



BE CAREFUL BEFORE BUYING MEDICINE ONLINE

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

ALTHOUGH THE INTERNET OFFERS real benefits to consumers by fostering competition and lowering prices for many goods and services, Texans should be careful before buying medication online.

The Office of the Attorney General (OAG) routinely reminds consumers to take common sense precautions before buying anything over the Internet. These tips include:

- Deal only with reputable businesses;
- Use credit cards or other payment options that will protect you if the product does not arrive or fails to live up to its advertising; and
- Beware of Web sites that do not provide a refund policy or a physical address for the seller.

When it comes to buying prescription medications online, consumers should be doubly cautious. Unfortunately, many online pharmacies are based in foreign countries and could pose serious risks to consumers' health. These pharmacies are not regulated by U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) or any other U.S. authority.

The OAG and the Texas State Board of Pharmacy strongly discourage consumers from buying medicines from any online pharmacy that is not based in the United States. No matter how tempting the offers and how legitimate the Web site might appear, it is best to play it safe. Consumers may place their health at risk by buying unapproved drugs.

There are numerous instances in which foreign online pharmacies have sold counterfeit drugs that do not meet with U.S. quality

standards. For example, active ingredient content might be higher or lower than what the package indicates, and in many instances consumers have purchased drugs that had long since expired.

Even if the offer from a foreign or unapproved Web site appears to be for a name brand drug, the product could be of inferior quality or might even be a clever counterfeit. Consumers have no guarantee that a non-U.S. pharmacy is providing what they need to treat or manage serious medical ailments.

If consumers choose to use an online pharmacy, they should only use those based in the U.S. and approved by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacies (NABP) through its Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites (VIPPS) program (www.vipps.info). Consumers should independently consult the VIPPS site to make sure they are dealing with an approved entity, and they should not rely solely on a Web site's reassurance that it is approved by NABP or has the VIPPS logo.

Furthermore, even if the pharmacy is located in the United States, consumers should never deal with an entity that does not clearly state its physical location, the name and license number of the affiliated pharmacists, and the states which issued the licenses.

Another red flag are Web sites that fill out prescriptions based on a consumer's responses to a questionnaire or a brief phone conversation with a purported pharmacist. Under Texas law, those informal consultations

could be illegal. There is no substitute for an in-person visit with a legitimate pharmacist or doctor. Texans should steer clear of online merchants willing to sell them medications without a prescription, if they would otherwise need one to buy the same drugs at their local pharmacy. It is illegal to purchase controlled substances without a prescription.

Texans should also avoid Web sites that offer "miracle" drugs or advertise drastically reduced prices for what are normally expensive medications. Under no circumstances should consumers respond to unsolicited e-mail offers for prescription drugs. These annoying advertisements are almost always sent by spammers in other countries selling medicines that quite possibly do not meet U.S. standards.

We also encourage Texans to consult with their local pharmacist or physician to help them understand which sites are legitimate. A pharmacist can also help reduce prescription costs by providing information on lower-priced generic alternatives and various assistance programs for free or low-cost prescriptions, including those sponsored by drug manufacturers.

Texans who believe they have been scammed by an online pharmacy can contact the Office of the Attorney General to file a complaint by calling (800) 252-8011 or through our Web site at www.oag.state.tx.us.

Additional information to avoid pitfalls when buying medications online is available from the Texas State Board of Pharmacy at www.texaspharmacyboard.org or from the FDA at www.fda.gov/buyonline.

POINTS TO REMEMBER



TIPS FOR BUYING MEDICINE ONLINE

- ALWAYS consult your local pharmacist and doctor about buying medications online.
- ALWAYS check out online sites (based in the U.S.) independently through the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy at www.vipps.info.
- NEVER buy medications from a Web site based outside the U.S.
- NEVER buy medications from someone who does not request a prescription.
- NEVER rely on an online questionnaire or phone "consultation" with a Web site employee as a means to obtain a prescription.

For more information about buying medications online, including product recalls and other updates:

TEXAS STATE BOARD OF PHARMACY
(512) 305-8000
www.texaspharmacyboard.org

U. S. FOOD AND DRUG ADMINISTRATION
(888) INFO-FDA (888-463-6332)
www.fda.gov/buyonline

To file a complaint about an online pharmacy, contact:
Office of the Attorney General
(800) 252-8011
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