FDA warns: Swine flu scams lurk on the Internet

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Air "sterilizers." A photon machine. Supplement pills to boost the immune system. Protective shampoos and face masks. Even fake Tamiflu. These and other products making bogus claims to prevent or treat swine flu are flooding the Internet as scam artists prey on the public's fears while the vaccine is delayed and real Tamiflu — made by Switzerland's Roche Group — is rationed.

Every problem, it would seem, is a sales opportunity. Some of the products appear to have been pitched for other emergencies, such as one called "Quake Kare" and masks and purifiers sold during the SARS scare.

Federal officials have sent warning letters to promoters of more than 140 swine flu-related products, including well-known alternative medicine advocate Dr. Andrew Weil for his "Immune Support Formula." Consumer Reports also has warned subscribers to be wary. "It's harmful, disappointing, frustrating to see folks take advantage of the public like this," said Dr. John Santa, who evaluates health claims for Consumer Reports.

Fraudulent products emerged shortly after swine flu did last spring — about 10 a day, said Alyson Saben, head of a swine flu consumer fraud team formed by the Food and Drug Administration. The pace slowed over the summer as the flu abated, but "it's picked up" in recent weeks, she said. "We are seeing new sites pop up." Most worrisome: sites that claim to sell Tamiflu without a prescription. The FDA bought and tested five such products. One contained powdered talc and generic Tylenol — no Tamiflu. Several others contained some Tamiflu but were not approved for sale in the U.S. "We have no idea of the conditions under which they were manufactured. They could contain contaminated, counterfeit, impure or subpotent or superpotent ingredients," Saben said.

Tamiflu and GlaxoSmithKline's Relenza are the only drugs recommended for treating swine flu.

Rogue Web sites are not the only ones trying to cash in on flu fears. Makers of some well-established products are making claims that may be close to the line, the FDA says.

This week, the makers of Dial Soap, Kleenex, Clorox and other big brands launched a joint promotional campaign costing up to $1 million. The FDA is reviewing the campaign, which includes a video that says: "Germs are tiny organisms that can cause disease. According to the CDC, up to 80 percent of infectious diseases, like the flu, are spread by your hands. That's why frequent, proper handwashing is so important in preventing spread of the flu, other viruses and germs. An antibacterial soap like Dial Complete foaming hand wash kills 99.9 percent of germs." Flu is caused by a virus, so killing bacteria is of uncertain benefit.

The campaign is "not being specific down to swine flu," said Scott Moffitt, an official with Dial Corp.'s parent company, Germany-based Henkel AG. He also contends the video is not misleading, even though the germ-killing claim follows a sentence about flu and other viruses.

One product that drew a warning letter from the FDA is the Photon Genie, a gadget that delivers "energy waves." Its Web site claimed it "helps strengthen the immune system, and a strong immune system is KEY to preventing swine flu symptoms and KEY to treating swine flu." The site has since removed the swine flu claim but "other claims remain," Saben said. The group behind the Web site, the Skilling Institute of Phoenix, "is not marketing, and will not market in the future, any product that is intended to diagnose, mitigate, prevent, treat or cure the H1N1 flu virus," its director, Warren Starnes, wrote in an e-mail.

Some products the FDA warned about contain silver, such as "Swine Flu...Gone," made by Secrets of Eden. "Spray 'Swine Flu...Gone' with ionic silver on your hands and on any surface where these germs may exist and kill the virus," its site had claimed.

Secrets of Eden sells supplements and oils with a biblical flair, said its general manager, Rick Strawcutter, a former pastor in Adrian, Mich. The staff "got a little carried away" on marketing for one product and "drew the ire of the FDA," he said. "It was not worth contesting," so he ordered a stop to it, Strawcutter said.

The federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry says silver "may cause harmful health effects," depending on the amount and type of exposure.

Dr. Andrew Weil's site had this problem language, the FDA's warning letter said: "...during the flu season, I suggest taking a daily antioxidant, multivitamin-mineral supplement, as well as astragalus, a well-known immune-boosting herb that can help ward off colds and flu. You might also consider ... the Weil Immune Support Formula which contains both astragalus and immune-supportive polypore mushrooms." Weil issued a statement saying the content "was primarily educational" about how to avoid the flu, and that he had directed his Web site team to remove and review it for compliance with federal rules.

Doctors, too, are being warned not to prescribe unproven remedies, such as drugs not shown to be safe and effective for swine flu. In this week's New England Journal of Medicine, three FDA doctors caution against use of ribavirin, a drug approved in the U.S. for treating hepatitis C and respiratory syncytial virus, or RSV, a childhood illness.

There have been reports of doctors wanting to try it for seriously ill flu patients, but it can cause a dangerous type of anemia and cannot be used in pregnant women because of the risk of birth defects, said the FDA's Dr. Debra Birnkrant. "It shouldn't be used lightly" and needs to be tested in a clinical trial for flu, she said.

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