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Web Exclusive: Protection from Health Fraud

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The evolution of the Internet has spawned thousands of online and mail-order businesses that specialize in so-called cancer cures. The anonymity of the Internet and the sheer number of fraudulent businesses has left the legal system unable to prosecute most of them. In addition to the Internet, consumers must also be wary of any print advertisements, mail-order products and home- or store-based businesses that look suspicious.

A general rule is anything that looks too good to be true probably is. Warning signs include a product touted to cure or treat multiple diseases in a short amount of time and personal stories without scientific evidence. If “studies” are given, experts recommend researching the information yourself through well-known medical journal libraries, such as www.pubmed.gov and talking with your doctor. Identity theft is also something to consider. A company should not ask for personal information, such as a social security number, when ordering anything over the phone or on the Internet.

Two government agencies share the responsibility of investigating fraudulent companies, and only a couple of hundred are prosecuted each year because of the effort and time involved in each case. The [Federal Trade Commission](http://www.ftc.gov) (877-382-4357) is charged with regulating advertising of products and to prevent fraud and deceptive business practices. The FTC works with Canadian and Mexican officials to shut down deceitful businesses across the border. The [Food and Drug Administration](http://www.fda.gov) shares the burden of protecting consumers by regulating and ensuring the safety and efficacy of cosmetics, medication and food.

Contact the FTC with questions about a company advertising a suspicious cancer treatment or if you’re a victim of health fraud. On a state level, you can contact your Attorney General's office, FDA office, department of health or consumer protection agency. The more complaints filed against a fraudulent business, the greater chance the government will investigate.