

HEALTH

# A Common Snake Oil Reemerges for the Coronavirus

The pandemic has sparked an interest in dubious cures such as colloidal silver—and some are trying to capitalize on it.

By Olga Khazan



Getty / The Atlantic

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To the silver salesmen, moms must have seemed like an ideal demographic. Last year, Candy Keane, a 44-year-old lifestyle blogger in Florida, heard about colloidal silver—silver particles suspended in liquid—from a mom’s group she’s part of. A company called My Doctor Suggests was sending out free samples of its products, including colloidal-silver solution, lozenges, lotion, and soap, to bloggers who might be willing to review the products online.

Keane spoke with Doug Godkin, the vice president of My Doctor Suggests, who she says assured her that taking the silver was as harmless as taking a

vitamin, and that the solution could help with all kinds of ailments. She remembers him saying it would be safe to drink up to a bottle a day.

Keane thought the silver might clear up some white splotches that had spread across her skin. She tried all the products and sipped the metallic-tasting “silver solution” daily. While they didn’t seem to do much, they didn’t make anything worse, either. She wrote up her results, such as they were, in a blog post. When she later read an (erroneous) online claim that silver can kill the coronavirus as it enters the mouth, she let her 5-year-old son eat the rest of the lozenges—he liked their sweet taste.

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Before I called her, Keane hadn’t realized that in April, a federal court in Utah shut down My Doctor Suggests for allegedly fraudulently promoting their colloidal-silver products as a treatment for COVID-19. Godkin and My Doctor Suggests’s founder, a self-proclaimed naturopathic doctor named Gordon Pedersen, released videos and podcasts in which they suggested that colloidal silver could protect against the coronavirus because “the silver can isolate and eliminate that virus.” Pedersen has no medical license, and he has been cited in the past for the unauthorized practice of medicine. (Godkin declined to comment, and lawyers for Godkin and Pedersen did not return requests for comment. A spokesperson for Pedersen has previously said that “all the statements he has made are supported by scientific documents.”)

Pedersen’s efforts may have been halted, but he’s far from the only one selling this substance. The state of Missouri recently filed suit against the televangelist Jim Bakker for promoting a “Silver Solution” for the coronavirus on his show. And last month, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration went to court to stop an Oklahoma company called N-Ergetics from allegedly touting colloidal silver as a cure for everything from the coronavirus to yeast infections. (“Jim Bakker is being unfairly targeted by those who want to crush his ministry and force his Christian television program off the air,” Jay Nixon, Bakker’s attorney and the former governor of Missouri, said in a statement. “Bakker did not claim or state that Silver Solution was a cure for COVID-19.” And in

a statement to the *Tulsa World*, N-Ergetics said, “To the best of our knowledge, we are in compliance.”)

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What’s happening here seems deeper than snake-oil salesmen foisting useless potions on people. All of these silver peddlers are tapping into a real interest in the stuff. Colloidal silver enjoys a devout following online among people who believe it can cure a number of diseases. Before the site was shut down, demand for My Doctor Suggests’s products was surging, and Pedersen was paying a separate company an average of \$10,000 a week to fulfill orders.

Unlike Pedersen’s or Bakker’s, though, most colloidal-silver brewers are homespun operations in which people make the silver themselves or buy it in small quantities from a trusted source. Devotees say its effects have been nearly miraculous for various ailments, including suspected COVID-19 cases. They flock to Facebook groups to discuss the best ways to prepare the solution and share success stories.

Though topical silver can be used in wound care, almost all mainstream scientists say colloidal silver doesn’t do much of anything—except, in extreme cases, turn a person’s skin blue. Most doctors would say these individuals’ positive experiences are most likely the result of a placebo effect, or of the disease resolving on its own. According to the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, silver has “no known function or benefits in the body when taken by mouth.”

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Nevertheless, people’s deep faith in colloidal silver speaks to how the uncertainty of COVID-19 has fueled a desire for alternative remedies. Crises such as the current pandemic are a prime time for sham cures, fraud experts told me, because people are isolated, afraid, and willing to do whatever it takes to protect themselves.

