

VANITY FAIR

March 20, 2020

<https://www.vanityfair.com/style/2020/03/coronavirus-wellness-immunity-vitamins-supplements>

BE WELL

The Wellness Industry Can't Help Itself

Covid-19 has sequestered us indoors, and wellness has followed us there.

BY KENZIE BRYANT

MARCH 20, 2020



I have not stopped thinking about my health for two weeks. It's the first thing I think about when I wake up and the last thing I think about at night. Sometimes, as a break from thinking about my health, I chastise myself for not starting to think about my health sooner. If I think too

VanityFair.com
Monthly Unique Visitors: 12,300,000

much about my parents' health, I cry, so I try very hard to think about my own health. It's what I'm thinking about when I'm reading about transmission rates and vulnerable demographics. It's what I'm thinking about when my frustration with the **administration's lethargic, fractured response to all this** raises my blood pressure. It's what I think about when I think about that **episode** of the Goop show in which that guest expert told **Gwyneth Paltrow** that her chronological age was 46, but her biological age was 42.5. What is my biological age? What did those two months of Juuling do to it? What did I just eat?

The wellness industry—collectively the products and services that promise to improve the mind, body, and spirit—has been thinking about my health too. Or more accurately it's been thinking about me thinking about my health. In so many ways, the whole industry has been building to this very moment. According to the most recent statistics collected by the Global Wellness Institute, the global wellness economy was worth **\$4.5 trillion** in 2018, a 12.8% increase from 2015-2017. It's surging, then, at the same time as the most severe health crisis in recent memory, and those in charge have very few answers.

To parrot the **skeptics** who have **charted** the industry's rise, the siren song of wellness becomes more appealing when mainstream Western medicine dismisses or misunderstands certain health issues. And right now, the majority of Americans can't know for sure if that dry cough is nothing or if the pandemic is calling from inside the house. We do know that the best thing to do is isolate, and isolation poses a threat to the mind, body, and soul. In so many ways, this is what the industry is primed for. This is the wellness Thunderdome.

So I let wellness find me where I am, which is, right now, always in my home. I take Bar Method and Sky Ting yoga classes via Instagram and Vimeo. I do glute work and tricep work and various forms of cardio bouncing through Classpass's proprietary streaming videos. Expensive fitness has long been the arm of the industry that called to me the most, but there are other options for protecting the home-bound's sanity. Because the wellness industry isn't just workouts; it's supplements and elixirs and colloidal silver and infrared saunas and "well-being"

necklaces as well. It's sleep apps and clay masks. It's meditation, like the kind The Well, an all-in-one health space in New York, is offering through Instagram every day at 10:30am EST (I've never successfully calmed my mind that way, even in those halcyon days before February when the simple act of breathing didn't remind me of how germs can hang in the air, but maybe you can).

I paint my nails. Then I paint my five roommates' nails. I take my evening constitutional. I stare out the window for one hour. I read ads for immunity supplements. I read ads for immunity supplements. I read ads for immunity supplements.

The second season of producer **Jane Marie**'s podcast *The Dream*, which premiered in December, accidentally on purpose dug into the foibles of the industry right in time for a global wellness crisis (she wrapped "two weeks into coronavirus"). Two of the episodes track the rise of the vitamin and supplement industry with the help of **Catherine Price**, author of *Vitamania*. For the pod, Price charted the Food and Drug Administration's attempts and abject failures to regulate that market over the past century. So in 2020, because manufacturers of the stuff still don't have to submit their products to the FDA for approval, they don't even have to have the **ingredients they say they do**. Price writes that though vitamins are necessary to maintain health, a little goes a long way. Most vitamin supplements contain an amount that is above and beyond what a body needs. Your immunity is usually boosted, as it were, by eating a balanced diet, something that's still available at the grocery store even during this trying time.

And yet, "immunity" or "immune system boosters" have the early makings of an unfortunate pandemic buzzword. No one can promise immunity from the deadly virus. At least not yet. And these supplements, which claim to fortify your immune system, are largely unnecessary even in times of plenty.

One should be "skeptical of anyone trying to sell you a pill—they're taking advantage of you in a vulnerable moment," Price told me. "The best thing you can do for your immunity is totally free: sleep more. I'm serious. Sleep will do more for your immunity than any supplement possibly could."

