

This year, we Americans will spend billions of dollars on products that do nothing for us - or may even harm us. And we'll do it for the same reason people have done it since ancient times... We want to believe in miracles. We want to find simple solutions and shortcuts to better health. It's hard to resist. All of us, at one time or another, have seen or heard about a product - a new and exotic pill, a device, or potion - that can easily solve our most vexing problem. With this product, we're told, we can eat all we want and still lose weight. We can grow taller or have bigger breasts. Or we can overcome baldness, age, arthritis, even cancer. It sounds too good to be true - and it is. But we're tempted to try the product in spite of all we know about modern medical science - or perhaps because of it. After all, many treatments we take for granted today were once considered miracles. How can we tell the difference?

Not all advertisements for health products are false, of course. In fact, the vast majority aren't. So just what is quackery? Simply put, quackery is the promotion of a medical remedy that doesn't work or hasn't been proven to work. In modern times, quackery is known as health fraud. But call it quackery or call it health fraud, the result is the same - unfulfilled wishes, wasted dollars, endangered health. Often quack products are fairly easy to spot, like the magic pills you are supposed to take to stay forever young. But sometimes the products are vaguely based on some medical report that you may even have heard about in the news. In general, when looking over ads for medicines and medical devices, watch out for those that seem to promise too much too easily. Quack cures rob us of more than money. They can steal health away or even take lives. Quacks may lure the seriously and often desperately ill, such as people suffering from arthritis and cancer, into buying a bogus cure. When people try quack remedies instead of getting effective medical help, their illnesses progress, sometimes beyond the treatable stage.

Quacks have always been quick to exploit current thinking. The snake-oil salesmen a few generations back carried an array of "natural" remedies to sell to a public that was still close to the frontier. And today, quacks take advantage of the back-to-nature movement, capitalizing on the notion that there ought to be simple, natural solutions to almost any problem. Some current target areas for such promotions include:

**ARTHRITIS.** Over 30 million Americans suffer from arthritis, and the nature of the disease makes it fertile ground for fraud. And because symptoms may come and go, or the disease may be in remission for several years, arthritis sufferers may actually believe at least temporarily, that they've been cured by a quack remedy.

Before you add to the \$2 billion spent annually on quack arthritis cures, remember that, although medical science offers effective treatments, it has found no cure for arthritis. The list of fraudulent "miracle cures" for the disease ranges from snake venom to lemon juice, from the harmless milk of vaccinated cows to the dangerous use of steroids. More dangerous and costly arthritis treatments are offered by legitimate-looking clinics, often located outside the United States. While some clinics may offer effective treatment, many prescribe untested diets or drugs that either offer no arthritis cure or cause patients to have additional health problems. Beware of arthritis clinics that offer cures. It is important to remember that pain relief and inflammation treatments are not the same. A product that advertises relief for the minor pains of arthritis does not necessarily treat inflammation. For this reason, the serious condition of arthritis should be treated by a doctor.

**CANCER.** Here quack cures are probably the cruelest and the most expensive. Seriously ill people may spend thousands of dollars on phony treatments

that do nothing to relieve their disease or suffering. Often, the quack cancer treatment clinics are set up just outside the United States, so that they're beyond the jurisdiction of U.S. authorities. Before you request admission to any cancer clinic, talk to your doctor about it.

As an aid in evaluating cancer-cure claims, keep in mind that there is no one device or remedy capable of diagnosing or treating all types of cancer. Cancer cannot be detected or treated solely through the use of machines. No one medical test conducted one time can definitively diagnose cancer, nor can a machine operated by a fraudulent practitioner cure it.

Teens are also a big target of quackery. Teenagers are ready to experiment with products that promise to speed their development and ease growing pains. And many of these junior and senior high school age

children have money enough to do the experimenting. In fact, a study by Teenage Research Unlimited revealed

that 27.6 million teenagers spent an average of \$93 a month on personal items in 1989 for a total of nearly \$31 billion.

Further, in families in which both parents work, teens take on more of the family shopping responsibilities. The U.S. Labor Department reports that as of March 1988, %62.4 of families with teenagers had two working parents. And a 1987 report by Teen Research Unlimited showed that teens do the shopping in %70 of the households with working mothers.

Many people believe that advertising is screened by a government agency and that, therefore, all claims about health products in advertising must be truthful. This is not the case with most health-care products, except for those drugs and medical devices that require pre-market approval by FDA. There is no federal, state, or local government agency that approves or verifies claims in advertisements before they are printed. Law enforcement authorities can take action only after the advertisements have appeared.

This holds for claims of a "money-back guarantee." Many quacks are fly-by-night operators who do not respond to refund demands. Often, by the time refund requests come in, they have changed their address to avoid law enforcement officials.

Health fraud promoters are fond of using testimonials from "satisfied users" to promote their wares. One reason they do this is that they can't get ethical health professionals to sanction their products. Legitimate testimonials may be useful sources of information about how a product works. However, beware of testimonials reporting incredibly fantastic medical results, especially when no medical support for the claim is offered. This is particularly important since "satisfied users" may, in some cases, have experienced the sugar pill, or "placebo" effect. The placebo effect occurs when people, believing they have been given a real medicine, experience a benefit from it. It is the power of suggestion at work.

There are many ways to protect yourself from quackery. Apply the "it-sounds-too-good-to-be-true" test to ads for health products by watching for these common characteristics of quackery:

A quick and painless cure. A "special," "secret," "ancient," or "foreign" formula, available only through the mail and only from one supplier. Testimonials or case histories from satisfied users as the only proof that the product works. A single product effective for a wide variety of ailments. A scientific "breakthrough" or "miracle cure" that has been held back or overlooked by the medical community.

To sum everything up I think that quackery is costing Americans too much money every year and needs to be stopped. Tighter government regulations and stricter rules from the FDA will help.