

2019

## Fake Medical News: The Ethics and Dangers of Health Product Advertising Disguised as Real News

George A. Gellert  
ggellert33@gmail.com

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### Recommended Citation

Gellert, G. A. (2019). Fake Medical News: The Ethics and Dangers of Health Product Advertising Disguised as Real News. *Online Journal of Health Ethics*, 15(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.18785/ojhe.1502.05>

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**Fake Medical News and News Mimicry:  
The Ethics and Dangers of Health Product Advertising Disguised as Real News**

George A. Gellert MD, MPH, MPA

**ABSTRACT**

Leading national newspapers in the U.S. are allowing drug and medical product advertisers to format their advertisements so they appear to be actual, authentic news articles. This strategy of marketing through news mimicry has no rationale except an intent to confuse and deceive consumers to accept product claims of clinical efficacy and safety as if coming from a trusted, authoritative news source, and to obscure that the vendors' claims are not evidence-based and substantiated by peer reviewed published studies. Examples of such advertisements from USA Today and online news sources are reviewed and the financial, health care and patient safety implications are considered, along with recommendations to public health and medical leadership organizations.

Key Words: Fake news, drug and health product advertising, advertising news mimicry, newspapers, authentic news, advertising

# **Fake Medical News and News Mimicry: The Ethics and Dangers of Health Product Advertising Disguised as Real News**

George A. Gellert MD, MPH, MPA

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **News Mimicry: When News is not News**

Early evidence exists indicating that acemannan, a polysaccharide extracted from Aloe vera, may have medicinal properties, including osteogenic, anti-inflammatory, antitumor and antimicrobial effects, and as a treatment of skin conditions, chronic periodontitis and other dental conditions (1). It is nonetheless concerning when the maker of AloeCure, whose primary ingredient is acemannan, purchases and places a half page advertisement in USA Today on the second page of the News section, and deliberately formats it to appear like an authentic, real news story (Figures 1-2) (2). The section headline declares: “Leading Acid Reflux Pill Becomes an Anti-aging Phenomenon.” Despite noting outside the main body of text in small, faded font that the advertisement’s claims have not been evaluated by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), and that the apparent “news story” is an advertisement, these disclaimers comprise less than 5% of the advertisement’s space, which also includes two photos, one a headshot of an unnamed individual posing as if he were a newspaper columnist-author, and the other an image of a physician or actor with a bottle of AloeCure in hand.

The news mimicking advertisement details a physician testimonial, and highlights the clinical effectiveness of AloeCure in relieving acid reflux, irritable bowel, constipation, joint pain, reducing serum cholesterol, and improving immune responses, skin, hair and nail health (2). The advertisement claims that these benefits of AloeCure are supported by evidence from multiple clinical studies, and that it has no harmful side effects. The company’s website states, “Decades of research have gone into this capsule” (3). However, no substantive research findings, peer reviewed study reports or publication citations are provided in the advertisement, or on the manufacturer’s website (2,3). Contacting the manufacturer of AloeCure to request a weblink or paper research reports, or publications describing the studies and outcomes claimed, did not yield any. A booklet about the product could be sent, with a minimum \$9.95 purchase. The company representative nonetheless stated with absolute conviction that within 6-12 months of daily use, “AloeCure achieves a 92% success rate.”

More recently in USA Today’s November 14, 2019 issue, another advertisement from the same company appears with the headline “Good News for Americans, Bad News for Pain Drugs” marketing VeraFlex as an anti-inflammatory product to treat arthritis (4). This news mimicking advertisement cites data from two studies, the first with 60 participants in which “the data collected by researchers was stunning . . . groups taking the VeraFlex ingredient saw staggering improvements in arthritis symptoms such as flexibility, discomfort and function. And even more astonishing they experienced a dramatic reduction in pain by the 30-day mark that was even better than Celecoxib, a powerful drug!” Citing a second study, the advertisement claims VeraFlex “this time beat out the drug Naproxen. Shockingly, both men and women experienced a reduction in joint stiffness two days faster than when using Naproxen.” The active agent of VeraFlex, Univestin, is stated to be “one of the only known substances which has been proven successful . . .

resulting in phenomenal relief from the worst kinds of discomfort.”

