

Phony Weight Loss Products

More than two-thirds of Americans are either overweight or obese, and scammers hope to profit from the desperation many of us feel to lose weight. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) warns that a company known as “Sale Slash” has been peddling fraudulent weight loss products through hacked email addresses, to convince readers the products were endorsed by friends or family members. Those emails often support bogus claims of incredible weight loss results with fraudulent versions of respected news websites and fabricated celebrity endorsements, adding another layer of apparent credibility to their claims.

Weight loss scams old and new

Weight loss scams are nothing new. In fact, the FTC has been prosecuting false diet claims since 1927. Further, the word “diet” comes from the ancient Greek word “diatia,” meaning Plato might have been dealing with diet scams while he wrote “The Republic.” In the twenty-first century, the Internet has greatly accelerated the speed and impact of scammer successes by gaining access to wide audiences and making it easy for them to reap large profits.

The variations are many and the tactics are just as varied. Since 2005, the FTC has brought 82 cases against scammers for using false or unsubstantiated claims about weight-loss products. Surely there are many others that have gone under the radar and/or are lacking evidence for prosecution. That’s why awareness is a valuable means for guarding yourself. Diet experts and government agencies offer some warning signs to help consumers avoid these types of scams:

- The product claims you will lose more than one pound per week. Diet experts believe about one pound per week is the ideal rate for healthy weight loss. Any product that claims it can shed weight faster is probably too good to be true.
- The product advertises you can lose weight without diet or exercise. It’s not fun to hear, but if you really want to lose weight, a diet and exercise are the only proven and healthy paths.
- Be alert if it claims you can lose weight from a specific part of your body, that a single factor is preventing your weight loss, and/or any advertisement using the words “miracle,” “scientific breakthrough,” or “secret formula.”
- The images on the site are obvious stock photos or appear altered. If you aren’t sure if the images are authentic, use Google images to perform a reverse-image search. Google can show you all the places using a specific picture. The method for doing this varies based upon your Web browser. Just search “Reverse Image Search Google” to quickly find the instructions that will work best for you.
- Google the name of the product and add the word “scam” to the search query. Simply searching for “weight loss scam” returned the following products in just a few seconds: HCG Diet Direct, Sensa Products, LeanSpa, L’Occitane, Lobster powders & creams, caffeine underwear, double shot pills, Healthe Trim, and many others.

Who can you trust?

Medical research progresses every day and even well-intentioned diet experts can find it difficult to determine if any specific product works. TV's Dr. Oz recently testified in front of the U.S. Senate about the difficulties he has experienced in keeping up with dietary science. He even has encouraged viewers to interpret his advice as if he were a celebrity rather than a doctor. Whether Dr. Oz encourages misinformation or is the victim of forces outside his control, the green coffee bean supplements scammers have been peddling skyrocketed in popularity after appearing on Dr. Oz's TV show while the guest promoting them settled with the FTC for \$9 million.

If you can't trust famous doctors, you might then turn to friends for diet advice. That's why many recent email scams have used Americans' faith in their loved ones against them by hijacking email addresses to make it look like the scammers' pitch was coming from a close friend or family member. In addition, these emails send readers to false versions of respected news websites, giving their false claims an air of objectivity, because even people who might not trust Uncle Fred's diet tips might accept claims made by famous journalists. Here are some additional tips for combating those deceptive practices:

- Always confirm that someone you really know sent you the email before you pay any money or volunteer any personal information.
- Even if a site shows the logo of a major network, that doesn't mean it's legitimate. Check out the other headlines the page links to. Take a look at the ads on the page. Are all the ads directing you to weight loss products or other similar businesses?
- If a "reporter" tells you about their first-hand experience with the product, be skeptical. If the claims seem incredible, be even more doubtful. Reporters don't usually try medical products for a story and they are even less likely to do so for a long period of time.
- If a major news network were to subject a reporter to experimental medical treatments, they would most likely put the segment on television and do a lot of pre-story promotion. Weight loss offers a very dramatic visual, after all. If you don't see the reporter describing the product on video, or if the video doesn't look like an expensive, major-network production, it is probably fake. Scammers will take images and names from authentic news sources and use them without regard to legality, so confirm you are actually seeing the reporter talking about the product on that's on the video.
- If you're still unsure about a product or offer, question everything. What name did the reporter use in the video? Search for it online to make sure he or she works for that network. Look up the product and see if it's for sale at a legitimate store. Call the friend who sent you the email. Ask your doctor.

If you are attempting to shed pounds for whatever reason, remember there are many healthy ways to do so. Some are relatively inexpensive while others can put a heavy strain on your wallet. Armed with awareness of the tricks and tactics will help you be alert and less susceptible to falling for the latest magic pill a scammer claims will get you to your ideal weight without the work.

Sources

<http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0299-fake-news-sites-promote-acai-supplements>

<https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/blog/spammy-phony-weight-loss-promises>

<https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/press-releases/2015/05/ftc-halts-deceptive-marketing-bogus-weight-loss-products>

<http://www.nbcnews.com/health/diet-fitness/were-getting-even-fatter-survey-finds-n365276>

<http://www.nbcnews.com/health/diet-fitness/dr-oz-effect-senators-scold-mehmet-oz-diet-scams-n133226>

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/william-anderson-ma-lmhc/weight-loss-scams_b_4590533.html

<http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-20695743>

http://www.diet-blog.com/07/7_ways_to_spot_a_weight_loss_scam.php