

Telling safe supplements from snake oils

Mix equal parts fact and fiction and you have the simple recipe for profitable sales in the dietary supplement business. A supplement promotion we saw recently promises to do everything. It's billed as the most important health discovery in decades.

The ad claims that the product will take care of virtually anything that ails you. It includes all the key words like rebuild, rejuvenate, regenerate, energize, activates your stem cells, scientifically proven, European anti-aging breakthrough, etc. If even only half of this is true, who would not want to buy it?

Certainly, there are dietary supplement products that have been well researched and are marketed with reasonable science-based information. However, others promise everything and are worthless at best and dangerous at worst.

QUESTION: How can you sort fact from fiction to avoid getting ripped off?

ANSWER: There are many "red flags" to consider. First, be suspicious if the product claims to cure a disease, provides personal testimonials, makes quick-fix promises, uses terms like "all natural" or "miracle cure," or makes claims that others are conspiring to hide its "discovery."

If a product promotion does not include detailed information on its ingredients and the amounts of each component, stop right there and don't waste your time. Also, keep in mind that "all natural" ingredients means nothing. Hemlock and strychnine are both natural.

If a claim is made that the effectiveness of a product is scientifically proved by hundreds of studies, but no references to these studies are provided, your scam alarm should be sounding loudly. If references are provided, then you need to ask whether they are really related to the product itself. Lists of rather arbitrary scientific references can just be an impressive-looking smoke screen.

If you want to do some advanced investigation, you can see if there really is published research on a product. Obtain the assistance of a librarian to conduct a search of the biomedical literature using the National Library of Medicine's PubMed system.

Conduct searches on the product name, its key ingredients and the name of the person who developed the product. Most likely, no studies have been done on the specific product. A search for studies on the key ingredients of the product may be helpful, but keep in mind that the

quality of studies can vary greatly, so don't put your trust in just one study or a single researcher.

To get a quick professional perspective, call the University of Hawaii at Manoa's Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences department at 956-7095 and ask to talk with someone who has expertise related to your question, or email gotnutr@hawaii.edu.

One of the biggest markets for dietary supplements is the older generation. Ads targeting this group often refer to benefits for your joints, bones, brain, heart, lungs, kidneys, intestines, sexual function and so on, because these are common things that develop problems with aging. Be wary of claims that the product will not interfere with your medications. They don't know what you are taking!

Be extra careful about products that say the first bottle is free. You just pay the shipping. You give them your credit card information, and you will likely be on the hook for monthly shipments unless you go to great effort to cancel the order. And, finally, if a company provides no physical address information, it is symptomatic of a scam. Run the other way!

Joannie Dobbs, PhD, CNS and Alan Titchenal, PhD, CNS
are nutritionists in the Department of Human Nutrition, Food and Animal Sciences,
College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources, UH-Manoa.
Dr. Dobbs also works with the University Health Service.
