing as a safe smoke.¹⁴ In fact, no tobacco use is safe, including cigarettes, cigars, or chewing tobacco.

"As with other products, the [Federal Trade] Commission's primary role for tobacco products is to ensure that products are marketed in a manner that is truthful, not misleading, and adequately substantiated. **The Commission does not pre-screen advertising claims for tobacco or any other product** [emphasis added]. Instead, the agency addresses deception in the marketing of tobacco largely through post-market law enforcement actions targeted against specific false or misleading claims or unfair practices, just as it does for other products.

Despite coordinated efforts of the government and the public health community, tobacco use in the

United States continues to cause substantial health risks. Products that could significantly reduce those risks could provide a substantial health benefit...." At the same time, consumers may be injured if advertisers make harm-reduction claims that turn out to be untrue or that exaggerate the benefits or safety of their products."¹⁵

Thus, as with other advertised health claims, persons seeking tobacco cessation products should be aware of false claims, such as claims that a product:

- enables smokers to quit in a short time-span (e.g., seven days or less);
 - enables smokers to quit quickly, effortlessly, and permanently;
 - eliminates nicotine cravings;
 - eliminates withdrawal symptoms or side effects, such as weight gain, insomnia, or tension;
 - is more effective than nicotine patches, nicotine gum, and prescription medications.¹⁶
- For more information on these alternatives, consult your doctor, pharmacist, or other credible health care provider.

For further information on best practices and programs to stop smoking, see this previous *HealthHints* issue: "[Tobacco Cessation](#)."

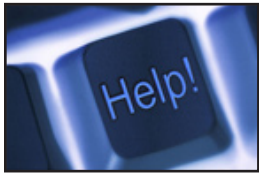
As you strive to reach your goals, remember, if it sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Be a wise consumer of health products – read the fine print, talk to your doctor, and get the facts before buying into any health product. See the upcoming issue of *HealthHints* for more ideas on finding accurate health information.

To view the references used in this newsletter, go to: <http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/healthhints/2007mar/ref.php>

Healthy Resources

Help for Finding the Information You Need

As you work toward making healthy changes and reaching your long-term goals, remember to use credible, research-based sources of information, as well as consulting licensed practitioners such as doctors, dietitians, and pharmacists. The following is a list of resources that may help with some of your goals, as well.



Evaluating Online Health Information

Evaluating Internet Health Information: A Tutorial from the National Library of Medicine at <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/webeval/webeval.html>

Weight Loss

How to Lose and Manage Weight at <http://www.fda.gov/oc/opacom/hottopics/obesity.html>

Partnership for Healthy Weight Management at <http://www.consumer.gov/weightloss/index.htm>

Setting Goals for Weight Loss at <http://www.ftc.gov/bpc/online/pubs/health/setgoals.htm>

WIN Weight-control Information Network: Weight Loss and Nutrition Myths at <http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/myths.htm>

Weight Loss: Finding a Weight Loss Program that Works for You at <http://www.ific.org/publications/brochures/upload/Weight-Loss-Finding-a-Program-That-Works-for-You.pdf>

Supplements and “Natural” Products

What’s in the Bottle? An Introduction to Dietary Supplements at <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/bottle/>

Herbal Supplements: Consider Safety, too at <http://nccam.nih.gov/health/supplement-safety/>

Tips for the Savvy Supplement User at <http://www.cfsan.fda.gov/%20~dms/ds-savvy.html#resources>

Natural Is Not Always Better at <http://www.fmaware.org/patient/beaware/natural.htm>

Update on Natural Product-Drug Interaction at http://www.fmaware.org/patient/coping/update_naturalprod.htm

Online Purchases of Medicines & Medical Products

Buying Medicines and Medical Products Online at <http://www.fda.gov/oc/buyonline/default.htm>

Use Caution Buying Medical Products Online at http://www.fda.gov/fdac/features/2005/105_buy.html

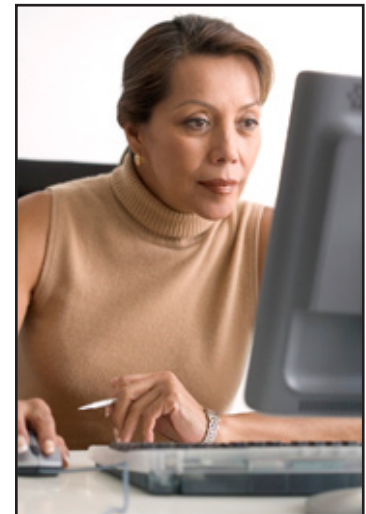
Exercise

Activity Resource Guide at http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/Health_Education/Rural_Outreach/Health_Hints/2006/jan06/workouts-handout.php

Walk Across Texas at <http://walkacrosstexas.tamu.edu>

Smoking Cessation

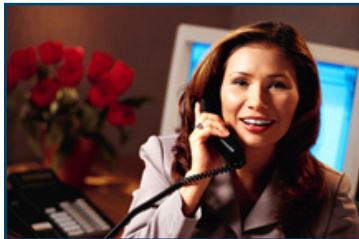
Freedom from Smoking® On-Line at <http://www.lungusa.org/site/apps/kb/home/login.asp?c=dvLUK900E&b=38973&membershipreq=83912&targetURL=http%3A%2F%2Fwww%2Elungusa%2Eorg%2Fsite%2Fpp%2Easpx%3Fc%3DdvLUK900E%26b%3D22933>



Guide to Credible Food, Supplement, & Alternative Medicine Information

When you are seeking information on the potential medical/health benefits of a food, supplement, or alternative form of medicine, first see the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine (NCCAM) website as a credible source of the latest information at <http://nccam.nih.gov>.

When considering supplement use, always ask for more information. If necessary, contact the manufacturer for more information about the specific product that you are purchasing. "Promoters of legitimate healthcare products do not object to you seeking additional information."⁶ If you cannot tell



whether the product you are purchasing meets the same standards as those used in the research studies you read about, ask to speak to someone who can address your questions, some of which may include:

- What information does the firm have to substantiate the claims made for the product? Be aware that sometimes firms supply so-called "proof" of their claims by citing undocumented reports from satisfied consumers, or "internal" graphs and charts that could be mistaken for evidence-based research.
- Does the firm have information to share about tests it has conducted on the safety or efficacy of the ingredients in the product?
- Does the firm have a quality-control system in place to determine if the product actually contains what is stated on the label and is free of contaminants?

- Has the firm received any adverse events reports from consumers using their products?¹¹

Talk with your doctor, dietician, or pharmacist. Some dietary supplements may interact with prescription and over-the-counter drugs, have unwanted effects during surgery, or have other serious adverse effects that need to be reported to the FDA (by phone at 1-800-FDA-1088 or online at <http://www.fda.gov/medwatch/how.htm>).



For other credible sites addressing your food and dietary supplement needs, see:

- the USDA Food & Nutrition Information Center's website for dietary guidance: http://fnic.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=4&tax_level=1&tax_subject=256
- the USDA Food & Nutrition Information Center's website for dietary supplements: http://fnic.nal.usda.gov/nal_display/index.php?info_center=4&tax_level=1&tax_subject=274
- the International Bibliographic Information on Dietary Supplements (IBIDS) database at http://dietary-supplements.info.nih.gov/Health_Information/IBIDS.aspx
- the Institute of Medicine's Dietary Reference Intake Tables (a complete listing of the nutrients you need based on age and gender categories) at <http://www.iom.edu?id=21377>

Educational programs of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, or national origin.

The Texas A&M University System, U.S. Department of Agriculture, and the County Commissioners Courts of Texas Cooperating