



Internet “Health Warnings”: Are You Hitting the Delete Button or Taking Action?

How many times in the past year have you received e-mail messages with the subject lines “Antiperspirants cause breast cancer!” or “Tampons contain dioxin and dioxin causes cancer!”? Other e-mail “warnings” that have made the rounds include those describing cases of hepatitis and AIDS that supposedly occurred as a result of needle pricks sustained when unsuspecting individuals reach into the coin returns of vending machines and pay phones.

Considering the overall number of these messages and how often they are forwarded from one person to another, usually with a personal message added by the sender (e.g., “Read this!” “Don’t delete! Life-saving info!” or my personal favorite, “My sister received this message from the Cancer Society!”), it is not surprising that some people have come to believe that some truth can be found in these warnings. My neighbor, an intelligent and well-informed civil engineer, asked me for antiperspirant recommendations that “don’t cause breast cancer” after she had received multiple e-mail messages detailing how breast cancer results from sweat glands blocked by antiperspirants. I was surprised that even after I assured her (twice) that no evidence exists to substantiate an association between antiperspirant use and the development of breast cancer, she *still* asked me about a possible association every time she received another e-mail message about it. She said, “If these e-mail messages were just an Internet hoax, they would stop coming. They keep coming, so there must be something to them.”

In the past, my response to these e-mail messages had been to simply hit the delete button whenever they appeared and move onto the next message. However, all that changed after I heard Sandra Millon-

Underwood, PhD, RN, FAAN, speak at a conference. She talked about those pesky e-mail messages that linked items (e.g., antiperspirants, tampons) to cancer, as well as other e-mailed warnings intended to alert recipients to various health hazards. She said that she takes action. As an oncology nurse, she knows that she has much to offer to the individuals receiving this misinformation. Instead of deleting the messages, she responds by sending reputable information to the sender. And she does this not just for the person she received the forwarded message from, but for *everyone* who had received the message in prior forwarding. She calls it a mass education effort and described how it has been effective in reducing the circulation of unfounded rumors about health-related issues.

I stopped being lazy about e-mailed health warnings after that and became proactive. I thought it would take a lot of time to respond to people who sent me these messages but surprisingly, it did not involve much time at all. I save my standard response messages that present evidence and links to reputable information sources and use them over and over. Some of the most helpful Internet sites that address commonly circulated health warnings include the following.

- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Health-Related Hoaxes and Rumors (www.cdc.gov/hoax%5frumors.htm):** As allegations of health-related warnings make their rounds on the Internet, researchers at the CDC promptly investigate them, list them on its Web site, and provide links to evidence-based information about the supposed health hazard. The information is written in lay terms and updated frequently.

- **CDC Division of HIV and AIDS Prevention (www.cdc.gov/hiv/pubs/faq/faq5a.htm):** Information about rumors related to hepatitis- or HIV-contaminated needles deliberately placed in playground equipment and coin-return slots of pay phones, vending machines, gumball dispensers, etc., can be found at this site.
- **National Cancer Institute’s Cancer Information Service (<http://cis.nci.nih.gov/asp/FactSheetPub/AlphaSublist.asp?alpha=21>):** Rumors about a link between antiperspirant use and the development of breast cancer are dispelled in a fact sheet located at this site.
- **U.S. Food and Drug Administration (www.fda.gov/cdrh/ocd/tamponsabs.html):** The rumor that tampons contain dioxin and other potentially harmful components, such as asbestos, is refuted at this site. The site provides detailed, accurate information about tampons and their safety.

When I started replying to e-mail health warnings instead of simply deleting them, I wondered if my actions would have any impact on the circulation of Internet hoaxes and rumors. I knew they did when I started receiving forwarded messages of my e-mail that contained evidence-based information and links to reputable Internet sites. In fact, my time and effort were clearly worth it the day I received a forwarded message from my neighbor—the woman concerned about antiperspirants causing breast cancer. She had included me in a mass e-mail of the message I originally sent to her; however, she had changed the subject line to read, “Antiperspirants DON’T cause breast cancer—here are the facts!”