No corroborating peer reviewed and published studies are cited either in the newspaper fake advertisement, or on the company’s website (4,5). Contacting the company’s customer service line could not produce any published reports supporting the claims made in the fake news/news mimicking advertisement. The customer service agent did note, however, that VeraFlex will be “way better for your health and arthritis” and recommended that all over the counter and prescription drugs or therapies being taken for arthritis should be discontinued because VeraFlex is “all natural and has no side effects. VeraFlex can take care of 100% of what is troubling you.”

An even greater concern and risk to patients occurs when these news mimicking advertisements are picked up by exclusively online media outlets and mixed with real news, creating a powerful amplification effect through the Internet that can impact many more readers and remains online in perpetuity. One example is the online news website PressReader, where the identical VeraFlex advertisement from USA Today has appeared since January 3, 2019, and where no small font disclaimer notes that the content is an advertisement, or that the claims made have not been evaluated by the FDA (6). PressReader lists the USA Today logo above the title of the fake news advertisement, and at the end of the advertisement or apparent “news column”, conveys a photograph of the full front page of that January 3, 2019 issue of USA Today, further convincing a reader that this is real news and not product marketing. Furthermore, if one scrolls right from the VeraFlex “story” one finds current real news, as of this writing reporting on the Ukraine scandal from the Houston Chronicle, the Albanian earthquake from the San Francisco Chronicle and others (6). Thus, the problem of health product advertising using news mimicry is not limited to paper news media but can become endemic online as well, with far longer lasting public exposure and impact.

There is of course no surprise in companies making grandiose claims to sell their products, doing so is as old as the marketplace itself. The average person/patient recognizes that marketing claims are often just that - claims, not evidence. The critical difference with advertisements that mimic legitimate, trusted source news stories in appearance, and in their strategic placement in the News section of leading newspapers, is that the vendor is trying to bypass the public’s usual, healthy skepticism of marketing claims by cloaking their product in the trust and credibility associated with legitimate, real news outlets. These vendors are trying to leverage the trust readers have for the newspaper in order to slip in their product marketing as just more news conveyed to an unsuspecting public, and in this case, actually deliver some good news about a new miracle drug, treatment or supplement.

### **Negative Impact and Pervasiveness of Advertising News Mimicry and Fake Medical News**

Financially, the twice daily dosage of AloeCure requires an annual purchase of 13 bottles, an expenditure of \$637 per year, a significant cost as many Americans’ health care remains uninsured or underinsured, and as consumers share an increasing financial burden of out of pocket health expenses. There is no evidence AloeCure is therapeutically effective, safe and without side effects, or has no drug interactions, as claimed in the news mimicking advertising. No evidence rationalizing this cost or supporting the company’s claims can be found on its website, elsewhere online, and none were provided when asked for. VeraFlex costs \$239.70 for a six-month supply (at a discounted “special offer price that can only be locked in now”), or almost \$480 per year.

These are substantial costs for any therapy but particularly so for unproven products, costs that compete with the limited resources many patients have to manage all of their health care needs, all their drugs and essential, proven treatments. Patients who have one or more chronic

conditions (a majority of the U.S. population), patients with low health literacy, those with high desperation resulting from pain and other discomfort, and elderly patients are particularly vulnerable populations for this kind of deceptive product advertising that uses news mimicry to leverage the credibility and legitimacy of real news from a trusted news outlet. Some of these patients may be unable to discern that an article in their trusted newspaper is not actually a news article, but an advertisement made to look like news and by so doing, gain their trust and deceive them into purchasing the product. The product vendors placing such advertisements, and the newspapers selling them advertising space for those ads, are cynically leveraging the public trust of its news sources to sell products with unsubstantiated claims of efficacy and safety, and which could be harmful by displacing patients' adherence to medications with known, proven clinical impact and value.

In addition to the cost and diversion of health care resources from legitimate treatments that can result from such news mimicry, it is clear from the advertisements' content and contact with their customer sales departments that these unscrupulous companies are telling patients they can, because of the immense efficacy and impact of their products, discontinue their existing therapies in favor of the new product. These products are not sold as augmentations to but as replacements of existing, proven therapies. Thus, the negative impact of this news mimicry in product advertising is not limited to the diversion of patient financial resources away from proven therapeutics, but by reducing medication adherence can cause preventable exacerbations in one or more of a patient's conditions, potentially resulting in hospitalization or visits to the Emergency Department if the drops in adherence are not identified in primary care. Along with their claims of high efficacy, the claims that these products are highly safe are also unsubstantiated, but nonetheless rendered with authority in an advertisement that looks like a credible news story from a trusted news source.

