
FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

Offers to Treat Biological Threats: What You Need to Know

Produced in cooperation with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Food and Drug Administration

The recent reports of anthrax exposure have spawned numerous websites and emails selling Ciprofloxacin (Cipro) and other antibiotics for treatment. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC) warns that fraudsters often follow the headlines, tailoring their offers to prey on consumers' fears and vulnerabilities.

If you're wondering whether to buy products online from sellers who claim that their products will protect you from biological threats, the FTC, as well as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), have news for you:

Talk to your health-care professional before you use any medications.

Unless you are specifically notified or instructed by public health officials, there is no need to obtain or take antibiotics to prevent anthrax. Confirming an infection requires a doctor's examination and diagnosis. This is particularly important for anthrax. A general questionnaire does not provide enough information — or the right kind of information — for a health-care professional to determine whether 1) a particular drug will work for you; 2) it is safe to use; 3) another treatment is more appropriate; 4) there will be adverse reactions with another medication you're taking; or 5) you have an underlying medical condition, such as an allergy, that could make the drug harmful.

Know that some websites may sell ineffective drugs.

Some sites may claim to sell FDA-approved drugs, like Cipro, made to meet U.S. standards. But they may be selling a similar drug made elsewhere, where there may be no guarantee of appropriate manufacturing standards. There also may be no way for you to tell whether a drug is an ineffective “knock-off” just by looking at the pills. In fact, the drugs could be counterfeit or even adulterated with dangerous contaminants.

Know who you're buying from.

Would you buy a prescription drug from a sidewalk vendor? Online, anyone can pretend to be anyone. Because it is easy to fake email addresses, be mindful of who you're buying a product from. You may send the website your money and not get the real thing — or anything — in return. To ensure that the site is reputable and licensed to sell drugs in the United States, the FDA recommends that you check with the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (www.nabp.net, (847) 698-6227) to determine whether a website is a licensed pharmacy in good standing.

In addition, the FTC and the FDA also issue these cautions:

- Don't buy prescription drugs from sites that offer to 1) prescribe them for the first time without a physical exam, 2) sell a prescription drug without a prescription, or 3) sell drugs not approved by the FDA. According to the American Medical Association, prescribing medication without a doctor's examination is considered substandard medical care.
- Don't do business with websites that do not provide you with access to a registered pharmacist to answer questions.
- Avoid sites that don't provide their name, physical business address, and phone number. Otherwise, you will never know who you're dealing with and how to reach them if there is a problem.
- Don't purchase from foreign websites at this time. It is generally illegal to import the drugs bought from these sites; the risks are greater, and there is very little the U.S. government can do if you get ripped off.
- If you buy drugs online, pay by credit or charge card. If you pay for online purchases by credit or charge card, the Fair Credit Billing Act will protect your transaction. Under this law, you have the right to dispute charges under certain circumstances and withhold payment while the creditor is investigating those charges. In the case of unauthorized use of a consumer's credit or charge card, consumers generally are held liable only for the first \$50 in charges. Some cards may provide additional warranty or purchase protection benefits.

For more information from the federal government about treatment for anthrax, visit www.consumer.gov or www.fda.gov/cder/drug/infopage/cipro.

Food and Drug Administration

The FDA regulates over \$1 trillion worth of products, which account for 25 cents of every dollar spent annually by American consumers. It is part of the FDA's job to see that the food we eat is safe and wholesome and that the medicines and medical devices we use are safe and effective. For more information, call toll-free, 1-888-INFO-FDA (1-888-463-6332), or visit the FDA website, www.fda.gov.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) is recognized as the lead federal agency for protecting the health and safety of people — at home and abroad, providing credible information to enhance health decisions, and promoting health through strong partnerships. CDC serves as the national focus for developing and applying disease prevention and control, environmental health, and health promotion and education activities designed to improve the health of the people of the United States. Recognized for expertise in Infectious Diseases, the CDC, located in Atlanta, Georgia, USA, is an agency of the Department of Health and Human Services. General information can be accessed on our website, www.cdc.gov. Information on bioterrorism and public health preparedness can be obtained at www.bt.cdc.gov and also by telephone at 1-800-311-3435.

Federal Trade Commission

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit www.ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357). The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.