

By Joanne Pizzino, MD, MPH

The Internet is like a fabulous amusement park with a toxic waste dump in the middle.

A. Nonymous

The holistically-oriented providers at Whole Health Solutions provide care based upon our mission to empower people to heal themselves. In reality, all healing is self-healing. Medications, surgeries, herbs, even mind-body techniques can only help us if we provide the proper “terrain” for them to root, blossom and grow. For example, all the antibiotics in the world will not cure an infection in someone whose immune system is suppressed by poor lifestyle choices, other illnesses, or drugs.

In the modern world of highly complex medical modalities, let alone varied options for care, one must become a savvy health consumer. Healing will require that you become captain of your own health journey, rather than passively leaving this up to doctors, alternative healers, or even the latest-and-greatest website.

While some doctors cringe when their patients bring in copies of website information, we rejoice that the person has taken responsibility for their own healing. We feel it is a valuable service for us to offer a trained scientific opinion about the legitimacy of the information available, as results yielded by Dr. Google have a wide span of validity.



Dr. Pizzino

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One of the most valuable uses of the Internet is to acquaint yourself with details about medications you take or are considering, as well as interactions with supplements or foods. Although I rarely prescribe medication, I always use a drug interaction checker before doing so. A recent example is a patient who is a veteran is receiving 24 medications for her multiple sclerosis-like disorder. The drug interaction checker showed that 38 drug interactions are mimicking or worsening many of her complaints. This is why the first order of the day at Whole Health Solutions is to reduce or eliminate medication usage where possible, and find less toxic methods to heal.

Here are some ways you can evaluate your own over-the-counter health purchases to help maximize benefits and minimize side effects as you take responsibility for your own health.

When evaluating websites for pills, potions and gadgets reputed for health, ask these questions as you review the claims for **“AMERICA’S #1 LEADING CURE FOR XYZ!!!!!!”** (Beware of all caps, unsubstantiated claims and lots of exclamation points.)

Effectiveness: Does it really do what it claims? Is it appropriate for the condition you have?

Dosage: Does it contain the amount of the substances it claims? Is it in a form that is absorbable and can actually be

• To determine if Internet pharmacies are legitimate: <http://www.safemedsonline.org/protecting-consumers/verify-your-pharmacy/>

• To find guides to evaluating health care quality on-line: <http://healthfinder.gov/findservices/searchcontext.aspx?topic=14310>

UNDERSTANDING THE GOVERNMENT’S ROLE

We may think our government has created watchdogs for our safety, and there are important laws, regulations, and services to protect and help consumers; but even the FDA is notoriously unreliable. So it’s important to know what the FDA (Food and Drug Administration) does and does not do: <http://www.fda.gov/>. It regulates dietary supplements under a different set of regulations than those covering “conventional” foods and drug products (prescription and over-the-counter). The dietary supplement manufacturer is responsible for ensuring that a dietary supplement is safe before it is marketed, not the FDA. The FDA only takes action against any unsafe dietary supplement product after it reaches the market. Generally, manufacturers do not need to register their products with FDA nor get FDA approval before producing or selling dietary supplements. All the more reason to do your homework before using something.

CHECK YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

Check your assumptions about the following:

#1 Questionable Assumption: “Even if an OTC product may not help me, it at least won’t hurt me.” It’s best not to assume that this is true. When consumed in high enough amounts, for a long enough time, or in combination with certain other substances, all chemicals can be toxic, including nutrients, plant components, and other biologically active ingredients.

#2 Questionable Assumption: “When I see the term ‘natural,’ it means that a product is healthful and safe.” Consumers can be misled if they assume this term assures wholesomeness, or that these food-like substances necessarily have milder effects, which makes them safer to use than drugs. The term “natural” on labels is not well defined and is sometimes used ambiguously to imply unsubstantiated benefits or safety.

#3 Questionable Assumption: “A product is safe when there is no cautionary information on the product label.” Dietary supplement manufacturers may not necessarily include warnings about potential adverse effects on the labels of their products. If consumers want to know about the safety of a specific dietary supplement, they should contact the manufacturer of that brand directly.

When navigating the jungle of scientific vs. marketing jargon, find an interpreter you can trust. Board-certification in Integrative Medicine demonstrates proficiency in understanding, evaluating, and effectively utilizing holistic healing modalities. The Whole Health Solutions team is there for you. **h&h**

Joanne Pizzino, MD, MPH, is board-certified in both Preventive Medicine and Integrative Medicine. Karen Saylor, FNP, has extensive training and experience in Functional Medicine, nutrient and epigenetic evaluation, and the proper use of supplements. See Health Links on our website to learn how your prescriptions can interfere with nutrition. Call today to schedule a **supplement consultation** to determine if the time and expense of your nutritional supplements are effective. Make sure to bring all your supplements to the consultation.

Internet Health User:
Buyer Beware

used by the body? Note how to take it for maximum effectiveness. Are the dosages suggested for consumer OTC use or from a research article on therapeutic dosing?

Purity: Could it be contaminated? Will the manufacturer supply you with independent laboratory testing for heavy metals, PCBs, dioxins, other drugs, etc? This is especially important with formulations produced in other countries.

EVALUATING INFORMATION

One of the more challenging areas for lay health consumers is that the already mind-boggling array of health information seems to change daily, and often seems to contradict itself. Remember that the media are profit-driven. Attempting to distill complex scientific concepts into sales for an information-overloaded society results—at best—in confusion and—at worst—a self-prescription for disaster.

Mass media journalists, and sometimes well-meaning health providers with an “axe to grind,” may not have the specific scientific training necessary to educate you properly. Headlines and sound bites are inadequate to determine scientific accuracy, reproducibility, and validity. “Facts” change with new science. That is what science is about: uncovering the truth. The following websites can help you:

• To understand and interpret food and health-related scientific studies: <http://www.foodinsight.org>

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