

Beware of False or Misleading Claims for Treating Autism

April is National Autism Awareness Month, a fitting time to think about the growing need for concern and awareness about autism.

One thing that is important to know up front: There is no cure for autism. So, products or treatments claiming to “cure” autism do not work as claimed. The same is true of many products claiming to “treat” autism. Some may carry significant health risks.

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) plays an important role in warning these companies against making false or misleading claims.

About Autism

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), about 1 in 68 children has been identified with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASDs are reported to occur in all racial, ethnic and socioeconomic groups, and are almost five times more common among boys (1 in 54) than among girls (1 in 252).

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) describe autistic children as having difficulties with social interaction, displaying problems with verbal and nonverbal communication, exhibiting repetitive behaviors and having narrow, obsessive interests.



These behaviors can range in impact from mild to disabling.

“Autism varies widely in severity and symptoms,” says Amy Taylor, M.D., M.H.S., a pediatrician at FDA. “Existing autism therapies and interventions are designed to remedy specific symptoms and can bring about improvement,” she adds.

In addition, FDA has approved

medications that can help some people manage related symptoms of ASD. For example, the FDA has approved the use of antipsychotics such as risperidone and aripiprazole to treat children 5 or 6 years of age and older who have severe tantrums or aggression and self-injurious behavior. Before using any behavioral intervention or drug therapy (prescription

The bottom line is this—if it’s an unproven or little known treatment, talk to your health care professional before buying or using these products.

or over-the-counter), check with your health care professional.

The Association for Science in Autism Treatment (ASAT), a not-for-profit organization of parents and professionals committed to improving the education, treatment, and care of people with autism, says that since autism was first identified, there has been a long history of failed treatments and fads.

FDA Cracks Down on False Claims

According to Gary Coody, R.Ph., FDA’s national health fraud coordinator, the agency has warned a number of companies that they are facing possible legal action if they continue to make false or misleading claims about products and therapies claiming to treat or cure autism. Some of these so-called therapies carry significant health risks and include:


- **“Chelation Therapies.”** These products claim to cleanse the body of toxic chemicals and heavy metals by binding to them and “removing” them from circulation. They come in a number of forms, including sprays, suppositories, capsules, liquid drops and clay baths. FDA-approved chelating agents are approved for specific uses, such as the treatment of lead poisoning and iron overload, and are available by prescription only. FDA-approved prescription chelation therapy products should only be used under medical

supervision. Chelating important minerals needed by the body can lead to serious and life-threatening outcomes.


- **Hyperbaric Oxygen Therapy.** This involves breathing oxygen in a pressurized chamber and has been cleared by FDA for certain medical uses, such as treating decompression sickness suffered by divers. It has not been cleared for autism, among other conditions.
- **Miracle Mineral Solution.** Also known as Miracle Mineral Supplement and MMS, this product becomes a potent chemical that’s used as bleach when mixed according to package directions. FDA has received reports of consumers who say they experienced nausea, severe vomiting and life-threatening low blood pressure after drinking the MMS and citrus juice mixture.
- **Detoxifying Clay Baths.** Added to bath water, these products claim to draw out chemical toxins, pollutants and heavy metals from the body, falsely offering “dramatic improvement” for autism symptoms.
- **Coconut kefir and other probiotic products.** These marketed products claim to treat autism and gastrointestinal illnesses associated with autism. They have not been proven safe and effective for these advertised uses.

Coody offers some quick tips to help you identify false or misleading claims.

- Be suspicious of products that claim to treat a wide range of diseases.
- Personal testimonials are no substitute for scientific evidence.
- Few diseases or conditions can be treated quickly, so be suspicious of any therapy claimed as a “quick fix.”
- So-called “miracle cures,” which claim scientific breakthroughs and secret ingredients, may be a hoax.

The bottom line is this—if it’s an unproven or little known treatment, talk to your health care professional before buying or using these products. 

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