

Should I Buy Prescriptions Online?

Q: Are online Canadian pharmacies offering cheap drugs for real?

A: The U.S. Food & Drug Administration (FDA) is very clear: “If you cannot confirm that an online pharmacy is licensed in the United States, you should not use that online pharmacy.” The FDA has no jurisdiction over prescription medication from other countries, and can’t guarantee the safety or effectiveness of those medications. Only 3% of online pharmacies reviewed by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy are in compliance with U.S. pharmacy laws and practice standards.

Many consumers are turning to the internet for drugs, because they can get instant access to information and services. Consumers are looking for cheaper alternatives. According to a FDA survey, one in four of those surveyed internet users reported having purchased prescription medicine online. About 29% of those in the survey said they were not sure how to safely purchase medicine online. Online pharmacies associated with your health insurance plan or a local pharmacy, are generally safe to use. But medicines ordered through illegal pharmacies could have been made anywhere.

One large online pharmacy based in Canada that says it handles over 300,000 orders per year tells seniors that it sources its drugs from “partner pharmacies” in India, Singapore and Europe, “which are under strict government regulations of their country.” But they are not U.S regulated. “The only difference between these medications and ones you would receive from a pharmacy in the United States is the price,” the internet pharmacy says. And the price difference is dramatic: A bottle of 84 Atenolol 25 mg. pills is \$80 in the U.S., \$11 online. A bottle of 84 Aricept 10 mg. pills are \$1,090 vs. \$64 online. A bottle of 90 Lipitor 10 mg. pills is \$399 in the U.S., \$60 online. You just go onto their website, place an order, pay by credit card, and fax your prescriptions toll-free.

But the FDA warns that buying prescriptions from fraudulent online pharmacies can be dangerous, or even deadly: “Counterfeit medicines of approved drugs should be considered unsafe and ineffective. These medicines may be less effective or have unexpected side effects.” These sites may also sell your information to other illegal websites and internet scams. “The products they provide may be fake,” the FDA says, “expired and otherwise unsafe. In fact, many online pharmacy scams are so sophisticated that even health care professionals can have a hard time detecting illegal sites at first glance.”

Here are some warning signs of a fake online pharmacy:

1. They allow you to buy drugs without a prescription
2. They offer discounts or cheap prices that seem too good to be true
3. They send unsolicited email or other spam offering cheap medicine
4. They ship prescription drugs worldwide
5. They are located outside the U.S. and say your drugs will be shipped from a foreign country
6. They are not licensed in the U.S. and by the state board of pharmacy in your state.

It’s illegal to import drugs into the United States for personal use, but the FDA doesn’t object to personal imports of up to a 3 months supply of drugs that are not FDA approved--- if the drug is for a serious condition for which effective treatment isn’t available in the U.S.; if there is no commercialization or promotion of the drug to U.S. residents; if the drug doesn’t represent an unreasonable risk; and if the individual importing the drug states in writing that it’s for his or her own use, and provides contact information about the doctor providing treatment. Drug products must be listed with FDA before they may be imported for commercial use in the U.S. The foreign manufacturer is required to register with FDA, and to identify a U.S. Agent. For more information, go to: www.FDA.gov/BeSafeRx.