

# Don't Be Fooled By Health Fraud Scams

The science of public health was still in its infancy in the 19th and early 20th centuries when early incarnations of the modern Food and Drug Administration (FDA) tried to protect consumers from “snake oil salesmen” and other shifty characters who swindled the sick and gullible.

Back then the agency was known as the Division, and later the Bureau of Chemistry. Its agents pursued the traveling con men who sold tonics and elixirs—such as “miracle oil” supposedly made from snakes—with promises to cure whatever ails you. Labels did not list ingredients and unsuspecting buyers only found out through bitter experience that they were at best ineffective and at worse deadly.

FDA is still on the case—more than a century later.

The agency has created a new Internet resource to help consumers recognize and protect themselves from the 21st century versions of these bogus health products.

FDA’s Health Fraud Scams website ([www.fda.gov/healthfraud](http://www.fda.gov/healthfraud)) pulls together videos and articles on how to avoid fraudulent schemes, and offers information about products that have been seized, recalled or are the subject of warnings from the agency.

The site also provides links to government resources on health fraud involving FDA-regulated products, such as drugs, dietary supplements,



tobacco products, alternative medicines, medical devices, and cosmetics.

Gary Coody, R.Ph., national health fraud coordinator at FDA, calls the site “one-stop shopping” for people who want to learn how to recognize and avoid health fraud scams. Anyone can search the site to see if FDA has taken an action against a product or company. However, just because a product is not listed does not mean that it is legally marketed or safe to use.

## Equal Opportunity Fraud

Consumers spend a fortune on products that “are either worthless or may cause harm,” says Coody. “Consum-

ers can buy very dangerous products on the Internet and in stores that can cause serious injury or death.”

The waste of money is bad enough but using one of these unproven treatments can delay getting a potentially life-saving diagnosis and medication that works, he says.

The schemes can take many forms. “Some products billed as “all natural” in fact have prescription drugs and other chemicals not listed on the label that could be dangerous,”

## *“The snake oil salesman is still alive.”*

Coody says. The most common categories of these tainted products include weight loss, sexual performance, and bodybuilding.

Other products claim to be a cure-all for such serious chronic diseases as cancer, arthritis, diabetes, Alzheimer’s disease and multiple sclerosis. Seniors are particularly vulnerable to this kind of deception but consumers of all ages are taken in by fraudulent products, says Coody, adding, “Everyone is vulnerable.”

With every new health threat, phony products appear overnight, Coody says. For example, after the Japan nuclear incident in March, 2011, he says the market was flooded with products that falsely claimed to offer protection from harmful radiation.

“The snake oil salesman is still alive,” says Coody.

### **Back to FDA’s Roots**

Rampant health fraud was a significant reason for the passage of the 1906 Food and Drugs Act, says FDA historian John P. Swann, Ph.D. “So-called ‘patent’ medicines, with their outrageous claims and unlabeled, often harmful ingredients had been a mainstay of the American medical landscape throughout the 19th century (and before),” he says.

“Examples abound, from alleged rapid cures for serious diseases like cancer, tuberculosis and syphilis, to remedies with harmful and dangerous ingredients, such as addiction cures that included the unlabeled ingredient

that was the source of the addiction,” says Swann. “There were also soothing syrups for colicky and teething babes that included alcohol and opiates.”


The 1906 law prohibited the marketing of adulterated and misbranded drugs, and required labeling of a few ingredients, including alcohol, opium, morphine, heroin, and cocaine.

More than 30 years later, the 1938 Federal Food, Drug and Cosmetic Act gave FDA (named the Food and Drug Administration in 1931) new power to regulate medical devices. The agency was then able to act against the “countless gadgets that could deflect the attention of consumers from seeking established therapies,” Swann says.

### **The Difference Today**

Health fraud is more pervasive today, says Coody, because “the Internet has opened up the world market to people from their personal computers.” If you’re tempted to purchase any unproven or little known treatment, especially if it’s sold on the Internet, check with your doctor or health care professional first, he advises.

But shady products are also peddled by TV infomercials, radio, direct mail, word-of-mouth marketing and ads in newspapers and magazines.


“There are many ways that consumers are getting these messages,” says Coody, and they should view these ads with a healthy dose of skepticism.” 

### **Red Flags for Fraud**

- CURE ALL! For unrelated diseases
- QUICK FIX! Within days
- ANCIENT REMEDY! Or a secret formula
- REVOLUTIONARY! Or new science
- AMAZING RESULTS! Difficult to verify
- MY TUMOR SHRUNK! Unproven testimonials
- ACT NOW! Limited availability
- LOSE WEIGHT! No diet or exercise
- MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE!

**Visit FDA’s Health Fraud Scams Website,**  
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