Nutrition Misinformation

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Nutrition Misinformation Exists

In today's "freedom of choice" era consumers may use any product they want, even if it is useless. Still, this does not give anyone the right to sell you useless products or treatments. Health fraud, the promotion of false or unproven products for profit, costs consumers billions of dollars each year.

Knowledge is your best protection against health fraud. Being able to recognize health fraud before you waste your money, or endanger your life is the key to preventing health fraud. Through education you can become aware of the methods used by promoters and the language of fraud.

Misinformation Misleads

Nutrition fraud is a leading example of health fraud. Nutrition fraud describes abuses that occur as a result of misleading claims for food and nutrition products. These products can include traditional foods, dietary supplements, dietary products, food substances, diet plans and devices.

Food faddism, or an exaggerated belief in the effects of food or nutrition on health or disease fuels nutrition fraud. Food fads are based on some basic misbeliefs: 1) certain foods have special attributes which may cure disease; 2) certain foods should be removed from the diet because they are harmful; and 3) certain foods have special health benefits.

Nutrition fraud may lead to loss of money, failure to seek correct medical care, and/or lack of money for proper treatment. Substituting poor nutritional practices for sound ones, or disease itself, can also occur.

Nutrition fraud is a major concern in the United States. Highly skilled promoters and marketing techniques that promote fraudulent products have replaced the traveling medicine man. The manner in which nutrition misinformation reaches you can be very subtle. Books, talk shows, magazine and newspaper articles, advertisements, and mail order companies often distort nutrition information. Unfortunately, so can friends or family members, who tell of the wonders of a special food or diet. What is unfortunate is the hope we put in a few special foods when what we really need is a balanced diet.

Unfortunately, many people falsely believe that anything printed or sold is truthful. There are many federal and state agencies that regulate against health fraud. However, misleading claims about food and nutrients are difficult to control. There are limits on what government agencies can do about fraudulent nutrition practices. The government must observe the basic rights of freedom of speech and press. Nutrition information, whether scientifically correct or not, is protected under the first amendment. This means that, for you as a consumer, you must evaluate the accuracy of nutrition claims. "Caveat Emptor" is a Latin term that means "Let the Buyer Beware." Food is not magic and it is not a cure-all. Yet some promoters make such claims. If they do not make the claims outright, they may use advertising to imply false claims. Therefore being a well informed consumer is your best defense against nutrition misinformation and fraud.

How to Spot Nutrition Misinformation

Listen, ask questions, and investigate nutrition claims. You may be able to spot false nutrition information. Many misleading claims play on our fear of disease. The following are some FDA tips for evaluating nutrition information.

1. Watch out for claims of FDA approval. Current law does not permit the use of the term "FDA" in any way that suggests approval.
2. Look for key words. Be cautious about products that use words such as "natural," "miracle," "cure," or "breakthrough." These are not scientific words. Cures for serious medical problems are not available through the mail or door to door.
3. Ask to see the product's label. By following the instructions on the label, a user should be able to realize the benefits claimed by the product. If the label doesn't clearly explain how to achieve all the benefits, be careful.
4. Check to see if the information in the advertisement or promotional material differs from information on the product's label. FDA can prohibit the introduction of any food, drug, device, or cosmetic that is not labeled correctly. Only factual and non-misleading information can be on the label. As a result, most false claims are not on the product label. False claims often appear in books, television, brochures, and promotional materials. Regulation of these types of materials is difficult due to first amendment rights of free speech and press.
5. Insist on full identification. If the advertisement mentions medical clinics or medical personnel, see that full names, addresses, and phone numbers are available and factual.
6. Ask for proof of the product's status with FDA. All legitimate medical manufactures engaging in interstate commerce must register with FDA, and have products listed with FDA. Some drugs, medical devices, and diagnostic products

require FDA's approval before marketing. Ask to see the firm's FDA registration letter, the product's listing letter, or the FDA marketing approval letter.

7. Be careful of sponsors who say their products don't need FDA approval. Some say supplements and some "natural substances" don't need FDA approval because they are a food or food ingredient. Under the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act, a product is a drug if there is a medical claim. Drugs are articles intended to affect the function of the body. FDA also requires approval for combinations of approved drugs.
8. Watch out for cures for serious diseases. Be especially careful of products that claim to cure multiple health problems. Don't treat serious medical problems by mail or door to door products.
9. Be careful of self diagnosis based only on symptoms. This can be hazardous if the diagnosis is false. Remember, everyone gets tired and gets occasional pains. There are many causes for such universal symptoms. A proper diagnosis requires a physical examination by a health professional. Delaying treatment can allow a disease to progress beyond help. If you need medication, your physician should prescribe it.
10. Investigate any "star support" or "big name" approval for any medical product. Any promotor must be able to demonstrate that the endorser has agreed to the ad campaign. Remember these are not scientific evidence. FDA can regulate claims made on a product label, but not what someone says happened to them.
11. Be cautious of recommendations for vitamin or mineral doses larger than the dietary reference intakes (DRI) or non-nutritive compounds. Reliable sources will only recommend vitamin and mineral doses in line with the DRI's. Only certain conditions like pregnancy or serious illness use doses beyond the DRI's.
12. If is sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

Your Right to Evaluate

Exert your right to evaluate. If you suspect that a product you are interested in is fraudulent there are a number of things you can do:

- Ask for evidence of all claims and a written guarantee.
- Check out the product and claims with your physician, county medical society, dietitian, health department nutritionist or county Extension Educator.
- Contact the Food and Drug Administration either at its office in your area, or National headquarters.
- Ask the Better Business Bureau or consumer interest group about the reputation of the promoter.
- Inform your local Post Office about products promoted through the mail.
- Don't buy immediately. Ask for time to think it over. Check out the product and claims. A legitimate product will stand up to your evaluation.

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