

South Florida

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Sunrise man loses sense of smell after taking cold medicine, suit alleges

By Rafael A. Olmeda | South Florida Sun Sentinel
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SUNRISE - There are serious consequences to losing your sense of smell, but those aren't the things Frederick Schaffer really misses.

He misses the smell outside Cinnabon when he's walking through the mall. And a really good cup of coffee. And his wife's perfume. And his kids' hair when they've just taken a bath.

Schaffer, 43, has retained Sam Coffey, Esq., to sue the maker of Zicam, claiming he lost his sense of smell after using its products to treat cold symptoms in June 2007.

Matrixx Initiatives Inc., headquartered in Scottsdale, Ariz., makes 19 Zicam products. Three were singled out in a warning letter from the Food and Drug Administration last week, ordering the company to subject its homeopathic remedies to new drug approval testing, something the company hasn't needed to do before.

That letter, and Zicam's voluntary withdrawal of its Cold Remedy Swabs, Cold Remedy Swabs Kids Size, and Cold Remedy Gel, marked the first time Schaffer connected his loss of smell -- a condition known medically as anosmia -- with his use of Zicam.

"I've been wrestling with this," he said, checking off a list of doctors and specialists he's seen over the past two years to determine what happened to his ability to smell. There was the exam of his sinuses with a miniature camera that showed nothing wrong. There was the CT scan that showed nothing out of the ordinary. There was the MRI that didn't find the problem.

"Not until I saw the recall did I put it together," he said.

The FDA's warning covered those Zicam products that are taken nasally and contain zinc gluconate. "There is evidence ... that various salts of zinc can damage olfactory function in animals and humans."

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Matrixx spokeswoman Negin Kamali disputed that assertion.

"Ten separate federal judges in 10 different cases have now examined the scientific validity and reliability of research conducted by experts retained by plaintiffs," she said. "Each court has concluded that the theory has no reliable scientific support."

The company did pay \$12 million in 2006 to settle 340 lawsuits brought by consumers. At the time, a company spokesman said the payments made good business sense but did not accept blame for the plaintiffs' anosmia.