

Cancer Information on the Internet: Search Smart, Search Safe

Anyone who has had cancer can understand the fear that this diagnosis brings. Unfortunately, there are many people and companies that prey on those fears by promoting unproven cancer “treatments” and “cures.” Many of these fake cures are advertised as “natural” nutritional supplements. Even though these may seem harmless, some may actually interfere with treatments like chemotherapy and radiation therapy. Here are some tips and resources that may help you identify cancer fraud.

- I. Be skeptical of treatments that are promoted with some of the following words or phrases:
 - **Natural/Organic/Nontoxic**—Natural does not mean safe or effective or without side effects.
 - Even cyanide is natural! And anything can have side effects.
 - Be wary when someone tells you it “can’t hurt to try it.”
 - **Treats/Cures all cancers**—No single treatment will work on every cancer.
 - Different cancers require different treatments.
 - **Listen to the many testimonials**—Testimonials or endorsements are not validated scientific studies.
 - **Scientific breakthrough that the government (or doctors or pharmaceutical companies) doesn’t want you to know**—If there were a scientific breakthrough, reputable health-care providers would be the first to know about this. Such a breakthrough would be impossible to keep secret.
 - Be wary of sellers who bad-mouth respected organizations such as medical associations, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA), or the American Cancer Society (ACS)
 - **Money-back or no-risk guarantee**—This doesn’t mean that the treatment works.
 - Be wary of products with “limited availability” or advance payment requirements.
 - Be wary of offers like “free 6-month supply” if you order the product.
 - **Suggestions that a treatment should be combined with a proven treatment**—This is a big “red flag.”
 - Weight loss products often say they should be combined with diet and exercise.
 - Products recommended to be combined with regular cancer treatments should be viewed with great suspicion.
 - **The treatment is not available in the United States**—Ask yourself, “Why not?”
 - Is it because of the required rigorous assessment of the scientific data on the benefits and safety of the treatment?

II. Information About Fake Cancer Treatments

FDA: 187 Fake Cancer Cures <http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/GuidanceComplianceRegulatoryInformation/EnforcementActivitiesbyFDA/ucm171057.htm>

Snopes www.snopes.com

Quackwatch www.quackwatch.org

III. Information About the Safe Use of Herbals, Supplements, and Vitamins

ACS: “Guidelines for Using Complementary and Alternative Methods”

<http://www.cancer.org/Treatment/TreatmentsandSideEffects/ComplementaryandAlternativeMedicine/guidelines-for-using-complementary-and-alternative-methods>

ACS: “If You Are Thinking About Buying Drugs Online”

<http://www.cancer.org/Treatment/FindingandPayingforTreatment/ManagingInsuranceIssues/PrescriptionDrugAssistancePrograms/prescription-drug-assistance-programs-buying-drugs-on-line?docSelected=prescription-drug-assistance-programs-intro>

ACS: “Dietary Supplements: How to Know What Is Safe”

<http://www.cancer.org/Treatment/TreatmentsandSideEffects/ComplementaryandAlternativeMedicine/DietarySupplements/dietary-supplements-choosing-safely>

FDA: “Buying Medications Over the Internet”

<http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/BuyingMedicinesOvertheInternet/default.htm>

FDA: “Buying Medicine From Outside the United States”

<http://www.fda.gov/Drugs/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/BuyingUsingMedicineSafely/BuyingMedicinefromOutsidetheUnitedStates/default.htm>

IV. Where to Find Information About Herbs, Botanicals, and Vitamins

Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center Searchable database of herbs, botanicals, and vitamins

<http://www.mskcc.org/mskcc/html/11570.cfm>

National Cancer Institute (NCI): MedlinePlus Searchable database of drugs, supplements, and herbs

<http://www.nlm.nih.gov/medlineplus/druginformation.html>

V. How to Determine the Credibility of a Website

FTC: “How to Find Health Information Online”

www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/microsites/whocares/health.shtm

ACS: “Cancer Information on the Internet”

<http://www.cancer.org/Cancer/CancerBasics/cancer-information-on-the-internet>

NCI: “Evaluating Health Information on the Internet”

<http://www.cancer.gov/cancertopics/factsheet/Information/internet>

This supplementary material accompanies the article “Internet Oncology: Cure Seekers Beware!” by Wendy Vogel (*J Adv Pract Oncol* 2011;2,409–412).