



Scam Gram!

Keep the sharks at bay

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SCAM GRAM is Consumer Action's monthly e-newsletter alerting you to the dirtiest players in the world of tech fraud, credit card scams, ID theft and general con-artistry. Don't be fooled by liars, cheats and crooks—wise up with SCAM GRAM!

Vitamin D'oh

From our [national obsession](#) with low vitamin D as the cause of all our problems to our willingness to believe in coffee enemas and mystical stickers to promote "healing," Americans are increasingly being duped by pseudo-science couched in vague medical terminology. Perhaps it makes sense that snake oil salesmen (and women) are flourishing: The U.S. healthcare system is difficult to navigate, insurance is off-the-charts expensive, and women and people of color are often treated with downright disdain by their doctors. But as one "good doctor" who reviewed all 161 of actress Gwyneth Paltrow's GOOP-promoted products [points out](#), businesses like GOOP—along with other popular "wellness" companies and "wellness" pyramid schemes (dōTERRA Essential Oils, we're [looking at you](#))—have made a bad situation worse by peddling the types of "miracle" cure-alls that the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) [calls](#) "false promises that will rob you blind." GOOP critic Dr. Jen Gunter not only deemed the online store "90% quackatorium," she also found that the website features what appear to be "trusted physician experts who endorse conspiracy theories, such as AIDS denialism, vaccines causing autism [and] bras causing breast cancer," all of which are "known to be associated with [a person's] avoidance of evidence based health practices." Put simply, essential oils and jade stones are not approved to cure or treat diseases (and acting as if they *are* can make you sicker). Visit the Federal Trade Commission's [Health & Fitness scams page](#) to learn more. And, if you're able, [find your own](#) good doctor (since the crystals aren't curing that case of conjunctivitis).

Too much off the top

"I'm a saver. That's what I've done all my life. And I just want someone to take what I save, for a fee, and help me make it grow." As Rachel Wheeler found out, this reasonable request seems too much to ask. You see, Wheeler and her husband were robbed by their trusted retirement advisor. "It's almost like somebody broke

into our house and stole something," Wheeler lamented [in a video](#) that the group Americans for Financial Reform (AFR) posted to shed light on the underbelly of the brokerage industry. While brokers are supposed to *help* you save for retirement, many play faster and looser with your money than Jordan Belfort. Wheeler's broker, for instance, steered her into risky investments that cost her as much as \$30,000. And this isn't unusual: As AFR points out, "Americans lose \$40 billion per year to brokers chasing commissions and other benefits for themselves at the expense of their clients." Unfortunately, the federal agency regulating Wall Street wolves—the Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC)—is writing off people like the Wheelers with a new proposal that investor advocates agree has no teeth. Specifically, the proposal being considered mostly includes longwinded, confusing disclosures and doesn't establish a clear, uniform standard that brokers must act in their clients' "best interest." AFR, along with Consumer Action and many other groups, has [sent a letter](#) to the SEC pushing back on the rule. [Learn more here](#) about the types of financial advisors you could entrust with your hard-earned money. And, before you sign on with any investment pros, check them out with FINRA's [BrokerCheck](#) and the SEC's [Check Your Investment Professional](#).

Unhealthy hoaxes

Terminal shill-ness. Preying on those of us with the most to lose is just sick, as the non-profit Truth in Advertising ([TINA.org](#)) revealed last month when it [released the results](#) of a yearlong investigation into the deceptive marketing of 50 cancer treatment centers in the U.S. The group collected over 700 testimonials from the centers' promotional materials. The centers failed to disclose that these testimonials were atypical. The testimonials allegedly originated from "patients" suffering from the types of cancers that have a less than 50 percent survival rate. TINA.org's accompanying [infographic](#) highlights some of the most terrible and unrealistic testimonials, including: "Statistics mean nothing to believers," and "No chemo. No radiation. 100% cured." Right. TINA.org also reveals which institutions spend the most on this type of false advertising, including "repeat offender" the Cancer Treatment Centers of America.

