

Beware dodgy coronavirus health advice and fake ‘cures’

Thousands of fake medicines claiming to cure COVID-19 have been discovered online and seized by authorities, as misinformation about the disease spreads

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Hold your breath, drink lots of water and sunbathe? Some questionable ‘health’ advice is doing the rounds at the moment and unscrupulous sellers are also touting medicines that claim to prevent against or treat COVID-19.

Fake news about coronavirus has been spreading rapidly via email and messaging platforms, often supposedly from ‘a doctor at [hospital, country or academic institution]’, with some outlandish claims about how to cure or prevent yourself from contracting the virus.

Meanwhile a coordinated global operation to tackle the illegal sale of medicines online has uncovered a huge rise in fake medical products related to coronavirus.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) took part in the operation, which revealed a disturbing trend of criminals exploiting fears about the pandemic, and increased demand for products such as personal protection equipment and hygiene products.

Among the products seized were counterfeit face masks and unauthorised antiviral medication.

Don’t fall for fake news about Coronavirus

There has been a lot of misinformation circulating online about coronavirus, often purporting to be from medical staff at hospitals or universities, in the form of a written note or voice memo.

Some we’ve seen include variants of the same ‘advice’ from, variously: ‘a doctor at St George’s Hospital’, ‘a doctor at Stanford’ and ‘a doctor treating COVID-19 patients in Japan’.

It can be hard to separate fact from fiction as the unfounded or simply outlandish claims are mixed in with official and sensible advice such as washing your hands.

Some of the claims floating around include:

Drinking water will ‘flush out’ the virus (FALSE) Text from one of the letters going around tells you that drinking water will flush the virus from your throat into the stomach where gastric acids can destroy it. While drinking plenty of water and staying hydrated is always important, the idea that you can remove a virus this way is unscientific. The virus can find its way into the cells of the respiratory system, as well as transmitting through the nostrils or eyes.

Gargling with salt water or disinfectant will kill the virus (FALSE) Advice that was incorrectly attributed to a London hospital says that gargling with disinfectant ‘removes the virus before it goes down to the trachea and then to the lungs.’ This is a fundamental misunderstanding of the virus, which affects the entire respiratory system and doesn’t just lurk in the throat.

If you can hold your breath for 10 seconds, you don’t have COVID-19 (FALSE) This claim says that if you can hold your breath for 10 seconds without coughing, you’re in the clear. It also suggests you do this daily and that by the time you have the officially recognised symptoms it’s ‘too late’. This is nonsense. While shortness of breath and coughing are (sometimes) symptoms of COVID-19, the ability to hold your breath for 10 seconds will vary from person to person, for a myriad of reasons. It isn’t an indicator that you do or don’t have the virus.

The virus is killed by the sun (FALSE) Claims that the new Coronavirus ‘hates the sun’ and that therefore sunbathing can prevent you catching it are unfounded. Given the global spread of the virus so far in both hot and cold climates, there is no evidence for this. We don’t yet know if COVID-19 is a seasonal flu.

Drinking hot water and avoiding ice or cold drinks will help (FALSE) Working on the same flawed logic of the myth above, some advice recommends constantly drinking hot drinks and avoiding ice or cold drinks. But drinking hot drinks will not change your body temperature. You cannot kill the virus once it’s in the body – your immune system just needs to fight it off.