USA Today has a weekly print circulation of 727,000, a digital only subscriber base of 504,000, and an approximate daily readership of 2.6 million. It is in the top tier of newspapers having the widest circulation of all newspapers in the United States, along with The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times. PressReader has more than 12 million monthly active users online. AloeCare and VeraFlex are also available and sold on Amazon.com where, interestingly, one of the customer reviews for VeraFlex states: "I was reading the article on USA Today on Thursday Sept 19th issue and was really excited for my Grandma's arthritis pain and wanted to buy this until I saw the article was cleverly included with news and a tiny Advertisement title was attached on the top. Such a bad practice to get new customer" (7). Nine resellers offer VeraFlex on Amazon.com, all fulfilled by Amazon itself. So, while the savvy grandchild caught the deception, the troubling question remains, would Grandma have?

This kind of news mimicry or fake medical news employed as a marketing strategy is increasingly common. USA Today regularly "features" such advertisements disguised as legitimate news stories. Multiple other media outlets, including The Denver Post and The Memphis Commercial-Appeal, are also engaging in this highly unethical practice, with similar advertisements posing as news stories exposing millions of readers – the public at large and patients with multiple chronic conditions and complex medical treatment regimens – to fake medical news and news mimicry in order to market and sell unregulated products with questionable, if any, evidence of actual efficacy and clinical value (8-12). This practice, enabled by trusted news outlets, is designed deliberately to deceive consumers by making product advertisements appear as if they are objective, genuine news articles and attempt to blur the line between news reported fact and unsubstantiated or fictional commercial marketing claim.

The sole purpose of formatting drug advertisements in this manner is to confuse susceptible readers, usually people suffering from severe disease and desperate to reduce their pain and suffering, and trick them into thinking they are reading a credible, objective medical story from a trusted source of objective news and professional journalism. Playing on the hopes and vulnerabilities of individuals suffering from various conditions, news mimicry seeks to convince them that a product has achieved a scientifically documented, evidence-based breakthrough of real value, and to buy that product. The only reason that newspapers allow these unscrupulous vendors' advertisements to mimic their news stories is so they in turn can monetize advertising revenue. Thus, USA Today and other newspapers allowing advertising that mimics news, are effectively selling their own credibility and trust-based relationship with their readers to these product vendors in order to gain advertising revenue, for what could be considered essentially a cut or commission from the vendors' sales and profits.

Why would major U.S. newspapers like USA Today, The Denver Post, and The Memphis Commercial-Appeal risk their credibility on such clearly deceitful advertising? Perhaps the financial disruption and pressures faced by newspapers over recent decades in the forced transition from paper to the Internet and electronic media have caused them to ignore their responsibilities to report and convey information accurately, objectively and responsibly, including the kind of advertising they allow on their pages. But how can newspaper editors offer opinion columns to inform and educate the public on political, social and other weighty issues – including editorials on the most pressing issues of the day – when they sacrifice their newspaper's fundamental integrity to extract advertising revenue from vendors who deliberately use the news venue – and public trust of that venue – to mislead readers by mimicking news stories in their advertisements? Of course, part of why newspapers allow this practice is that they can get away with it, knowing that no one, not an agency of federal, state or local government, not consumer advocates, nor their readers will penalize or punish them.

## **Recommendations and Conclusion**

Vendors that employ news mimicking advertisements in trusted news sources to convince unsuspecting readers of unsubstantiated clinical value must stop this highly unethical, predatory practice. Publishers, editors and journalists should not enable the dissemination of fake medical news or health product advertisements mimicking actual, real news stories because doing so is craven exploitation of vulnerable, ill and often elderly people suffering with one or more severe medical problems, including chronic pain. If they expect to retain any claim to professional and journalistic integrity, or any conviction that their work seeks to have a positive societal impact, newspapers and media outlets must prohibit all health product advertising that mimics news.

U.S. public health and health care leadership organizations should alert consumers and patients to the existence of fake medical news found in leading newspapers across the nation and online. This can hopefully reduce the financial exploitation of the vulnerable, and prevent individuals becoming more ill or dying as a result of using unevaluated products and being convinced they can discontinue taking needed, proven medications. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration should prevent and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the American Medical Association should condemn vendors using news mimicry, and educate the public about this deceptive health product advertising. All products, vendors and newspapers employing such unethical news mimicry to market and sell products should be listed on a well-publicized website so that patients and consumers will not be deceived.

