

The Power of Suggestion

By Tara Spinelli for Jersey Moms Blog

My 9-year-old son says he's worried that I'm going to contract shingles because it's something "older people like you, mom" can get. He's happy to report that there's now a vaccine. No, it's not effective for everyone, and may cause "difficulty in breathing and swallowing," but maybe I'd prefer that to a painful, blistering rash.

Why did the FDA ever think it would be a good idea to let drug companies market to consumers, especially on television?

When that ad for Enbrel is over, sure, we're all relieved that the nice lady can wear short sleeves to the luncheon, but mostly we hope she doesn't end up with a "serious infection that may lead to hospitalization or death."

Are the makers of Viagra aware that middle-aged men aren't the only ones watching baseball games? Maybe they recognize that some youngsters (like my son) could be an excellent source of referrals, rare risk of "a sudden decrease or loss of vision or hearing" aside?

Is it just me, or does your exposure to prescription drug ads have you wondering if SNL's Chantix spoof is really that far-fetched? <https://www.nbc.com/saturday-night-live/video/chantix/n13339>

Speaking of ads with dubious purposes and/or unintended effects, I don't think the "corn sugar" industry has done itself any favors by echoing the drug-makers' approach to advertising. I only wish they were governed by the same requirements to detail potential risks.

Have you seen the one where the girl thrusts a popsicle at her boyfriend at a picnic (because popsicles are perfect for picnics)? He recoils at the suspicion that the popsicle contains high-fructose corn syrup. She reassures him that HFCS is "nearly identical to table sugar," which is apparently all the explanation this independent thinker needs.

By contrast, the dad in SNL's "Almost Pizza" skit proves the health benefits of skepticism. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLHRjaUBb3o>

Then there are those doctor's office pamphlets with titles like "Bladder Leakage & You," "Is Your Child Hyperactive?" and for Spanish speakers, "El Herpes Genital." Educational, yes, and more helpful to people than ads (especially when they're not also sponsored by drug companies). I guess they're supposed to spark conversation with your doctor, but in my case, they're more like fuel for the fire of my paranoid fantasies (speaking of a painful, blistering rash...or is that an impending case of shingles?).

Unfortunately, television ads and patient education pamphlets aren't the only sources of nagging ideas. The other day, I got this text from a friend: "Found a bug in John's hair. At Target to buy treatment. Going to shave boys' heads. Can you check me for lice?" My hand moves as if controlled by an unknown force to the base of my scalp and gives it a good scratch (even after the would-be louse is proven to be a gnat).

I've come to recognize this force, and I call it IIPLS: Internet-Induced Phantom Lice Syndrome. IIPLS is tipped off by the power of suggestion, and intensifies following a relentless bout of Googling. Like Viagra, IIPLS can diminish your vision and hearing to the point where it's impossible to process information accurately.

Remember when lice were seasonal? I chuckle (bitterly) every time that notice comes home from school—it could be Sep, Feb, or May—that reads, "A case of lice has been identified in your child's grade. Don't be alarmed as lice are very common this time of year." I'm not alarmed, but I sure feel a wicked case of IIPLS coming on.

If you've had IIPLS yourself—or any other Internet-Induced Phantom Disease Syndrome—you know that the power of suggestion is the root cause. And while you might wish for a prescription drug to treat IIPLS, if there were one, you would see the ad for it on TV, and then you would know that it might make you “get up out of bed while not being fully awake and do an activity that you do not know you are doing such as driving a car (“sleep driving”), making and eating food, talking on the phone, having sex, and walking around.”

And that's when you would recognize that the real cure—the power of reason, as slow as it can be to kick in—is still the best thing you've never seen on TV.