

Mexico enacts rules against 'miracle cure' ads

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(AP) -- Mexico enacted tough new rules Thursday to ban advertising of "miracle cures" for weight loss, sagging body parts and more serious illnesses like prostate ailments, chronic fatigue and even cancer.

Mexico has a long history of faith healers and home remedies, but the problem has come to a head in the last few years with a constant stream of ads on television for more "scientific" sounding creams that supposedly lift or enlarge breast and buttocks, magnets that help users lose weight, or pills and powders that cure gastric problems or diabetes.

In a country with levels of diabetes and [obesity](#) among the highest in the world, the combination of a sick population and fake cures can be deadly.

"This is a fraud," said regulator Mikel Arriola, whose Federal Commission for Protection against [Health Risks](#) is the agency in charge of regulating pharmaceuticals in Mexico. "It is a very serious public health problem, because people take these things instead of going to the doctor ... they lose time in getting treatment or getting cured."

Under the new rules, which take effect in 30 days, authorities can order [media outlets](#) to remove such advertising within 24 hours, and it steeply raises fines that can be levied on manufacturers and distributors that advertise the products.

The rules require that any product making a therapeutic claim will first

have to prove it is listed in Mexico's pharmaceutical register. The register requires scientific proof of effectiveness and a scientific description of how the medicine or medical apparatus achieves its claimed effects.

That is probably not going to be possible for products like "Acu-Mag." Its advertising purports that when the tiny pad with eight bumps is placed in the [outer ear](#) and massaged a few minutes each day, it helps customers lose weight through what ads call "auricular therapy" - an [alternative medicine](#) supposedly derived from [acupuncture](#).

According to the manufacturer's published claims, the pad "helps you lose weight ten times faster than any other (method) ... eliminates anxiety, burns the fat on your body, improves digestion."

Arriola said the ad should no longer be able to air because it makes claims of medical treatment.

Nor should ads for an herbal supplement called Prostaliv, which promises to reduce prostate enlargement and urinary problems in two to four weeks. Similar claims are made for Mulunggay, another herbal extract that is touted as being able to "combat 300 diseases" and control diabetes.

Anyone with real health issues who relies on such non-working treatments could wind up getting worse, "and that represents a cost for the government," Arriola said, because public hospitals have to treat sicker people.

But he added that supposed "miracle cures" are seldom outright dangerous. "Mainly what these companies are doing is selling a placebo, and spending a lot of money on advertising to promote it."

Executives at two of Mexico's largest vendors of such cure-alls could not be reached for comment. An employee at one of the companies appeared not to have heard of the new rules, and the other firm had an incorrect phone number listed with the Mexican stock exchange.

Companies do appear to have been taking note of the government's plan.

Some already run small-print slogans with their ads stating that "this is not a medicine." Arriola called that "an evasive maneuver" and said such ads won't be exempt from the new rules if they still make medical claims.

And the marketing companies also appear to be moving into less-regulated areas, such as corsets in various forms that are "guaranteed" to give wearers a perfect figure instantly. Those ads could continue to run, in theory, as long as they don't make claims that the product is doing anything but hiding fat.

President Felipe Calderon announced the new rules as a sort of crusade against the power of deceitful advertising.

"Every day, at every hour, on radio, television and the Internet, in print media, the public is literally being bombarded with a huge quantity of ads for all sorts of products that supposedly have curative powers," Calderon said. "They put the health and economic well-being of the population at risk."

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