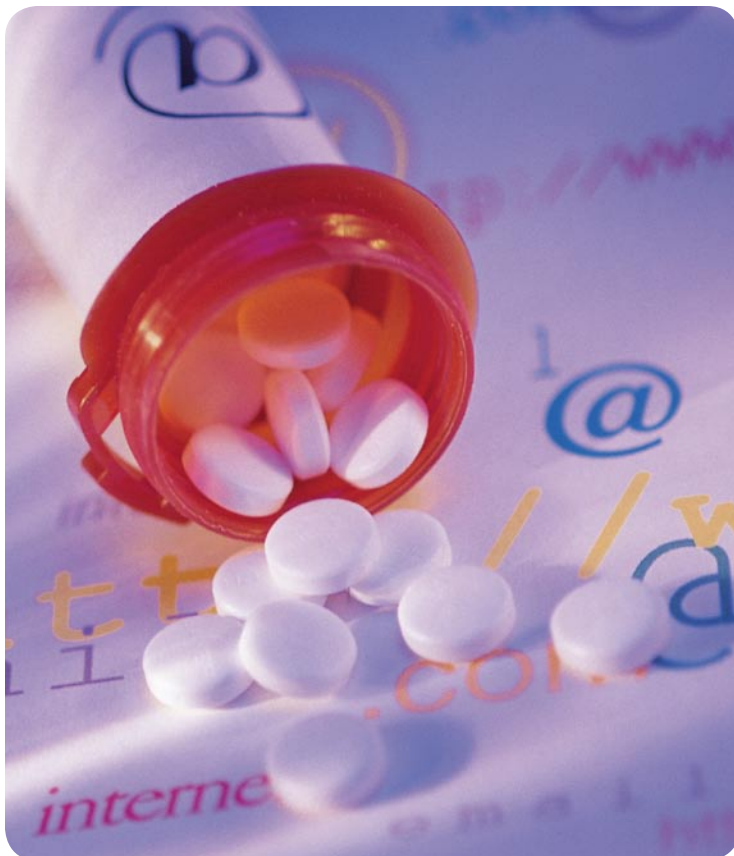


# The Possible Dangers of Buying Medicine Online



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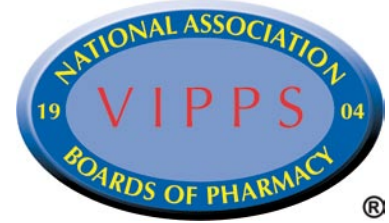
**T**he Food and Drug Administration cannot warn people enough about the possible dangers of buying medications online. Some Web sites sell medicine, such as prescription and over-the-counter drugs, that may not be safe to use and could put people’s health at risk. The current system of federal and state safeguards for protecting consumers from using inappropriate or unsafe drugs has generally served the country well. But FDA says that the best way consumers can protect themselves is to become educated about safe online shopping.

### **SET YOUR SITES HIGH**

Buying such prescription and over-the-counter drugs online from a company you don’t know means you may not know exactly what you’re getting. While many Web sites are operating legally and offering convenience, privacy, and the safeguards of traditional procedures for dispensing drugs, consumers must be wary of “rogue Web sites” that aren’t operating within the law. A Web site can look very sophisticated and legitimate but actually be an illegal operation.

These sites often sell unapproved drugs, or if they market approved drugs, they often sidestep required practices meant to protect consumers. Some Web sites sell counterfeit drugs. Although counterfeit drugs may look exactly like real FDA-approved drugs, they are not legitimate and are of unknown quality and safety. If you’re considering buying medicine over the Internet, look for Web sites with practices that protect you. If there is no way to con-

*People can be confident that Web sites that are VIPPS-approved are legitimate. Legitimate pharmacies that carry the VIPPS® seal are listed at [www.vipps.info](http://www.vipps.info)*



tact the Web site pharmacy by phone, if prices are dramatically lower than the competition, or if no prescription from your doctor is required, you should be especially wary.

**Safe Web sites should**

- Be located in the United States.
- Be licensed by the state board of pharmacy where the Web site is operating (visit [www.nabp.info](http://www.nabp.info) for a list of state boards of pharmacy).
- Have a licensed pharmacist available to answer your questions.
- Require a prescription from your doctor or other health care professional who is licensed to prescribe medicines.
- Provide contact information and allow you to talk to a person if you have problems or questions.

