

ONLINE MEDICINES – ESSENTIAL?

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ABSTRACT

In today's rapidly changing world of e-commerce, almost anything can be bought over the Internet and delivered right to your front door. Walking out this morning and trying to get medicines might turn into quite a hassle. For, the All India Association of Chemists and Druggists, the apex body for pharmacies in the country, has announced a one-day strike against what they say is the "growing menace" of online pharmacies. Virtually everyday there is news of yet another company selling some type of product online. Included in this barrage of products is prescription medication.

Buying medicines online is common practice across the globe these days. This is because buyers are preferring to order for medicines through a click of a button rather than taking a trip to a drug store. Such online websites sell everything from prescription drugs to health related products. There is no specific law to deal with online pharmacies in India but multiple laws govern online pharmacies in an indirect manner. These laws collectively govern the food, health, cosmetics, drugs and medicines in India. For instance, the Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, and the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945, have guidelines on the sale of drugs. These can be sold only on prescription and there are specific rules, including for labeling and bar-coding. But those laws provide "no regulatory control over drug advertisements on television or the

Internet". The Food and Drug Administration wants to warn consumers about the possible dangers of buying medicines over the Internet. Some websites sell prescription and over-the-counter drugs that may not be safe to use and could put people's health at risk. This article describes about Buying medicines online is essential or not?

INTRODUCTION

An online pharmacy, Internet pharmacy, or mail-order pharmacy is a [pharmacy](#) that operate over the [Internet](#) and sends the orders to customers through the mail or shipping companies. Online A website that offers prescription drugs from the comfort of home Cons. The IP or prescribing physician may not be qualified or licensed to prescribe drugs in all states. Mail-order pharmacies are somewhat similar to community pharmacies; one primary difference is the method by which the medications are requested and received. Some customers consider this to be more convenient than traveling to a community drugstore, in the same way as ordering goods online rather than going to a shop.

While many internet pharmacies sell [prescription drugs](#) only with a prescription, some do not require a pre-written prescription. In some countries, this is because prescriptions are not required. Some customers order drugs from such pharmacies to avoid the cost and inconvenience of visiting a doctor or to obtain medications their doctors were unwilling to prescribe. Pharmacies offering medication without requiring a prescription and doctor review or supervision are sometimes fraudulent and may supply counterfeit and ineffective and possibly dangerous medicines.

TYPES OF ONLINE MEDICINE WEBSITES

Generally, there are three types of online medicine websites. The ability to distinguish between the various types of medical online sites is helpful in understanding the issues in some current cases.

1. Pharmacy-only based sites:

First, there are the sites which offer traditional pharmacy services online only. These *pharmacy-only* based sites will only dispense medicine to a consumer who has first obtained a prescription from a doctor and then submits it to the online pharmacy. *Pharmacy-only* sites are the least controversial because they do not actually initiate the drug sale. These sites merely process valid prescriptions which have already been obtained from a licensed practitioner. The most significant legal problem with these sites occurs when the pharmacy fails to obtain the appropriate license for each state where it intends to do business.

2. Prescribing based sites:

These sites often employ both pharmacists and doctors. However, they should be distinguished from the web sites that also may employ doctors and pharmacists, but *only* offer medical advice or health related information. Usually the *prescribing based* sites will provide an online doctor visit either through a medical questionnaire or a simultaneous video conference between the doctor and patient. After the patient enters the information and the doctor reviews it, a prescription may be issued which is then processed at an online pharmacy. Some prescribing based sites are comprised exclusively of physicians who, upon issuing prescription, contract with an online pharmacy to actually dispense the medicine. In many cases, the doctor, pharmacy, and patient are allocated in different states. The strongest criticism of these sites is that an online form or questionnaire, no matter how detailed, simply cannot substitute for a physical exam.

3. Online Drug Shops:

This is an appropriate description because these websites are primarily engaged in the sale of drugs. Here, essentially all a consumer needs to do in order to obtain a controlled substance or any other prescription drug, is simply go to the site, pick out the drug of choice, and make the purchase with a credit card. With these sites, no examination is necessary and no medical questionnaire needs to be answered. *Online drug shops* often operate from foreign countries. Although many consumers do not realize it, *online drug shops* are considered illegal by most law enforcement agencies. Authorities consider these sites to be the most dangerous because of their willingness to sell potentially dangerous controlled substances.

In addition, *online drug shops* often sell drugs that are unapproved for medical use in the United States. The anonymous nature of the Internet, combined with the fact that many of these pharmacies are foreign based, make them very difficult to stop. Infact, the few *online drug shops* that are discovered and shut down often reappear the next day under a different name or address, ready again to do business.

POSITIVE ASPECTS IN ONLINE MEDICINES:

- Online stores offer greater convenience because these are one stop shops for a variety of products. Besides buyers get to compare the prices before placing Orders on online drug stores.
- Lower cost and convenience for elderly people or those living in rural areas.
- The store of drugs at such stores is ample enough to cater to the needs of people

Living far from the pharmacy.

