

The Consumer's Edge

Consumer Protection Division, Maryland Attorney General's Office

Issue # 129

Healthy Winter Living

With winter and the cold and flu season upon us, people are more susceptible to becoming ill. Different people try different remedies to maintain their health and combat illness, including taking herbal supplements. The Attorney General wants consumers to be informed before taking herbal supplements.

Herbal supplements and natural remedies are sold at grocery stores, gyms and health food stores, and on the Internet. Many people take these because they are promoted as a safe way to lose weight, boost energy, fight colds or even cure cancer. **Herbal supplements can be sold without prior approval or testing by any government agency.** The FDA may remove a supplement from the market, but it usually does so only after it receives reports of people suffering serious side effects.



Because herbal supplements are not as closely regulated as drugs, it is harder to be sure the product contains what its label says, that it is not contaminated with other substances, or that it is safe or effective when taken as directed. Independent tests of supplements have shown that batches of the same brand can vary greatly in the amount of the active ingredients - or may not contain any active ingredient at all.

Although supplements cannot claim that they can treat, prevent or cure specific diseases or conditions, some may make claims that they will have a positive effect on the body, such as "antioxidants maintain

cell integrity," even though there may be no proof to back up those claims. Often supplements are advertised with glowing testimonials from people who claim that the product changed their lives. Consumer testimonials are unreliable, may be exaggerated or untrue, and do not prove a product is safe or will work for you.

The most important warning the Maryland Attorney General wants to give consumers is that they need to make informed decisions about herbal supplements because **some supplements can be dangerous, even deadly.** The FDA has issued warnings to consumers or made manufacturers recall these products after reports of serious illness and deaths in users, or evidence that they contained dangerous substances.

Supplements may react with prescription or over-the-counter medicines, or reduce their effectiveness.

Organic products are becoming increasingly popular and are being heavily marketed to consumers. **Just because a product is "natural" does not mean it is safe.** Poison ivy and arsenic are both natural substances. A "natural" product can cause allergic reactions or be toxic in large doses.

Products marketed as "miracle cures" for cancer, AIDS, arthritis or other serious conditions can be even more dangerous. These products are usually nothing more than scams designed to cheat desperately ill consumers out of their money. The treatments are ineffective, can have serious side effects, and cause the consumer to avoid getting legitimate treatment that

could help. In 1999, the Attorney General's Office brought charges and won the case against a business that promoted massive doses of an aloe vera extract to cure cancer and AIDS. Many consumers spent thousands of dollars on this unproven treatment without any improvement in their condition. The business was fined the maximum penalty allowed by law and had to pay back all monies collected from deceived consumers. More recently, the Attorney General entered into a settlement with a national supplement distributor that was making unsubstantiated claims that its products could prevent colds.

PROTECTION

- Tell your doctor if you take any herbal products, in case they might interfere with other medications you take, or if you have scheduled surgery in the near future.
- Contact your doctor if you think you have had an adverse reaction to a supplement. If you are considering taking something promoted as a cure or treatment for a serious illness, always discuss it with your licensed physician.
- Stay informed. Listen to the news and check out the FDA website (www.fda.gov) or our consumer recall clearinghouse website (www.oag.state.md.us/Consumer/recalls) for information about recalls or warnings about supplements.
- Look for information on labels about possible side effects and warnings for certain classes of people who should not take the product, such as pregnant or nursing mothers, people with allergies, or people taking certain prescription medications.
- When buying a supplement, consider the name of the manufacturer. Supplements made by a nationally known food and drug manufacturer have likely been made under tight controls.

Visit the websites of the Federal Trade Commission: www.ftc.gov or the Food and Drug Administration: www.fda.gov. If you have any questions or concerns, contact the Consumer Protection Division's Health Education and Advocacy Unit at (410) 528-1840 or toll-free at 1-877-261-8807.

Volunteer Opportunities and Internships

Do you like to help people? Do you live in the Baltimore area? Then come volunteer in the Attorney General's Consumer Protection Division.

Our volunteers respond to consumer inquiries on the telephone hotline, and mediate consumer complaints against businesses and health care providers. You will receive training in mediation and learn valuable skills. The division also offers college and law students a variety of internship opportunities.

Our downtown office is convenient to the Light Rail and Metro, and volunteers receive a travel stipend. No experience necessary. Interested? Call 410-576-6519.

Attorney General's Consumer Offices

Consumer Protection Division
200 St. Paul Place, 16th Fl.
Baltimore, MD 21202-2021

- General Consumer Complaints: 410-528-8662
Toll-free: 1-888-743-0023
TDD: 410-576-6372
9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday
- Medical Billing Complaints: 410-528-1840
9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
To appeal health plan claims decisions:
Toll-free within Maryland 1-877-261-8807

Branch Offices

- **Cumberland**
301-722-2000; 9 a.m. to 12:00 p.m. 3rd Tuesdays
- **Frederick**
301-600-1071; 9 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. 2nd and 4th Thursdays
- **Hagerstown**
301-791-4780; 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
- **Prince George's**
301-386-6200; 9:00 a.m. to 5:00p.m. Monday-Friday
- **Salisbury**
410-713-3620; 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
- **Southern Maryland (Hughesville)**
301-274-4620 Toll-free 1-866-366-8343
9:30 a.m. to 2:30 p.m. Tuesdays

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