The National Association of Boards of Pharmacy's (NABP) Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites™ Seal, also known as VIPPS® Seal, gives a seal of approval to Internet pharmacy sites that apply and meet state licensure requirements and other VIPPS® criteria.

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**Unsafe Web sites**

- Typically don't know your medical history or the details about your current illness or condition.
- Send you drugs with unknown quality or origin.

- Could give you the wrong medicine or another dangerous product for your illness.
- May sell prescription drugs even without a prescription—this is against the law!
- May not protect your personal information.

**KNOW YOUR MEDICINES**

Before you get any new medicine for the first time, talk to your doctor about any special steps you need to take to fill your prescription. In addition

- Any time you get a prescription refilled, check the physical appearance: color, texture, and shape of the drug. Even if all of these characteristics appear to be okay, there may be a problem if the medication doesn't taste like it has in the past.
- Pay special attention to altered or unsealed containers or changes in product packaging.
- Alert your pharmacist, or whoever is providing treatment, if you notice any differences or anything unusual about the product packaging.
- Make sure that you only use drugs that have been prescribed by your health care provider who is licensed in the United States to prescribe medications.

Be aware that some medicines 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.

**BEWARE OF COUNTERFEIT MEDICINE**

Counterfeit drugs are fake or copy-cat medicines 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.
- Be packaged in phony packaging that looks legitimate.

For example, counterfeit versions of the FDA-approved weight loss drug Xenical, which contains the active ingredient orlistat, recently were obtained by three consumers from two different Web sites. The agency announced in May 2007 that none of the capsules that the consumers received contained orlistat. In fact, laboratory analysis showed that one capsule actually contained sibutramine, which is the active ingre-



Drugs purchased over the Internet by an American patient who was told that the products were manufactured in the United States and were being sold from Canada. The drugs he actually received are fake “knockoffs” from India.

dient in Meridia, a prescription drug also approved by FDA to help obese people lose weight and maintain weight loss.

Using medication that contains an active ingredient other than what was prescribed by your licensed health care provider is generally unsafe.

FDA also became aware recently of a number of people who placed orders over the Internet for

- Ambien (zolpidem tartarate)
- Xanax (alprazolam)
- Lexapro (escitalopram oxalate)
- Ativan (lorazepam)

Instead of the intended drug, several customers received a product that contained haloperidol, a powerful anti-psychotic drug. As a result, some sought emergency medical treatment for symptoms such as difficulty in breathing, muscle spasms and muscle stiffness—all problems that can occur with haloperidol.

FDA continues to be proactive in aggressively protecting consumers from counterfeit drugs. The agency is working with drug manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers to identify and prevent counterfeit drugs. FDA also has created an internal task force to explore the use of modern technologies and other measures that will make it more difficult for counterfeit drugs to get mixed up with, or deliberately substituted for, safe and effective drugs.

Generally, medications that have not been purchased with a prescription from a state-licensed pharmacy located in the United States may be unsafe and ineffective. But remember, even those drugs that are purchased from a state-licensed pharmacy Web site cannot be guaranteed safe and effective.

**PROTECT YOURSELF**

- Only buy from state-licensed pharmacy sites based in the U.S. (preferably from VIPPS-certified sites, when possible).
- Don't buy from sites that sell prescription drugs without a prescription.
- Don't buy from sites that offer to prescribe a medication for the first time without a physical exam by your doctor.
- Check with your state board of pharmacy or the NABP to see if an online pharmacy has a valid pharmacy license and meets state quality standards.
- Sites ending in “.com” are usually commercial sites selling products (they may be either legitimate or rogue sites). Sites that end in “.gov” (government), “.edu” (universities or medical schools), and “.org” (not-for-profit groups) may be good sources of health information.
- Use legitimate Web sites that have a licensed pharmacist to answer

your questions.

- Look for privacy and security policies that are easy to find and easy to understand.
- 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 Web site will keep your information safe and private.
- Make sure that the site will not sell your personal information, unless you agree.
- Report Web sites that may be problematic. You can do this by visiting [www.fda.gov/buyonline](http://www.fda.gov/buyonline) and clicking on “Notify FDA about problem websites.”

**ALERT:** For a list of drugs that you should NOT buy online because of special safety restrictions, visit [www.fda.gov/cder/consumerinfo/dontBuyonNet.htm](http://www.fda.gov/cder/consumerinfo/dontBuyonNet.htm)