

Buying Prescription Drugs Online

Is It Safe?

consumer *brief*

Trips to the local drugstore are being replaced with a click onto the Internet today, where hundreds of websites now offer prescription drugs, vitamins and over-the-counter medications. During the next several years, annual sales of prescription drugs online are expected to rise from \$23 million to \$1 billion. While the Internet offers improved access to health care, this new distribution channel for prescription medications has raised some concerns.

Many online pharmacy sites are legitimate businesses, but you must use caution to avoid those who use the Internet to sell unapproved, outdated or illegal products. There is no guarantee that the person on the other side of the computer is a licensed pharmacist or doctor. In fact, the U.S. General Accounting Office reports that as many as a third of the “pharmacies” which operate online appear to have no safeguards to protect the consumer. There is no guarantee that the medicine that you get is what the seller says it is, and there is no guarantee that what you buy is right for you. A site might be located in the United States, but it may also be offshore and not easily reachable if something goes wrong.

New Jersey and other states have aggressively prosecuted a number of online drug stores. At the same time, the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP) has developed criteria to certify Internet pharmacies to its standards. NABP requires a pharmacy to comply with the licensing and inspection requirements of the state in which it is located, and for each state to which it dispenses medications. Approved pharmacies can be identified by the Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Site (VIPPS) seal which is displayed on the VIPPS site. The NABP encourages consumers to view the VIPPS site at www.nabp.net to search for a VIPPS Internet pharmacy which matches their needs.

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW

- Don't buy from sites that offer to provide drugs for the first time without a physical examination



or which sell drugs that have not been approved by the Food and Drug Administration.

- Reputable online pharmacies will always ask for a valid prescription and for a doctor's phone number to verify the order.
- Do not do business with sites that do not provide a registered pharmacist who is available to answer your questions.
- Do not purchase prescription drugs from foreign websites.
- Once the drugs arrive, compare the package and pills to the medication you already have at home. Check the expiration date carefully prior to taking any medication.
- Check for a street address and phone number when you are online. The site should also have a detailed privacy statement.
- Talk to your health care professional before using any medication for the first time.
- Sites which dispense medications to patients who have not seen a doctor are breaking federal law, because it is illegal to obtain prescription drugs over the Internet if you have not visited a physician.

If you have questions or concerns, contact the **Board of Pharmacy** at 973-504-6450, or via e-mail at AskConsumerAffairs@lps.state.nj.us.

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