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Bogus Treatments

Intelligent men and women will buy bogus hair growth treatments. These are treatments that do not work. Despite the claims made in print and television advertisements, on product labels, or by salespeople, most hair growth products do not grow hair. It is amazing to me that people who know better than to believe advertisements for products promising “easy weight loss without dieting,” or “face-lifts without surgery,” will often give ineffective hair loss treatments a try.

Advertisers for hair restoration products play on their prospect’s hopes and fears. Marketers of fake hair loss products often present their own (phony) reasons for hair loss, and then offer their special product that neatly solves the stated cause of the loss. Or they state the actual causes of hair loss, and then claim that their product somehow corrects the problem. People desperately want to believe these useless products work.

Bogus products for treating hair loss cost hopeful consumers millions of dollars each year. They also confuse consumers and distract them from trying hair restoration treatments that really do work.

In the United States, medicines and medical devices that actually affect the function of the body are regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, and are extensively tested in lengthy and expensive clinical trials to assure safety and effectiveness.

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To avoid regulation that would show that these products do not work, bogus products claim to the FDA to be either cosmetics having no effect on the body's function, or they claim to be food supplements containing naturally occurring herbal, botanical, vitamin, and enzyme ingredients. Cosmetics and food supplements are more loosely regulated than medicines and medical devices.

But the labeling, and especially the advertising for these products, suggests that they have “medical” properties that somehow stop hair loss or grow new hair. The wording in their advertising is very careful-

If a hair restoration treatment sounds too good to be true, it probably is. Before you purchase a treatment for hair loss, consult with a dermatologist and get the facts.

ly crafted to sound medically beneficial, but without stepping over the bounds of what the FDA would consider to be a medical claim. They may claim their product “opens the nutrient pathways” or “increases cellular activity” or other such nonsense. And almost always they will claim to have “all natural ingredients with no know side effects.”

Bogus treatments for hair loss tend to be offered for sale by companies with scientific sounding names, or by “research labs.” They are sold by mail-order ads in company-owned health journals, on Internet web sites, on cable TV infomercials, and especially on talk radio advertisements. Multi-level marketing and hair salons are also favorite ways to sell, because another individual (who earns a commission) can make a direct verbal sales pitch explaining that the bogus products “really work.”

For example, one product released by a New York firm consists of a three-part “hair care system” that claims to restore hair in nearly all balding men and women. It consists of a DHT blocker, a topical solution and a scalp detoxifying shampoo. The product purportedly treats androgenic alopecia, an inherited condition common in both men and women. Product adds talk about dihydrotestosterone (DHT), the substance largely responsible for shrinking hair follicles that lead to baldness. The product claims to block the effect of DHT on hair follicles, but the label uses obscure and misspelled names of common herbs, only one of which—saw palmetto—has been shown

to have any effect on the production of DHT. And the label gives no indication how much saw palmetto the product contains. The scalp lotion included in the three-part system contains minoxidil, an FDA approved hair-loss drug (brand name, Rogaine) now sold over the counter at about ten to twenty dollars for a one-month supply. Minoxidil may help some people grow hair, but the success rate is far below the ninety percent claimed by advertisements. Bottom line: this product, which was a top seller on the internet in early 2004, is a very expensive way to buy an undetermined amount of minoxidil.

In addition to offering a whole series of impressive sounding “solutions” to a wide array of phony hair loss “causes,” the sales material for bogus products follow up with “testimonials” from individuals, and sometimes even medical professionals. There is no way to verify these testimonials. Even if verified, there is no way to determine if the “miracle cures” were actually caused by the product being promoted, because there was no scientifically controlled clinical trial. Many types of hair loss are temporary, and hair growth resumes all by itself.

One thing many bogus products have going for them is the placebo effect. When Rogaine was studied, sixteen percent of the placebo group had measurable new hair growth. That’s four out of twenty-five people whose state of mind alone brought about real, measurable results. The power of the human mind is enormous.

Think about the economics of an effective hair loss treatment for a moment. Hair loss affects a huge proportion of the world’s population, and hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on hair loss treatment every year. A universally effective hair restoration treatment with no side effects would be worth hundreds of millions of dollars a year all by itself. When it would be discovered, it would be on the front page of every newspaper and magazine, and would be featured on every TV and cable show. There would be no need to advertise it on morning talk radio shows or in direct mail pieces.

The following page shows an example of a product costing far more than, and no more effective than, standard treatments.

National Council Against Health Fraud

Enhancing Freedom of Choice through Reliable Health Information

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Consumer Health Digest #03-17

Your Weekly Update of News and Reviews

April 29, 2003

Consumer Health Digest is a free weekly e-mail newsletter edited by Stephen Barrett, M.D., and cosponsored by NCAHF and Quackwatch. It summarizes scientific reports; legislative developments; enforcement actions; news reports; Web site evaluations; recommended and nonrecommended books; and other information relevant to consumer protection and consumer decision-making.

FDA warns Avacor marketer. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has warned Global Vision Products, Inc., that it cannot legally market its Avacor™ Hair Care System without FDA approval. The system includes a "detoxifying shampoo"; a topical formula; and capsules of an herbal "DHT blocker" claimed to "combat the bad chemicals in our body that causes thinning and balding." The topical formula has contained minoxidil, the active ingredient in the approved drug Rogaine. The FDA's letter notes that the presence of minoxidil and the nature of the manufacturer's claims make the components "new drugs" that require proof of safety and effectiveness before marketing. [Woyshner JG. Letter to Anthony Imbroglio, April 2, 2003] Ads for the product have claimed that the capsules work by blocking the follicle-shrinking effect of dihydrotestosterone (DHT), a hormone made from testosterone. The UC Berkeley Wellness Letter is skeptical about the capsules and has warned that although minoxidil may help some people grow a little hair, its success rate is far less than the 90% claimed for Avacor. Moreover, nonprescription Rogaine costs much less. [Avacor. UC Berkeley Wellness Letter, March 2003] The doctor featured in Avacor infomercials (David L. Gordon, M.D.) lost his medical license in 1995 after being convicted of defrauding Medicaid. [Gifford B. There's a price on your head. Men's Health, Sept 2002] Global Vision's Web site does not identify minoxidil as an ingredient.

An Online Warning About a Product of Dubious Value