

Swine flu gives rise to Internet hucksters plying questionable treatments

June 23 2009, By Alan Bavley

Worried about swine flu? Don't want to wait for a shot or a prescription from your doctor?

You could try something like the Cold Booster Plus Formula, which claims to eliminate flu viruses from your body within hours -- with just one capsule.

Or a nasal sanitizer that kills flu viruses lurking in your nose. Or Silver Shampoo to wash the virus out of your hair.

That's the kind of stuff the U.S. [Food and Drug Administration](#) has been discovering for sale on the Internet since the [swine flu pandemic](#) began.

The FDA has sent out more than 50 warning letters to online entrepreneurs demanding they stop asserting that their products can prevent or treat swine flu infections.

Most have backed down voluntarily and removed the claims from their sites, said Gary Coody, the FDA's national health fraud coordinator. The FDA can seize their products or shut down their sites if they don't.

But eliminating outrageous online marketing is a perpetual game of whack-a-mole for federal regulators. New sites pop up all the time. And there could be hundreds that haven't been detected, Coody said.

"The Internet is not a static thing. It changes minute to minute, second to

second," Coody said. "Anybody can set up a Web site. With a few keystrokes you can make the claims about a product."

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said last week that swine flu, or H1N1 flu, is likely to continue spreading through the summer and into the fall and winter.

A vaccine, if it's approved, will take months to manufacture. Antiviral drugs can reduce [flu symptoms](#) but require a doctor's prescription.

People may turn to products sold online because they're impatient with the advice public health officials have been giving, said Lee Norman, chief medical officer of the University of Kansas Hospital.

"The virus is out there. They read about it and all I'm being told is to cover my [coughs](#)," Norman said.

"People aren't satisfied with washing their hands with soap and water. If they're anxious, doing nothing is not gratifying."

The FDA anticipated that the swine flu might become a bonanza for marketers. Previous health scares from anthrax, SARS and avian flu also generated dubious Internet promotions.

In late April, the agency set up a task force to surf the Web. Within days of the first swine flu cases were reported in Mexico, questionable products for sale were discovered.

One of the first was Silver Shampoo.

"Because the swine flu virus is airborne, it may settle on your hair, and then if you touch your hair and then touch your eyes, nose or mouth, you can contract the illness," the shampoo's Web site said.

Products the FDA has flagged run the gamut:

Surgical masks "proven to trap and kill" 99.99 percent of swine flu viruses.

Air purifiers "that can protect you from a sneeze anywhere in a room immediately."

Eucalyptus and tea tree oil inhalers.

A nasal sanitizer "clinically shown to kill virus in the nose."

Some pandemic swine flu kits come in basic, standard and deluxe versions. The products sell for \$40 to \$200. The most expensive one the FDA encountered was an electronic gizmo with a price of \$2,995.

Buying these products is more than just a waste of money, Coody said. Worthless concoctions and contraptions may give buyers a false sense of security. They may not bother to get a shot or take drugs proven to work.

Some products may even be dangerous or interact with prescription medications.

"They certainly haven't been tested as safe and effective for what they're claiming," Coody said.

Sorting out valid information and sales pitches on Web sites is becoming more difficult, said Joyce Generali, director of the drug information center at KU Hospital.

"The packaging and presentation of information has become very sophisticated," she said. "So it seems to be reliable."

Generali suggested that people print out information on products and take it to a doctor, nurse or pharmacist before making a purchase.

If [swine flu](#) picks up again during the regular fall flu season, Coody expects additional Internet marketing.

"And we'll be ready for it," he said.

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