

Ten ways to avoid being quacked

By Stephen Barrett, M.D.

Promoters of quackery know how to appeal to every aspect of human vulnerability. What sells is not the quality of their products but their ability to influence their audience. Here are ten strategies to avoid being quacked:

1. **Remember that quackery seldom looks outlandish.** Its promoters often use scientific terms and quote (or misquote) from scientific references. Some actually have reputable scientific training but have gone astray.
2. **Ignore any practitioner who says that most diseases are caused by faulty nutrition or can be remedied by taking supplements.** Although some diseases are related to diet, most are not. Moreover, in most cases where diet actually is a factor in a person's health problem, the solution is not to take vitamins but to alter the diet.
3. **Be wary of anecdotes and testimonials.** If someone claims to have been helped by an unorthodox remedy, ask yourself and possibly your doctor whether there might be another explanation. Most single episodes of disease recover with the passage of time, and most chronic ailments have symptom-free periods. Some testimonials are complete fabrications; others give undue weight to minor changes.
4. **Be wary of pseudomedical jargon.** Instead of offering to treat your disease, some quacks will promise to "detoxify" your body, "balance" its chemistry, release its "nerve energy," or "bring it in harmony with nature," or to correct supposed "weakness" of various organs. The use of concepts that are impossible to measure enables success to be claimed even though nothing has actually been accomplished.
5. **Don't fall for paranoid accusations.** Unconventional practitioners often claim that the medical profession, drug companies, and the government are conspiring to suppress whatever method they espouse. No evidence to support such a theory has ever been demonstrated. It also flies in the face of logic to believe that large numbers of people would oppose the development of treatment methods that might someday help themselves or their loved ones.
6. **Forget about "secret cures."** True scientists share their knowledge as part of the process of scientific development. Quacks may keep their methods secret to prevent others from demonstrating that they don't work. No one who actually discovered a cure would have reason to keep it secret. If a method works-especially for a serious disease-the discoverer would gain enormous fame, fortune and personal satisfaction by sharing the discovery with other.

7. **Be wary of herbal remedies.** Herbs are promoted primarily through literature based on hearsay, folklore and tradition. As medical science developed, it became apparent that most herbs did not deserve good reputations, and most that did were replaced by synthetic compounds that are more effective. Many herbs contain hundreds or even thousands of chemicals that have not been completely cataloged. While some may turn out to be useful, others could well prove toxic. With safe and effective treatment available, treatment with herbs rarely makes sense.
- 8 **Be skeptical of any product claimed to be effective against a wide range of unrelated diseases-particularly diseases that are serious.** There is no such thing as a panacea or “cure-all.”
9. **Ignore appeals to your vanity.** One of quackery’s most powerful appeals is the suggestion to “think for yourself” instead of following the collective wisdom of the scientific community. A similar appeal is the idea that although a remedy has not been proven to work for other people, it still might work for you.
10. **Don’t let desperation cloud your judgment!** If you feel that your doctor isn’t doing enough to help you, or if you have been told that your condition is incurable and don’t wish to accept this fate without a struggle, don’t stray from scientific health care in a desperate attempt to find a solution. Instead, discuss your feelings with your doctor and consider a consultation with a recognized expert.

For more information about health-related frauds, myths, fads, and fallacies, visit the internet web site www.Quackwatch.com, operated by Quackwatch, Inc., a nonprofit corporation. Its primary focus is on quackery-related information that is difficult or impossible to get elsewhere. Founded by Dr. Stephen Barrett in 1969 as the Lehigh Valley Committee Against Health Fraud, it was incorporated in 1970 and assumed its current name in 1997. Its activities include:

- Investigating questionable claims rhetoric
- Answering inquiries
- Distributing reliable publications
- Reporting illegal marketing
- Generating consumer-protection lawsuits
- Improving the quality of health information on the Internet
- Attacking misleading advertising on the internet