More so now than normally, people feel let down and ripped off by medical professionals. There's no proven treatment for the coronavirus, and advice about how to stave it off seems to shift from week to week. Some people now look at “natural” remedies such as silver and think, *At least this won't hurt me*.

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In April, Alyss H. had spent weeks gasping for breath, and she was desperate for relief. Alyss, a 34-year-old who lives in Oklahoma City, had been following the spread of the novel coronavirus since it was first identified in China in December. (She asked me to use only her first name and last initial to protect her family's privacy.) She learned about the R0 number, and understood that quarantines were a possibility in the United States. She was worried about her family.

Her nightmare, it seemed, had come true. Alyss had body aches, a bad sore throat, and a persistent burning in her chest, and antibiotics weren't working. She started researching colloidal silver in medical journals, and she began corresponding on Facebook with a British man, Jim Ryan, who appeared to have a lot of information on the subject.

She followed the instructions for making colloidal silver the way Ryan suggested. She placed two strands of silver wire in a flask of water on top of a hot plate set to 160 degrees. She hooked a battery to the silver, and kept the wire submerged until the water turned urine yellow. This process, Ryan said, releases the silver particles into the water. Then, Alyss drank the water, making sure to keep it in her mouth for a few minutes and sloshing it under her tongue.

[Read: What you need to know about the coronavirus](#)

Two days later, she told me, she felt better. She still drinks about 20 milliliters of colloidal silver two or three times daily—five times a day if she's feeling sick. Alyss seems to understand why the FDA is cracking down on colloidal-silver manufacturers. But, she said, what other options are there? She's still not sure whether she had COVID-19, but doctors sent her home to convalesce alone for weeks. “My recommendation is to fight it,” she said. “Fight it with everything you have.” Including silver.

Ryan, the man who taught her about the silver, has been into colloidal silver for more than two decades. A 48-year-old tattoo artist and a helicopter pilot from Devon, Ryan blasted me with a torrent of silver's glories during our phone call. “It doesn't actually kill the virus,” he explained, sounding like a rapid-fire Ozzy Osbourne. “It literally stops, it prevents the bacteria or the virus from doing its job, which is to cause that chest infection that leads to

pneumonia.”

He and others I interviewed wanted to let me know that the infamous “blue man”—Paul Karason, who appeared on the *Today* show in 2008 with violet skin from a supposed silver overdose—was actually drinking too much of it, and in the wrong formulation, and for decades. But, they were sure to add, he didn’t get sick.

Read: COVID-19 can last for several months

Ryan, too, used a colloidal-silver solution on himself and his daughter when they had what he thought was COVID-19. “It turns COVID into a mere snuffle,” he assured me.

Perhaps expectedly, doctors push back against this idea. David Gorski, a surgical oncologist at the Karmanos Cancer Institute and the managing editor of the pseudoscience-debunking blog Science-Based Medicine, told me via email that Ryan and others are simply confusing correlation and causation. “Without a placebo or no-treatment control, there’s no way of knowing if the person would have gotten better anyway,” he said. “This is particularly true for a disease with such a variable level of severity as COVID-19, which can range from asymptomatic to mild symptoms to life-threatening.”

Still, there’s an element of seeing-for-yourself-ness among the silver stans. Ryan emphasized that he likes to research “both sides of the coin” and to question official narratives. His daughter is unvaccinated. He and others said they did months of research before they jumped into the silver world. They had this sense that there was a body of information that experts don’t want you to know, and they were lucky to have figured it out.

Read: The Facebook groups where people pretend the pandemic isn’t happening

In central Wisconsin, Dawn Louise—who also didn’t want me to use her full name for privacy reasons—says she found success using colloidal silver for her Lyme disease and shingles. When her 40-year-old daughter started having COVID-19 symptoms recently, with plummeting oxygen and shortness of breath, Dawn gave some to her. In 48 hours, Dawn told me, her daughter could breathe again.

