

CYBERSPACE

A New Arena for Consumer Health Fraud

The *Internet* has become an essential information source for consumers, and searches for health information are increasingly common. About 113 million adults in the United States now find information about their health on the Internet. With its ease of use and vast range of resources, the Internet can be very helpful in locating health information.



e-mail. Also, you might want to have at least two e-mail accounts, one for family and friends and one for using on the Web, such as when making purchases or when you need to give an e-mail address on a Web site. Free e-mail accounts are available from Yahoo, Hotmail, and other Web sites, though the cost of “free” e-mail is putting up with all the advertisements.

Cyberspace, a term used to describe the worldwide computer network known as the information superhighway, includes the Internet and a vast assortment of commercial online computer services.

Although indispensable, cyberspace has a dark side: fraudulent sellers use it to promote familiar schemes, and regulation and enforcement of laws on the Internet have been problematic, especially regarding sales of prescription drugs. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and Federal Trade Commission (FTC) work together to protect the public from these schemes, but it is an uphill battle with no end in sight.

SPAM E-MAIL

One problem with having an *e-mail* account is that you are likely to receive *spam*, unsolicited e-mail that tries to sell you junk and often promises free products that aren't really free. Spam is essentially junk mail for your computer. As with regular junk mail, there are ways to limit and even get rid of spam. Most importantly, don't respond to spam e-mail or click on the “unsubscribe” link if you do open the e-mail. This only tells the sender that your e-mail address works and to send you more spam! Just delete the

Since the CAN-SPAM act took effect in 2004, it is now illegal to send spam in the United States. To report spam to the FTC, simply forward it to spam@uce.gov.

CLASSIFIED ADS

Classified advertising on the Internet is, by far, the greatest source for fraudulent health products and remedies. No matter where you look online, chances are the classified ads will include some false and misleading medical claim.

BULLETIN BOARDS

A more subtle form of promotion of fraudulent products is through “disguised advertising.” Online *bulletin boards* that allow individuals to post comments about the quality or performance of products may include advertisements in disguise.

Because the full identities or affiliations of online bulletin board operators and participants are not always known, it could be difficult to detect disguised advertising. Promoters of fraudulent products could easily pose as consumers recommending a product that supposedly worked for them.

ONLINE CHAT ROOMS

Some commercial online services provide live discussion groups called *chat rooms* or *chat forums*. Service subscribers can “drop by” and engage in an online conversation by typing in their comments. Like online bulletin boards, chat rooms may play host to imposters who promote their own misleading or useless products.



WHAT TO WATCH FOR

Anything that causes concern in traditional print and broadcast media should also be viewed with skepticism online. One of the best warning signs of questionable online advertising is an overstated claim of product effectiveness, such as “Cures or improves 27 different conditions: Hypertension, some forms of cancer, age spots, ulcers, reduces weight,” etc.

Remember, the bottom line is never to make a purchase decision for these kinds of products or services based solely on information obtained from a single source, whether it is an electronic bulletin board, online chat room, newspaper or direct-mail ad, or a broadcast commercial. Be skeptical and check sources and references. Do not rely on advertisements.

ORDERING DRUGS ON THE INTERNET

It is estimated that more than two million U.S. citizens get prescription drugs from Canada, which is considered illegal. Under federal law, only manufacturers can import prescription drugs from other countries. Check with the National



Association of Boards of Pharmacy www.nabp.net, (847) 698-6227, to find legitimate online pharmacies. Avoid sites that do not identify the vendor or do not provide a U.S. address and phone number in case you have a problem. Also make sure they do not share your personal information without your permission.

USING YOUR CREDIT CARD

When you want to buy something over the Internet, make sure your browser is in secure mode. A small, closed padlock in the lower left corner of the screen means the Web site is secure. Most sites that handle financial transactions should be secure. Also, when buying items on the Internet, you are better off using a credit card than a debit card. With a credit card, \$50 is the most you will ever be liable for if there is fraud or unauthorized use. Liability for debit cards can be much higher by law and can be unlimited in certain circumstances.

HOW TO FIND MORE INFORMATION

About 85 million Americans, or three quarters of those who search for health information online, do not consistently check the information to make sure it is accurate. Despite the huge amount of fraudulent and erroneous information that is out there,

however, the Internet can be a great source for accurate and reliable material concerning today’s health issues. Following are some sites that Internet surfers can visit with confidence:

Medline Plus, <http://medlineplus.gov/>, is a service of the U.S. National Library of Medicine and the National Institutes of Health. It covers more than 600 topics on health conditions, diseases, and wellness. It also provides information on prescription and over-the-counter medicines.

Healthfinder – Your Guide to Reliable Health Information, www.healthfinder.gov/, is a free guide to publications by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The HHS Web site, www.hhs.gov/, provides links to non-governmental sites that present reliable medical information written in laymen's terms.



The National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine, <http://nccam.nih.gov>, has the best government Web site on identifying, investigating, and validating complementary and alternative medicine.

www.healthfinder.gov provides advice to parents and has sections for younger children and teens.

WHERE TO GET HELP

The National Consumer League maintains a Fraud Center Web site to provide consumers with answers to questions about online scams and telephone or mail solicitations. They also offer information about how and where to report fraud. Consumers can report fraud by completing the online complaint form found on their Web site: www.fraud.org/.

Information on complaints about specific companies operating in your area, as well as specific products being sold, can be obtained by calling your local office of the Better Business Bureau. They are www.lexington.bbb.org/ in Lexington and Eastern Kentucky, and www.ky-in.bbb.org in Louisville and Western Kentucky. Their phone numbers are (859) 259-1008 in Lexington, and (502) 583-6546 in Louisville.

If you feel you have been ripped off, contact the Kentucky Attorney General's Office, Consumer Protection Division. Their toll-free number is (888) 432-9257. They can inform you of your rights and legal options.

RELATED EXTENSION PUBLICATION:

Let the Consumer Beware! A Guide to Fraud and Rip-Offs

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