- Drug shopping on the internet helps a buyer to save money. Several surveys Conducted by research bodies have shown that as much as one third the price can be saved on prescribed medicines if they are bought online. Besides buyers get to find the best prices only at these stores.
- The access to written product information at these sites is way easier to obtain than in traditional store front pharmacies.
- Most of these legal stores have a process of drug approval. They require a Prescription from a personal physician, or at least offer a drug as a prescribed medication only after the consumer fills up a questionnaire. This questionnaire is reviewed by a doctor before the drug is dispatched.
- Consumers privately and conveniently order for medicines from online chemist stores as well as get to avail free delivery.

NEGATIVE ASPECTS IN ONLINE MEDICINES

Counterfeit Drugs:

- Counterfeit drugs are fake or copy cat products that can be difficult to identify.
- The deliberate and fraudulent practice of counterfeiting can apply to both brand name and generic products, where the identity of the source is often mislabeled in a way that suggests it is the authentic approved product. Counterfeit drugs may be,
 - contaminated
 - not help the condition or disease the medicine is intended to treat
 - lead to dangerous side effects
 - contain the wrong active ingredient
 - be made with the wrong amounts of ingredients
 - contain no active ingredients at all or contain too much of an active ingredient
 - packaged in phony packaging that looks legitimate
- Since the internet makes it easy to side step the safety net, these stores do not have any processes of medical supervision or physical evaluation in place. If at all there is any such process, these are not performed by a licensed health professional.
- Some illegal online drug stores deal in dangerous contaminated, counterfeit or outdated drugs that can lead to dangerous drug interactions.
- Such drug stores are under scrutiny through Internet surveillance practices. This is a sort of an enforcement priority that targets the sale or purchase of prescription drugs without a valid prescription as well as controls unapproved new drugs and similar health frauds.
- Possible to order prescription medication over the Internet, in some cases it is not necessary to be examined, or even to consult with a physician.

- Unfortunately, it still remains unclear as to exactly which agencies do have jurisdiction. Nevertheless, as Congress and individual states rush to address the issue, entrepreneurs and drug store chains are racing to establish the next on-line pharmacy.
- Easy access to illegal or unapproved drugs, medication offered without a prescription, and drugs marketed with fake health claims.
- Without an actual face to face exam, critics contend that patient warning signs which might easily be detected by touch, could go unnoticed, posing potential risk to the patient.
- Teen-agers receiving prescriptions for Viagra and other "life style drugs," are well chronicled.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, online medicine can offer enormous benefits to consumers. But there are still substantial risks. In buying prescriptions online, consumers will be well advised and be extremely cautious when visiting *online drug shops*. One way to accomplish that is to look for the VIPPS™ sign on the website. This will ensure that the site is a high quality operation that has undergone rigorous certification. Also, compare prices of several different pharmacies before making a purchase and inquire about delivery and shipping charges. According to the Pharmacy Act of India, a pharmacist needs to hold a degree or diploma in pharmacy, pharmaceutical chemistry or a chemist and druggist diploma. "A qualified pharmacist, while not qualified to prescribe, would know when a drug is particularly dangerous. This is not the same for an online pharmacy," said Dr Rajeev Kumar, general practitioner. There is no specific regulation for online medical sales in the country. We need specific guidelines that take into consideration the realities of the online market.

Of course the risk will vary according to the particular type of online drug sale. Therefore, consumers are not only risking their health when they make these purchases from foreign *online drug shops*, but also, they are potentially breaking the law as well. Don't give any personal information such as a social security number, credit card information, or medical or health history unless you are sure the website will keep your information safe and private.

Given the amazing rise of e-commerce and the Internet's regulation-free environment, it's no wonder that pharmacies and doctors are seeking to take advantage of the new opportunities. However, recent action by several states suggests entrepreneurs need to be extremely cautious when pursuing this new approach to medicine. Online medicine has the potential to offer great benefits to consumers, but it can also lead to very serious health consequences if practiced recklessly. Furthermore, this industry is so new and fast growing that it is not clear which practices are legal and which are prohibited by state or federal law.

The Internet Pharmacy Consumer Protection Act will not be endorsed by the National

Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP). The NABP is pushing for the industry to self regulate and has launched a new certification system called VIPPS™ (Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites. VIPPS™ is a voluntary, 17point rigorous examination, "VIPPS™ is a voluntary program designed to certify an online pharmacy's preparedness to meet the unique demands of pharmacy practice on the Internet." Before certification is issued, NABP will verify, independently, all pharmacy applications either through on-site inspections or through its computer database of state laws. Infact, the first VIPPS™ certifications were recently presented to several major online pharmacies, and already consumer advocates are encouraging consumers to check for the VIPPS™ sign when visiting pharmacy websites.

The Food and Drug Administration wants to warn consumers about the possible dangers of buying medicines over the Internet. Some websites sell prescription and over-the-counter drugs that may not be safe to use and could put people's health at risk. Before you get any new medicine for the first time, talk to a health care professional such as your doctor or pharmacist about any special steps you need to take to fill your prescription.

Be aware that some drugs sold online,

- are too old, too strong, or too weak
- aren't FDA-approved
- aren't made using safe standards
- aren't safe to use with other medicines or products
- aren't labeled, stored, or shipped correctly
- may be counterfeit

As the confusion over online pharmacies mounts, one thing is clear, this new type of medicine is growing at a substantial rate. Finally, the risks and benefits of ordering medications online, and what consumers should do to protect themselves as well as comply with the law.