When I told Dawn that Pedersen and others had been shut down because they were considered fraudulent, she wasn’t surprised at all—nor was she daunted. In her mind, it was a sign that the substance works, but there wasn’t an opportunity for Big Pharma to capitalize on it. “They don’t want that found out, the truth that it actually does work,” she said. “They want to get their patent on it so they can make it a prescription.”

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COVID-19 is a brand-new, deadly condition about which little is known, which can appear to strike at random, and which has no cure. “It’s very fear-arousing,” Michael Goldstein, a sociologist and a complementary- and alternative-medicine expert at UCLA, told me. That kind of situation primes people to seek out unconventional remedies, to try to regain some of the power that’s been stripped away by a scary new menace. Or as Alyss put it to me, “we all wanted to have control in our lives, and it felt like a possibility to have control.”

People who are into untested treatments such as colloidal silver—or even ever-so-slightly-more-evidence-based treatments such as Reiki or acupuncture—are commonly derided as crackpots. But in many cases, experts say, they are drawn to these New Age-y cures because of bad experiences they’ve had with conventional medicine. “Most people don’t start by going to some kind of alternative provider,” Goldstein said. “They start by going to the doctor, and they find that whatever the doctor has to offer doesn’t really help them in a way that they want to be helped. So that skepticism is one of the things that leads people to say, *Well, the next time I have this problem, I’m going to go to a chiropractor or an acupuncturist.*”

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This is especially true when people are weighing what seems like a safe medication—and silver does seem safe, to them—against the deadly consequences of certain prescription drugs, such as opioids. Though few responsible doctors would prescribe opioids for COVID-19, President Donald Trump has recently encouraged people to take the antimalarial hydroxychloroquine. When a man in Arizona tried to take a fish-tank cleaner with a similar name, he died.

Some experts warn that untested remedies such as colloidal silver may, too, become more damaging once a coronavirus vaccine becomes available. If people begin rejecting the vaccine in favor of “alternative” treatments, it will greatly reduce our ability to reach herd immunity and reopen society. “One of the things that I will be monitoring is whether or not some of that group that plans to refuse the vaccine is doing so because they think that other treatments—alternative treatments—will get the job done,” Matthew Motta, a political-science professor at Oklahoma State University, told me. “That to me is potentially very scary.”

Compared with prescription drugs, silver might seem more “natural” to some people, Maria Chao, the associate director of research at the University of California San Francisco’s Osher Center for Integrative Medicine, told me. People tend to be drawn to such organic-seeming cures because they see illness

as a violation of the natural, healthy state of the world, according to Alan Levinovitz, a religion professor at James Madison University and the author of the recent book *Natural*, about people's faith in nature. "Naturalness represents that which is good, and that which will return us to health," Levinovitz told me.

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Simmering a pair of silver wires and drinking the resulting mixture also serves as a kind of ritual, and rituals can help us feel better about things when little else can. (Just think of all the "morning ritual" literature out there.) "It's about symbolic empowerment," Levinovitz said. "These are rituals that people can do when they've lost confidence in an establishment."

And why *wouldn't* they have lost confidence in conventional medicine? Pharmaceutical companies actually did lie about the addictive nature of prescription opioids. People get rushed to hospitals, only to face confounding, towering bills later. Less nefariously, but still significantly, some public-health experts were telling us not to wear masks as recently as a month ago. The internet brims with misinformation, such as the kind Keane, the blogger, stumbled on, about what can and cannot kill the coronavirus.

None of this means that unscrupulous silver scammers shouldn't go unpunished, or that even more people should consider taking colloidal silver for COVID-19. But it should, perhaps, help us understand why people believe in something dubious at a time when there isn't much to believe in.

At one point in our interview about colloidal silver, Chao, a professor who has multiple advanced degrees from Columbia University, admitted that while she doesn't know when she would ever actually take silver, "I have a bottle of it in my medicine cabinet."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Olga Khazan is a staff writer at *The Atlantic*. She is the author of *Me, But Better: The Science and Promise of Personality Change*. She has also written for *The New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and other publications. She writes a Substack on personality change.