

Buying Foreign Drugs

The members of the Texas State Board of Pharmacy are aware that Texans are purchasing prescription drugs from foreign countries including Mexico and Canada. Because this practice could have a negative impact on the health of the citizens of Texas, the Board believes that Texans should be informed about the potential dangers of buying foreign drugs.

Many consumers believe that drugs sold in Canada or Mexico or any foreign country is exactly the same as drugs sold in the United States--made in the exact same manufacturing plants. The fact is that, some may be, and some may not. For example, drugs sold and distributed in Canada by Eli Lilly Canada come from the company's manufacturing facilities throughout the world--the United States, Europe, Asia, and South America.

The fact remains that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) does not have authority to approve drugs sold in Canada. And, if a Canadian company is selling drugs only for export to the United States, and not to Canadian citizens, Health Canada may not regulate the drugs or the company at all. Therefore, drugs coming to the United States from Canada may be coming from some other country and simply passing through Canada. Consumers must be aware of the following potential health risks associated with the use of imported drugs.

- # **Quality assurance concerns.** Medications that have not been approved for sale in the United States may not have been manufactured under quality assurance procedures designed to produce a safe and effective product.
- # **Counterfeit potential.** Some imported medications--even those that bear the name of a U.S.-approved product--may, in fact, be counterfeit versions that are unsafe or even completely ineffective.
- # **Presence of untested substances.** Imported medications and their ingredients, although legal in foreign countries, may not have been evaluated for safety and effectiveness in the United States. These products may be addictive or contain other dangerous substances.
- # **Risks of unsupervised use.** Some medications, whether imported or not, are unsafe when taken without adequate medical supervision. You may need a medical evaluation to ensure that the medication is appropriate for you and your condition. Or, you may require medical checkups to make sure that you are taking the drug properly, it is working for you and that you are not having unexpected or life-threatening side effects.
- # **Labeling and language issues.** The medication's label, including

instructions for use and possible side effects, may be in a language you do not understand or may make medical claims and suggest specific uses that have not been adequately evaluated for safety and effectiveness.

- # **Lack of information.** An imported medication may lack information that would permit you to be promptly and correctly treated for a dangerous side effect caused by the drug.

The FDA also offers the following ***“Tips and Warnings for Consumers”*** which outlines the dangers of buying drugs on the Internet.

- # Purchasing a medication from an illegal web site puts you at risk. You may receive a contaminated or counterfeit product, the wrong product, an incorrect dose, or no product at all.
- # Taking an unsafe or inappropriate medication puts you at risk for dangerous drug interactions and other serious health consequences.
- # Getting a prescription drug by filling out a questionnaire without seeing a doctor poses serious health risks. A questionnaire does not provide sufficient information for a healthcare professional to determine if that drug is for you or safe to use, if another treatment is more appropriate, or if you have an underlying medical condition where using that drug may be harmful. The American Medical Association has determined that this practice is generally substandard medical care. FDA agrees.

With hundreds of drug-dispensing web sites in business, how can consumers tell which sites are legitimate ones, especially when it is very easy to set up a site that is very professional looking and promises deep discounts or a minimum of hassles? FDA offers these tips to consumers who buy health products online:

- # Check with the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy, <http://www.nabp.net/> or (847) 391-4406 to determine whether a web site is a licensed pharmacy in good standing.
- # Don't buy from sites that offer to prescribe a prescription drug for the first time without a physical exam, sell a prescription drug without a prescription, or sell drugs not approved by FDA.
- # Don't do business with sites that have no access to a registered pharmacist to answer questions.
- # Avoid sites that do not identify with whom you are dealing and do not provide a U.S. address and phone number to contact if there's a problem.

- # Don't purchase from foreign web sites at this time because generally it will be 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.
- # Beware of sites that advertise a "*new cure*" for a serious disorder or a quick cure-all for a wide range of ailments.
- # Be careful of sites that use impressive-sounding terminology to disguise a lack of good science or those that claim the government, the medical profession, or research scientists have conspired to suppress a product.
- # Steer clear of sites that include undocumented case histories claiming "*amazing*" results.
- # Talk to your healthcare professional before using any medications for the first time.
- # Consumers who suspect that a site is illegal can **report it to FDA.**

Additional information about buying prescription drugs from foreign countries and on-line, may be obtained by visiting the web site of the federal Food and Drug Administration at <http://www.fda.gov/oc/buyonline/default.htm>.