

‘Health’ Gifts that Work (or Don’t)

By Ann Gerhardt, MD December 2018

This list is a bit late for this holiday but is reasonably sound advice for birthdays and random acts of kindness throughout the year.

It all started with my annual read of the Hammacher Schlemmer (HS) catalogue. Though not intended to be, it’s hilarious, and that’s why I read it. Every item is labeled “The,” as in The Only Six-Person Sandless Beach Mat, The Guitar Box Slide Guitar and The Oenophile’s Personalized Lazy Susan. In those cases, their products may actually be The only one available. Many gifts are labelled The Best and The Genuine, as in the The Best Nose Hair Trimmer, The Best Bug Vacuum, The World’s Lightest Carryon and The Genuine Peruvian Alpaca Cardigan, as if all others are fake. Some are absurd and outlandishly expensive, fit mostly for a catalogue reader who appreciates humor or has money to burn.

HS sells numerous health-related massagers (heated, reflexologic, compressive), stretching devices, and therapeutic braces. Who knows if they work. Many of the over-the-top claims made me wonder about their verity. So, leaving the random massagers and heaters aside, I did some research about a few of the other health-related products.

Recommended

Celliant textile products: These fabrics reuse body heat to maintain warmth, improve circulation, reduce arthritis pain and accelerate recovery from hard exercise. The new technology imbeds a thermo-reactive mineral matrix into fabric fibers.

Body heat is converted by the matrix into infrared energy and transmitted back to the body. Resultant warming increases circulation by dilating blood vessels, which improves circulation, potentially aiding healing. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has certified Celliant as a medical device and general wellness product, presumably based on reasonable studies.

It is made by Hologenix LLC for use in products by other companies, including
Sheets, blankets, pillows, mattresses and mattress covers
Scuba/Wet suits, hoodie, water mittens and booties
Jackets, active-wear, gloves
Ski boots, socks, shoe insoles
Medical and veterinary products.

Pillow wedge: Shaped like a long 3D triangle and generally made of foam, pillow wedges elevate the head and upper torso gradually, instead of propping the head up above a flat body. This helps people with heartburn, hiatal hernia and aspiration while asleep. It can aid sinus drainage and might reduce snoring. Propping up the legs of the head of the bed on blocks or putting a wooden wedge between the mattress and box springs also work but are a bit less elegant and condemn a bed partner to similar elevation.

Heated foot baths and paraffin wax hand baths: Sort of like a liquid heating pad, these baths improved circulation, reduce rheumatoid arthritis pain, soften cracked skin and are relaxing. But don’t believe any claims that they cure disease.

Gifts to Charities and Non-tangible gifts: It is healthy to do good by giving to charities, whether it be your time, money and/or expertise.

Research shows that giving increases self-esteem and happiness. It reduces depression, stress level and blood pressure. Givers even may live longer.

Most study results apply to volunteerism, emotional support and charitable donations, though there is a “gift-givers high” that might kick in after family members open your tangible gifts. Consider how unhealthy plastic and energy-consuming devices are for the planet, and perhaps give experiences that generate memories instead.

Not Recommended:

Do-it-yourself cold lipolysis body shaping devices:

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved CoolSculpting for spot fat reduction on a normal weight person *by a medical professional*. Doctors use a specific technique to apply just-above freezing cold to a body bulge, killing fat cells. Belts and paddles are now available for home use, but not approved by the FDA. When used for many days, 1-2 hours per day, the technique MIGHT reduce an unsightly bulge, but home use has a much greater chance of not working. Or it can freeze skin, nerves, blood vessels and muscle without killing much fat. It doesn't work if poor diet and couch potato lifestyle perpetuate overweight. Rarely, these devices *actually stimulate* fat cells to permanently grow larger.

Wrinkle reducing facial and neck

massage tools: From battery-powered vibrators, to ultrasound, photon or LED heat generator wands, to devices that look like cheese slicers, electric shavers, and meat tenderizers, these devices promise what they can't deliver – wrinkle and crow's feet elimination. There is no scientific proof that massage eliminates wrinkles. And there's no proof that smiling or frowning cause wrinkles, which result from diminished skin elasticity caused by sun, smoking and aging.

With physical and/or thermal skin stimulation, fluid rushes to the area, puffing out wrinkles.

Temporarily. When the irritation is gone, so goes the fluid. Wrinkles and skin sag win the war and you've wasted time and money, in my humble opinion.

Most of us earned our crow's feet. I rather like mine. They add character to a face, which is a good thing unless you really want the porcelain doll look.

Home electrolysis hair remover

Professional electrolysis hair removal devices are approved by the FDA, home devices are not. When a professional uses one, inserting a probe into one hair follicle at a time and zapping it with electrical current, it works well. Do-it-yourselfers can damage surrounding skin, leaving unsightly scars.

Another home 'electrolysis' device type, also used in some beauty parlors, is called transdermal electrolysis and is non-invasive. It applies electrical current to a large swath of skin, supposedly damaging hair follicles. It doesn't work, no matter who administers the treatment.

Most anti-aging products

I wrote a series of articles in 2015 and 2016 pretty much debunking a variety of anti-aging product claims, so I won't re-address them here. Search for the articles with the term 'aging' at the www.healthychoicesformindandbody.org website.

Instead of useless anti-aging products or more and more stuff, Good Gifts to Self might be taking up a sport or joining a team through the city recreation department, signing up for dance lessons, stopping an obsession with the mirror and starting volunteering, promising to eat two cups of veggies every day and/or doing random acts of kindness.