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FTC Warns Internet Peddlers that Marketing Unproven H1N1 Flu Products May Be Illegal

The Federal Trade Commission last week sent 10 warning letters to Web site operators who made questionable claims that their products can prevent, treat, or cure the H1N1 flu, commonly known as swine flu. In an ongoing effort that began during the spring, the FTC told the companies – whose products include dietary supplements, air filtration devices, homeopathic remedies, items containing silver, and cleaning agents – that unless they have scientific proof for their claims, they are violating federal law and must drop the claims or face further action.

The FTC conducted its swine flu surf as part of the International Consumer Protection Enforcement Network's 11th Internet sweep, which took place from September 21 to 25, 2009. As part of this sweep, consumer protection agencies around the world targeted rapidly growing fraudulent and deceptive conduct on the Internet, with special emphasis on conduct exploiting financial crises or natural disasters such as the H1N1 pandemic. Besides sending warning letters to 10 operators, the FTC referred 14 other Web site operators – which it suspects are located outside the United States – to foreign law enforcement authorities.

"As consumers grow increasingly anxious about obtaining the H1N1 vaccine for their children and other vulnerable family members, scam artists take advantage by selling them bogus remedies online," said David Vladeck, Director of the FTC's Bureau of Consumer Protection.

In collaboration with other enforcement agencies, including the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, the FTC will continue to work aggressively to identify, investigate, and take additional regulatory and law enforcement action against individuals or businesses that deceptively promote purported H1N1 products.

The FTC reminds consumers that the only products recommended for treatment of H1N1 flu are prescription antiviral drugs, including oseltamivir (brand name Tamiflu) and zanamivir (brand name Relenza).

The FTC's Consumer Alert, *Rx for Products That Claim to Prevent H1N1? A Healthy Dose of Skepticism*, warns the public to be skeptical of claims that products like pills, air filtration devices, and cleaning agents can kill or eliminate the virus. The alert advises consumers to:

- **Know the facts:** The H1N1 virus is thought to spread from person to person in the same way that seasonal flu spreads – mainly coughing or sneezing by people with the flu. Sometimes people may become infected by touching something with flu viruses on it and then touching their mouth, nose, or eyes.
- **Keep your hands clean:** Public health authorities advise that basic personal hygiene is the best protection against infection. Wash your hands thoroughly. When soap and water are not available, health authorities suggest using alcohol-based disposable hand wipes or gel sanitizers. These products are available in most supermarkets and drugstores.
- **Check travel advisories for affected areas:** To lower your risk of infection, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) suggests avoiding travel to affected regions.

- **Seek medical attention:** If you think either you may have influenza symptoms, or you may have been in direct contact with someone who has the flu, consult a health care professional immediately.
- **Stay informed:** For more information from the federal government about the H1N1 flu, check out flu.gov or visit the CDC at <http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/>.
To learn more, go to <http://www.ftc.gov/bcp/edu/pubs/consumer/alerts/alt083.shtm>.

Consumers who wish to file a complaint against a company that they believe may be deceptively advertising H1N1 flu products are urged to call 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357) or visit <https://www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov/>.

The Federal Trade Commission works for consumers to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices and to provide information to help spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint in English or Spanish, visit the FTC's online [Complaint Assistant](#) or call 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357). The FTC enters complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to more than 1,500 civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad. The FTC's Web site provides free information on a variety of [consumer topics](#).

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