Corresponding Author:  
George A. Gellert MD, MPH, MPA  
San Antonio, Texas, USA  
703 Sentry Hill, San Antonio, TX 78260  
Email: [ggellert33@gmail.com](mailto:ggellert33@gmail.com)

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# Figures 1 and 2: AloeCare Advertisement in USA Today, September 27, 2018

**Sex assault survivors risk safety, careers**  
Accusations often met with threats, derision

**USA** (Associated Press) — A woman who accused a prominent professor of sexual assault and harassment last year is now facing a lawsuit from the professor's attorney, who says she is trying to silence her. The woman, who spoke out against the professor, is now being sued for defamation. The professor's attorney, who is also a lawyer, is trying to get the woman's name out of the public record. The woman, who is now being sued, is a former student of the professor. She is now being sued for defamation. The professor's attorney, who is also a lawyer, is trying to get the woman's name out of the public record. The woman, who is now being sued, is a former student of the professor. She is now being sued for defamation. The professor's attorney, who is also a lawyer, is trying to get the woman's name out of the public record.

**Leading Acid Reflux Pill Becomes an Anti-Aging Phenomenon**  
Clinical studies show lansoprazole could reduce wrinkles and improve skin health

**USA** (Associated Press) — A clinical study has found that lansoprazole, a common acid reflux pill, may have anti-aging benefits. The study, which was published in a medical journal, found that lansoprazole could reduce wrinkles and improve skin health. The study, which was published in a medical journal, found that lansoprazole could reduce wrinkles and improve skin health. The study, which was published in a medical journal, found that lansoprazole could reduce wrinkles and improve skin health.

# Leading Acid Reflux Pill Becomes an Anti-Aging Phenomenon

Clinical studies show breakthrough acid reflux treatment also helps maintain vital health and helps protect users from the serious conditions that accompany aging such as fatigue and poor cardiovascular health



A clinical study on a leading acid reflux pill shows that its key ingredient relieves digestive symptoms while suppressing the inflammation that contributes to premature aging in men and women.

And, if consumer sales are any indication of a product's effectiveness, this 'acid reflux pill turned anti-aging phenomenon' is nothing short of a miracle.

Sold under the brand name AloeCure, it was already backed by clinical data documenting its ability to provide all day and night relief from heartburn, acid reflux, constipation, irritable bowel, gas, bloating, and more.

But soon doctors started reporting some incredible results...

"With AloeCure, my patients started reporting less joint pain, more energy, better sleep, stronger immune systems... even less stress and better skin, hair, and nails," explains Dr. Liza Leal, a leading integrative health specialist and company spokesperson.

AloeCure contains an active ingredient that helps improve digestion by acting as a natural acid-buffer that improves the pH balance of your stomach.

Scientists now believe that this acid imbalance is what contributes to painful inflammation throughout the rest of the body.

The daily allowance of AloeCure has shown to calm this inflammation which is why AloeCure is so effective.

Relieving other stressful symptoms related to GI health like pain, bloating, fatigue, cramping, constipation, diarrhea, heartburn, and nausea.

Now, backed with new clinical studies,

AloeCure is being recommended by doctors everywhere to help improve digestion, calm painful inflammation, soothe joint pain, and even reduce the appearance of wrinkles – helping patients to look and feel decades younger.

## FIX YOUR GUT & FIGHT INFLAMMATION

Since hitting the market, sales for AloeCure have taken off and there are some very good reasons why.

To start, the clinical studies have been impressive. Participants taking the active ingredient in AloeCure saw a stunning 100% improvement in digestive symptoms, which includes fast and lasting relief from reflux.

Users also experienced higher energy levels and endurance, relief from chronic discomfort and better sleep. Some even reported healthier looking skin, hair, and nails.

A healthy gut is the key to a reducing swelling and inflammation that can wreak havoc on the human body. Doctors say this is why AloeCure works on so many aspects of your health.

AloeCure's active ingredient is made from the healing compound found in Aloe vera. It is both safe and healthy. There are also no known side effects.

Scientists believe that it helps improve digestive and immune health by acting as a natural acid-buffer that improves the pH balance of your stomach.

Research has shown that this acid imbalance contributes to painful inflammation throughout your entire body and is why AloeCure seems to be so effective.

## EXCITING RESULTS FROM PATIENTS

To date over 5 million bottles of AloeCure have been sold, and the

community seeking non-pharma therapy for their GI health continues to grow.