Pain in the neck. CBS Chicago launched an investigation into how scammers are filing bogus claims for back, neck and other braces in the names of existing Medicare patients. The crooks have cost the Medicare system (and, by extension, taxpayers) millions, and all that they need to cash in is a recipient's Social Security or Medicare number. Armed with the digits, they pretend to be the patient and get a doctor to sign off on a prescription for the medical equipment, which often occurs after a mere phone consultation. (Tsk, tsk, lazy doctors.) The scammers then direct Medicare to pay a third party (and the rest is history). How bad is the problem? In its exposé, CBS [interviewed](#) a woman named Mabel, who was confused when she received 10 braces for various body parts over the course of a month, none of which she ordered or needed (and they didn't even fit when she *did* try them on)! Unfortunately, fraud like this threatens the future of Medicare and can increase premiums for a population that can least afford it. Seniors: Guard your Medicare and Social Security numbers closely (don't give them out over the phone) and report any suspicious or fraudulent charges you find on your Medicare summaries!

Bogus benefits. 'Tis the season for open enrollment (through the [Health Insurance Marketplace](#) until Dec. 15). And, as usual, whenever consumers sign up for a program or service that involves providing personal or financial information, [scammers circle](#) like sharks in the water. Companies like Simple Health (which the FTC is [going after](#)) have been misleading coverage-seeking consumers by throwing logos of credible insurance companies online and sending applicants to websites that promise the world but fail to deliver. "Simple Health pitched what it said were affordable, comprehensive, Affordable Care Act-qualified plans with low or no co-

pays or deductibles," the FTC said. "But when they needed to rely on that insurance, consumers learned they had none of the promised benefits." And this is even *after* they had paid up to \$500 a month in premiums! Unfortunately, Simple Health has a number of sites still running. One—called TrumpCareQuotes(dot)com—even attempts to appeal to its audience's intellect by offering "Health Insurance for Smart People." (Between this and "[Donald Daters](#)," Trump supporters are not faring well when it comes to fraud.) Want to *really* outsmart the scammers? Visit the [National Association of Insurance Commissioners](#) or the federal government's [HealthCare.gov](#) to see if a plan is legit and licensed. [Learn more](#) about avoiding an insurance issue here.

Tips!

- **One star; two thumbs down.** Looking to pick up some extra cash this holiday season? You may be willing to put in the work, but the only thing you'll get is worked if you respond to a solicitation directing you to any number of [knockoff websites](#) with "Amazon" in the name. "Recruiters" are promising that the online retailer will pay thousands a month for work-from-home product reviews. The catch? Before they deliver the goods, they direct you to pay an "enrollment" or "training" fee. (As if anyone needs to be trained on how to give a bad review!) They may also instruct you to fill out some sort of credit check or other online form with your personal or financial information—and guess where that goes?
- **100% fresh.** Want to get into the mind of a Nigerian scammer? NYU graduate and Nigerian-American Faraday Okoru explores why a Nigerian man living in poverty might specialize in scams, particularly when the country's police "have jaunty berets, big guns and slippery loyalties" themselves. [Nigerian Prince](#) is Okoru's first feature, which he created after winning a \$1 million AT&T/Tribeca Film Festival prize to highlight characters with "[underrepresented perspectives](#)." The film asks what motivates such people, and why do others fall for their lies? At the time of this writing, it has a perfect [100% rating](#) on Rotten Tomatoes. You can catch it at your nearest indie theater (or stream it online).
- **Thank you, next.** You might be so eager to stream Ariana Grande's latest [breakup anthem](#) for clues as to why she and Pete Davidson *really* ended things that you don't think to question an email confirming you've "renewed your subscription" to Spotify. The email [claims](#) your credit card has been charged \$150+ for a year of the streaming music service's premium option. If you're more of a month-to-month music lover (or you don't mind annoying commercials) and you want to log in and cancel the "subscription" (which never really happened in the first place), the site the email takes you to makes it easy to enter your Apple ID and password (assuming you're a Mac person). This is where the scammers get you: They can now log in to your Apple account and access your iCloud photos (uh oh!), saved financial info (eek!), the location of your iPhone/laptop (creepy!) and more.

Thanks for reading SCAM GRAM and, as always, feel free to send us your questions, comments and tips. [Click here to email us.](#)
