

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

Biothreats — Are Claims To Treat Really Just A Trick?

In the aftermath of the anthrax scare last fall, some marketers are trying to cash in on consumers' heightened fears and vulnerabilities, plying products that claim to detect, prevent, protect against or treat biological and chemical agents.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and other law enforcement authorities have examined hundreds of sites marketing gas masks, protective suits, biohazard test kits, colloidal silver, oregano oil and similar products that claim to be safe and effective against biological or chemical contamination. But according to the FTC, consumers should greet these claims with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Officials at the nation's consumer protection agency say many of these products simply can't do what they claim. For example, kits marketed to detect the presence of anthrax in your surroundings have almost never been tested on actual anthrax spores. At best, says the agency, that would make them ineffective. But the products also can be inaccurate and unreliable. False positive results could create unnecessary anxiety for consumers, and even worse, a false negative result could delay medical treatment in the unlikely event a consumer was exposed to anthrax spores.

Fraudulent promoters also are offering dietary supplements, like colloidal silver, zinc mineral water and oregano oil, as treatments for contamination from biological agents. The FTC is not aware of any scientific basis for these self-treatment alternatives. Indeed, the leading dietary supplement industry trade associations have urged dietary supplement sellers not to promote any dietary supplement for the prevention, cure or treatment of anthrax.

For consumers who are worried about preventing, detecting or treating biological or chemical threats, the FTC suggests that you:

- Consult your physician immediately if you believe you have been exposed to anthrax or any other biological or chemical agent.
- Cut claims down to size. When you see claims that a product can, say, "eliminate all pathogens in the human body in six minutes or less," it's time for a reality check. If any product really did that, wouldn't you have heard it first on the news — not in an ad?
- Check out your source. Appearances can be deceiving. Many fraudulent businesses either use names that sound like established legitimate organizations or sell products that imitate respected, well-known brands. How can you know if a business is legitimate? It can be tricky. Ask questions, do some research and check with local consumer protection agencies.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357), or use the complaint form at www.ftc.gov. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

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February 2002