

# Buying Medicines Online? Be Wary, FDA Says

**W**hen it comes to buying prescription medicines online, it's better to be safe than sorry.

BeSafeRx: Know Your Online Pharmacy, a new public education campaign by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), is aimed at helping consumers understand and minimize the risks of buying medicines online.

In a recent FDA survey of Internet users, 29 percent of participants reported they are unsure how to safely buy medicines online. Still, more than 20 percent of respondents reported using the Internet to buy prescription medicines.

The Internet makes it easier for fraudulent and illegal online pharmacies to sell medicines to American consumers outside the system of federal and state safeguards that protect patients from inappropriate or unsafe medicines. Medicines you purchase from fraudulent online pharmacies may put your health, or the health of your family, at risk.

"Many online consumers may not realize that they're buying from a fraudulent, illegal online pharmacy—and that the medicines they may receive could be counterfeit, contaminated, contain the wrong active ingredient, or not approved by FDA," says FDA pharmacist, Connie Jung, RPh., Ph.D.

Medicines purchased from fraudulent online pharmacies may contain no active ingredient. (The active ingredients in medicines are responsible for their effects.) It's also possible that they'll have too much or too little of the active ingredient or the wrong ingredient entirely. These medicines may also be contami-



**23%** say they've purchased prescription medicine online. Of those, almost 1 in 5 chose sites not associated with a local pharmacy or health insurance plan.

**21%** of those who reported buying from an online pharmacy reported using one based outside the U.S.

**15%** of all respondents would consider purchasing from an online pharmacy based outside the U.S.

**47%** of those who reported buying from an online pharmacy not associated with a local pharmacy or health insurance plan searched online for comments and ratings before making the purchase.

# *FDA is providing information through its BeSafeRx campaign to help consumers identify and avoid fraudulent pharmacy websites.*

nated with harmful substances, or be past their expiration dates.

As a result, says Jung, you may not receive the therapy you need. And, you may experience unexpected side effects and possibly get worse.

## **Some Red Flags**

According to the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP), the professional organization that represents the state boards of pharmacy (or equivalent state agencies) that are responsible for licensing pharmacies, only 3 percent of online websites reviewed appear to meet state and federal pharmacy laws.

It's sometimes hard to tell that a website isn't trustworthy, says Jung. Many fraudulent online sellers use convincing marketing efforts and develop websites that look legitimate. Even careful consumers may be fooled. FDA is providing information through its BeSafeRx campaign to help consumers identify and avoid fraudulent pharmacy websites.

FDA Commissioner Margaret Hamburg, M.D., says, "Fraudulent online pharmacies often offer deep discounts. If the low prices seem too good to be true, they probably are. BeSafeRx is designed to help patients learn how to avoid these risks and safely buy medicine online."

Jung also warns consumers not to be tempted by the much lower prices than those charged for pre-

scription drugs by a legitimate pharmacy. "They are a sure sign of a fraudulent, illegal online pharmacy, and the medicines you are getting could be harmful," Jung says.

What are some red flags that could signal a fraudulent online pharmacy? Beware of online pharmacies that:

- Are located outside the United States.
- Are not licensed in the United States by a state agency.
- Allow you to buy medicine without a prescription or by asking you to complete an online survey instead of requiring a prescription.
- Offer very low drug prices that seem too good to be true.
- Send spam or unsolicited e-mail offering deep discounts on medicine.
- Ship prescriptions worldwide.
- Ship drugs from a foreign country.

## **Signs of Authenticity**

FDA encourages patients to buy prescription medicines only through online pharmacies that:

- Require a valid prescription from a doctor or other authorized health-care professional.
- Are licensed by the state board of pharmacy (or equivalent state agency) where the patient is located.
- Are located in the United States and provide a physical street

address.

- Have a licensed pharmacist available for consultation.

FDA is making BeSafeRx campaign resources available to other federal agencies and to nonprofit and private organizations to inform patients, caregivers, and health care professionals about the risks of buying prescription medicine from fraudulent online pharmacies. You can find some of these resources at [www.FDA.gov/BeSafeRx](http://www.FDA.gov/BeSafeRx).

FDA encourages consumers to report suspected fraudulent sales of medical products on the internet by illegal online pharmacies at [www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/ucm059315.htm](http://www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/ucm059315.htm)

FDA also encourages consumers to report any adverse effects from any medical product use to MedWatch at [www.fda.gov/Safety/MedWatch/default.htm](http://www.fda.gov/Safety/MedWatch/default.htm).

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