According to Dr. Leal, her patients are absolutely thrilled with their results and are often shocked by how fast it works.

"For the first time in years, they are free from concerns about their digestion and almost every other aspect of their health," says Dr. Leal, "and I recommend it to everyone who wants to improve GI health without resorting to drugs, surgery, or OTC medications."

"I was always in 'indigestion hell.' Doctors put me on all sorts of antacid remedies. Nothing worked. Dr. Leal recommended I try AloeCure. And something remarkable happened... Not only were all the issues I had with my stomach gone - completely gone - but I felt less joint pain and I was able to actually sleep through the night."

With so much positive feedback, it's easy to see why the community of believers is growing and sales for the new pill are soaring.

## THE SCIENCE BEHIND ALOECURE

AloeCure is a pill that's taken just once daily. The pill is small. Easy to swallow. There are no harmful side effects and it does not require a prescription.

The active ingredient is a rare Aloe Vera component known as acemannan.

Made from 100% organic Aloe Vera, AloeCure uses a proprietary process that results in the highest quality, most bio-available levels of acemannan known to exist.

According to Dr. Leal and several of her colleagues, improving the pH balance of your stomach and restoring gut health is the key to revitalizing your entire body.



**"ACCIDENTAL" ANTI-AGING BREAKTHROUGH:** Originally developed for digestive issues, AloeCure not only ends digestion nightmares... it revitalizes the entire body. Some are calling it the greatest accidental discovery in decades.

When your digestive system isn't healthy, it causes unwanted stress on your immune system, which results in inflammation in the rest of the body.

The recommended daily allowance of acemannan in AloeCure has been proven to support digestive health, and calm painful inflammation without side effects or drugs.

This would explain why so many users are experiencing impressive results so quickly.

## REVITALIZE YOUR ENTIRE BODY

With daily use, AloeCure helps users look and feel decades younger and defend against some of the painful inflammation that accompanies aging and can make life hard.

By buffering stomach acid and restoring gut health, AloeCure calms painful inflammation and will help improve digestion... soothe aching joints... reduce the appearance of wrinkles and help restore hair and nails... manage cholesterol and oxidative stress... and improve sleep and brain function... without side effects or expense.

Readers can now reclaim their energy, vitality, and youth regardless of age or current level of health.

## HOW TO GET ALOECURE

This is the official nationwide release of the new AloeCure pill in the United States. And so, the company is offering our readers up to 3 FREE bottles with their order.

This special give-away is available for the next 48-hours only. All you have to do is call **TOLL-FREE 1-800-808-4214** and provide the operator with the Free Bottle Approval Code: AC100. The company will do the rest.

Important: Due to AloeCure's recent media exposure, phone lines are often busy. If you call and do not immediately get through, please be patient and call back. Those who miss the 48-hour deadline may lose out on this free bottle offer.

## One AloeCure Capsule Daily

- Helps End Digestion Nightmares
- Helps Calm Painful Inflammation
- Soothes Stiff & Aching Joints
- Reduces appearance of Wrinkles & Increases Elasticity
- Manages Cholesterol & Oxidative Stress
- Supports Healthy Immune System
- Improves Sleep & Brain Function

THESE STATEMENTS HAVE NOT BEEN EVALUATED BY THE FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION. THIS PRODUCT IS NOT INTENDED TO DIAGNOSE, TREAT, CURE, OR PREVENT ANY DISEASE. ALL DOCTORS MENTIONED ARE REMUNERATED FOR THEIR SERVICES. ALL CLINICAL STUDIES ON ALOECURE'S ACTIVE INGREDIENT WERE INDEPENDENTLY CONDUCTED AND WERE NOT SPONSORED BY THE AMERICAN GLOBAL HEALTH GROUP.





# Good News for Americans, Bad News for Pain Drugs

Millions are expected to benefit from a new technology that could relieve years of severe joint discomfort; reprograms the body to block slow burning inflammation instead of creating it

Several of the major drug companies behind popular pain relievers may take a financial hit as manufacturing of a new pill is now complete.

Using a new technology, the pill could be safer and more effective than many store bought brands.

The pill, VeraFlex, was developed in May of this year by a private company in Seattle.

Functioning primarily as an immune modulator, the pill targets the body's immune system which can decrease pain in the body.

## The Science Behind Relief

Research shows that the joint stiffness, soreness and discomfort associated with arthritis is caused by inflammation which attacks healthy cartilage and protective tissue.

