



## Health and medical scams

### The Set-up



An offer that speaks directly to your health concerns.

### The Hook

Promises of a remedy or cure that mainstream medicine has been unable to deliver on.

### The Sting

Costly miracle cures that do not work and may be very harmful.

## How health and medical scams work

If you are concerned about or just interested in your health, that makes you a target for scammers offering worthless solutions, cures and dodgy healthcare. Like any scams, these can cost you a lot of money, but this kind of scam can also damage your health.

New Zealand has restrictions on claims that can be made about health products and services. If you have been told that a product or service will have guaranteed amazing results, it is almost certainly a scam. Be very careful.

There are legitimate alternative medicines which make justified statements within the boundaries of the law ... and then there are miracle cure scams, masquerading as legitimate alternative medicine.

These worthless treatments cover everything from cancer and AIDS to arthritis and colds.

Medical scams are usually peddled in ways that are unconventional for normal medicine: like through the internet or mail order.

The offer is sometimes based around a revolutionary guru figure or magical special ingredient.

These miracle cures can add to your stress, perhaps worsen your condition, cost you large amounts of money and can actually be very dangerous for you.

You should always see your GP first if you are concerned about your health.

## Variations on health and medical scams

### Weight loss scams

These promise weight loss with little effort but great expense ... although the real cost is often hidden. These products are often 'endorsed' by people who do not need it for themselves. The solutions being marketed could be dangerous.

Weight loss scammers take advantage of the fact that when someone goes on a diet they can lose a great deal of weight in the first week or so. It is so impressive that you think it is caused by the product you have bought, rather than simply your own body's response to a change in diet.

There is currently no scientifically-proven way to lose weight without restricting diet or exercise. Claims to do these things are false and could be illegal.

### Medical spam

In the same way that there is spam about financial investments, lottery prizes and competition, there is also a lot of spam about medical issues. Apply the same cautions to health-related spam that you would apply to any kind of unsolicited junk email. Don't open them, don't click on them, don't believe them. Just delete them.

## **Fake online pharmacies**

These offer you drugs that are much cheaper than through a licensed pharmacy, or may give you access to drugs that are not approved for use in New Zealand. Be aware that most of these sites are simply fronts for stealing your credit card details, or loading malicious software onto your computer. However, if a site does actually send you the drugs you paid for, you should be aware that several things could happen:

- you could end up paying far more than you expected;
- you may receive counterfeit drugs;
- you may receive drugs have passed their use-by dates.

The drugs you receive could be very dangerous to your health.

## **Protect yourself from health and medical scams**

- Be very wary of completing health questionnaires from organisations you do not know or trust. The questions will be designed to raise all sorts of health concerns in your mind ... making you vulnerable to the scammer's prescription that what someone in your condition really needs is exactly what they are offering.
- Investigate all medical claims. Do not take the word of the person offering you the medicine. Make sure that scientific testing really did happen, and that the quoted effects happen to most people who use the product, not just a few isolated cases. Do not be satisfied with stories about 'Bill, from Wellington ...' Find out who Bill is, whether he actually exists, what his connection to the company is (he could be a paid representative), what his experience really was, and how many others there are like him.
- Do not accept a diagnosis from an unqualified person claiming to be a medical practitioner.
- If you want to lose weight, see your doctor or health centre for help with a supervised, medically-safe weight loss programme.
- If you have bought drugs from an online pharmacy, but have not received them, run antivirus and anti-spyware software on your computer. You should also consider changing your internet bank account passwords and other important passwords.
- If you have bought drugs from an online pharmacy, and you have received them, please dispose of them. The risk is too great that they may be fake or expired. They may be harmful to your health.
- Don't open spam emails. If you do, don't click on any links they contain, or open any files that may be attached to them. Even if they are not gateways for expensive medical sham treatments, they may launch computer viruses or spyware that can make any personal information you hold on your computer vulnerable to scammers.
- Never give out your personal, credit card or banking details to any person or organisation you do not know and absolutely trust.
- Remember that if a company or individual makes claims about their treatment, they are probably breaking the law. If they are prepared to break the law in making false promises, they may also be prepared to take your money and harm your health.
- Remember that medical scams can be dangerous to your health as well as your finances. Be careful about decisions relating to your health. See your GP first if you have health concerns.

### **More information**

23 November 2009 - [Medsafe warns of 65 overseas websites offering unapproved herbal products](#)

## **Help protect others from health and medical scams**

If your own health has been the subject of a scam attempt, please share your story here. We will treat your report in the strictest confidence and remove your personal details before posting your story on our site.

[Report your scam story to us.](#)