



BUYING DRUGS OVER THE INTERNET

The Issue

If you buy drugs on line, you may be putting your health at serious risk. This is especially true if you order prescription drugs without being examined in person by a health care practitioner.

Background

A simple Internet search will turn up hundreds of Web sites that sell drugs. Some Internet pharmacies are legitimate, but many offer products and services that are dangerous. Some sell drugs that are not approved for use in Canada because of safety concerns. Some take advantage of people desperate for relief by offering "miracle cures" for serious illnesses like cancer. Many offer prescription drugs based on answers to an on-line questionnaire. These sites tell you they will save you the "embarrassment" of talking to your doctor about certain prescription drugs, such as Viagra, or drugs to prevent hair loss, or prompt weight loss. What they do not tell you is that it is dangerous to take a prescription drug without being examined in person and monitored by a health care practitioner to make sure the drug is helping you.

Risks Associated with Buying Drugs On Line

Buying drugs from Internet pharmacies that do not provide a street address and telephone number may pose serious health risks. You have no way of knowing where these companies are located, where they get their drugs, what is in their drugs, or how to reach them if there is a problem. If you order from these sites, you may get

counterfeit drugs with no active ingredients, drugs with the wrong ingredients, drugs with dangerous additives, or drugs past their expiry date. Even if these drugs do not harm you directly or immediately, your condition may get worse without effective treatment.

If you order prescription drugs without being examined and monitored by a health care practitioner, you may be misdiagnosed, and miss the opportunity to get an appropriate treatment that would help you. You may also put yourself at risk for drug interactions, or harmful side effects that a qualified health professional could better foresee.

Buying drugs on the Internet may also pose financial risks. In some cases, the product may not be shipped at all, or if it is coming from another country, it could be stopped at the border by Canadian authorities.

The Status of Internet Pharmacy in Canada

A number of pharmacies in Canada have legitimate Web sites that offer a limited range of products and services, including information for consumers, and shopping for certain items. The practice of pharmacy in Canada is regulated by the provinces, and any licensed pharmacy that offers Internet services must meet the standards of practice within its own province.

If you have questions about whether an Internet pharmacy is legitimate, contact the licensing body in your province or territory.



Minimizing Your Risk

Do not take any prescription drug that has not been prescribed for you by a health care practitioner who has examined you in person.

Do tell your doctor and pharmacist about all of the health products you take, including vitamin and natural health products, as well as prescription and over-the-counter drugs. They need this information to assess and advise you about potential side effects and drug interactions.

If you decide to order drugs on line:

Do not do business with a Web site that:

- refuses to give you a street address, telephone number, and a way of contacting a pharmacist
- offers prescription drugs without a prescription, or offers to issue a prescription based on answers to an on-line questionnaire
- claims to have a “miracle cure” for any serious condition
- sells products that do not have a DIN (see below) issued by Health Canada

Do make sure you are dealing with a Canadian-based Web site that is linked to a “bricks and mortar” pharmacy that meets the regulatory requirements in your province/territory.

Finally, if you have a question or complaint about therapeutic drug products purchased on line, call Health Canada's toll-free hotline: 1-800-267-9675

Health Canada's Role

Health Canada regulates therapeutic drugs in Canada through a rigorous licensing process, which includes an extensive pre-market review and the ongoing post-market assessment of a drug's safety, effectiveness and quality. As part of this process, Health Canada conducts risk/benefit assessments, monitors adverse reactions, and communicates information about risks to health professionals and the public. All drugs approved for sale in Canada have an eight-digit Drug Identification Number (DIN). The DIN assures you that Health Canada has assessed a drug, and considers it safe and effective when used as directed on the label. The DIN also provides a way to track adverse drug reactions.

Health Canada licenses and conducts regular inspections of companies that manufacture, import and/or distribute drugs. In addition, Health Canada investigates complaints related to the sale or use of therapeutic drugs, including complaints about Web sites that sell drugs, and takes action where appropriate. Also, Health Canada works with the Canada Customs and Revenue Agency to control the illegal entry of prescription and over-the-counter drugs. Individual Canadians are allowed to import a three-month supply of therapeutic drugs, subject to a number of restrictions.

Need More Info?

For more information about Drug Identification Numbers (DINs), visit:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/prodpharma/activit/fs-fi/dinfs_fd_e.html

To learn more about the process for drug approvals in Canada, visit:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/prodpharma/activit/fs-fi/reviewfs_examenfd_e.html

For details about importing therapeutic drugs for personal use, please see the “Importation of Human Use Drugs for Personal Use Enforcement Directive” at:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/compli-conform/int/export-import/drugs-drogues_tc-tm_e.html

To find out what companies hold a drug establishment licence in Canada see:
http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/dhp-mps/compli-conform/index_e.html

For more information from the National Association of Pharmacy Regulatory Authorities about standards for Internet pharmacies in Canada, visit:
<http://www.napra.org/docs/0/95/158/186.asp>

For the Canadian Pharmacists Association's Internet Pharmacy Statement, visit:
http://www.pharmacists.ca/content/media/newsroom/News_Releases/archives_030700.cfm

For additional articles on health and safety issues go to the It's Your Health Web site at:
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/iyh
You can also call toll free at 1-866-225-0709 or TTY at 1-800-267-1245*