And according to leading medical scientists, this inflammation is caused by two inflammatory enzymes released by the body's immune system.

Remarkably, the active ingredients in VeraFlex help to block the production of both these enzymes, resulting in a dramatic decreasing in swelling, inflammation, and discomfort.

Right now, the leading over-the-counter pills are only able to block one of these enzymes!

It's why so many sufferers fail to ever find relief.

## Years of Discomfort Relieved in 5 Days

"VeraFlex users can generally expect more flexibility in three days...their joint pain alleviated in five days...and in just seven days, a tremendous improvement in overall joint function that may help them move like they did years prior" explains Dr. Liza Leal, developer and spokesperson for VeraFlex.

"It's an incredibly powerful little pill. And with the addition of a patented absorption enhancer, it packs an even greater punch. That's why I'm so excited to be the first to share these results. It's giving sufferers their life back."

## A Safer, More Effective Avenue to Amazing Relief

It's widely accepted through the medical community that inflammatory enzymes are the primary cause of pain and suffering in millions of Americans. It's why most prescriptions and even nonprescription pills are designed to block them.

However, what most people don't know is that even the most advanced ones can't block both!

And yet, that's exactly what VeraFlex is designed to do and why it works so well.

"Top pharma companies have struggled to create a drug that blocks COX and LOX, the medical names for the two inflammatory enzymes in the body. Consider the top seller Celebrex, it only blocks one variation of the COX enzyme" explains Leal.

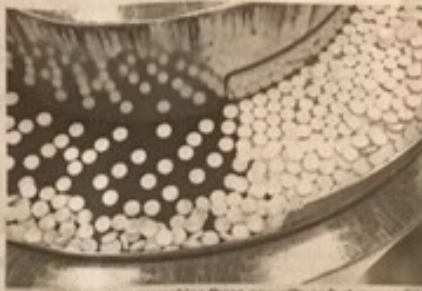
"And that's because they have focused on using chemicals instead of natural substances like VeraFlex."

"Every VeraFlex capsule contains an ultra-high dose of a patented plant extract which has been clinically shown to block both enzymes, bringing relief to every joint that hurts!

"The kind of relief most people have never experienced. I often say two enzymes, twice the relief. People think I'm kidding until they try it."

## Piling on the Clinical Research

Remarkably, the key ingredient in VeraFlex is protected by



VeraFlex producers are making these new pills as fast as possible to meet the growing and increasing demand.

8 patents that spread from the US into Canada. And as would one guess, it's backed by an enormous amount of research, including two patient clinical trials.

In the first, 60 participants with rheumatoid arthritis and/or osteoarthritis were randomly placed into four groups.

Two groups were given the patented ingredient in VeraFlex, one was given the drug Celecoxib, and the last group a placebo. The results were monitored at 30, 60, and 90 days.

The data collected by researchers was stunning.

The groups taking the VeraFlex ingredient saw staggering improvements in arthritis symptoms such as flexibility, discomfort and function.

And even more astonishing they experienced a dramatic reduction in pain by the 30-day mark that was even better than Celecoxib, a powerful drug!

A second study was conducted to ensure the data was accurate and again the results participants

cartilage and protective tissue.

Over time, this inflammation overwhelms the joint and it begins to deteriorate resulting in a daily battle with chronic pain.

Unfortunately, modern day pain pills are only able to block only one of these enzymes, resulting in marginal relief and continued suffering.

The Universtin in VeraFlex is one of the only known substances which has been proven successful in blocking both enzymes, resulting in phenomenal relief from the worst kinds of discomfort.

The addition of BIAloe, a unique aloe vera extra, maximizes the delivery of the plant based Universtin extract to every joint in the body because it is proven to improve nutrient absorption for maximum results.

Aloe Vera also is proven to support the body's immune system which manages inflammation, further supporting relief.

## How to Claim a Free 3-Month Supply Of VeraFlex

This is the official nationwide release of VeraFlex. And so, the company is offering our readers up to 3 FREE bottles with their order.

This special give-away is available for the next 48-hours only. All you have to do is call toll free 1-800-234-7806 and provide the operator with the Free Bottle Approval Code: VF350. The company will do the rest.

Important: Due to VeraFlex's recent media exposure, and Dr. Leal's latest book deal, phone lines are often busy. If you call and do not immediately get through, please be patient and call back. Those who miss the 48-hour deadline may lose out on this free bottle offer.

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