Most companies know to hedge language around claims or else incur the wrath of the FDA, Federal Trade Commission, and other consumer protection entities. Some companies do not. On March 12, New York Attorney General **Letitia James** sent a cease and desist notice to **Alex Jones**, Infowars founder, for claiming that products he sells, such as dietary supplements, creams, and honest-to-biscuits toothpaste, can fight this thing. "As the coronavirus continues to pose serious risks to public health, Alex Jones has spewed outright lies and has profited off of New Yorkers' anxieties," the attorney general said in a **statement**. "If these unlawful violations do not cease immediately, my office will not hesitate to take legal action and hold Mr. Jones accountable for the harm he's caused."

The ad for his **toothpaste** now reads, “This product is only intended for use in cleaning or whitening the appearance of teeth. It is not for therapeutic use and does not cure, treat, prevent, or mitigate any disease.”

Prior to that, the FDA and FTC had warned Vital Silver, Quinessence Aromatherapy, Xephyr (N-Ergetics), GuruNanda, Vivify Holistic Clinic, Herbal Amy, and The Jim Bakker Show for advertising products as a coronavirus remedy. Facebook and Twitter have vowed to help scour their own platforms for misinformation. Twitter, for example, **announced** on Monday that it’s “broadening our definition of harm” by removing tweets that appear to include “description of treatments or protective measures which are not immediately harmful but are known to be ineffective, are not applicable to the COVID-19 context, or are being shared with the intent to mislead others, even if made in jest, such as ‘coronavirus is not heat-resistant—walking outside is enough to disinfect you’ or ‘use aromatherapy and essential oils to prevent COVID-19.’”

The ones that manage to hedge their promises well are frankly more frustrating. Instagram served up an ad for a 16-pack of powder supplements that claim to help hydrate one’s way to immunity. It’s nearly \$25 total, *or* one can enter “immunity25” to get 25% off. Something called Asystem said it could still deliver “Superhuman Supplements designed to build resilience” (to what?) directly to my door. Another ad for a personalized vitamin pack was sold through a personal testimonial: “Thanks to Hundred and my dedicated nutritionist Paulina, my immune system feels better than ever!” One for **WTHN**, the “DryBar of acupuncture” in New York, reads, “Win the fight against viruses. Keep your immune system strong all season long.” An “immune boost bundle” of two types of supplements costs \$75.

“I think for the most part, aside from **Jim Bakker** and **Alex Jones** and **Tom Brady**, most people have good intentions and want people to be healthy and so they may not even realize that they’re profiteering,” said Marie, *The Dream* podcast host. “I probably wouldn’t put Gwyneth in that group [of well-intentioned people].”

Which brings us to Goop, the bellwether of aspirational wellness. I mentioned to Marie that the site has come through with a storm of information on COVID-19. They linked out to articles in the *New York Times* and *The New Yorker*, essentially sending readers away from the site in favor of the most timely, fact-checked information. It offered Centers for Disease Control guidelines in a clear list form. It included notes about how scientific studies had not yet proven that zinc and vitamin C actually do anything to prevent colds—except *maybe* reduce the length one is sick. There was an interview with a health educator advocating for vaccines (again, there is no vaccine for the COVID-19 now, but when there is, everyone will do well to get it). I was pleasantly surprised by all the careful wording during a time when it was hard to know what was true, hard to know how to protect one’s family.

I suppose one could argue that if supplements and tinctures, et al., make you feel good, like you're making progress on something or actually helping yourself and if it doesn't hurt you, it's fine to buy in. It could even act as a stopgap for otherwise service-based businesses like WTHN, for example, in the same way that buying gift cards hypothetically helps restaurants stay open for delivery when their margins are already so low. Is it good and right to make your pee expensive (to **borrow a phrase**) in order to help save your acupuncturist's job? They are service workers, too. I don't know. So many jobs are at stake. So many people and so many businesses are looking for protection wherever they can get it. It's hard to know what the right thing to do is right now.

We are still in the early days of global crisis. We want to do something, but we've been asked to do as little as humanly possible. And the promise of wellness has long been that by doing basically nothing, you're still doing something. The real work is happening on the inside. You just can't see it, until suddenly you do—in the skin, in the hair, in the eyes, in the energy, in the focus. Again it's a multitrillion-dollar industry that stands to lose a lot during this health crisis. But it can also gesture toward normalcy at an abnormal time better than many other industries, too. And, it has tried.

The pandemic and its shadow menace, isolation, has made at least one thing clear: We need sleep. We need to mitigate the anxiety. So maybe I'll livestream a free meditation class in earnest next time. I'll turn on my free, downmarket Calm app. I'll breathe. I'll think about my health until I fall asleep.