

Is it OK to order my medications online from outside the U.S.?

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No. Don't put yourself in danger by ordering from pharmacy websites that could be unreliable, especially ones located outside the U.S. Medications purchased abroad aren't regulated by the Food and Drug Administration, so you can't be certain if the drugs contain the correct active ingredient, too much or too little of it, or even harmful additives.

Only 3 percent of the 10,421 online pharmacies recently reviewed by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy appear to be legitimate. Nearly 9 out of 10 didn't require a valid prescription, 48 percent offered foreign-made or non-FDA-approved drugs, and 23 percent had addresses outside the U.S. "Some of the primary sources of drugs for these sites are China, India, and Pacific Rim locations without any adherence to FDA or state regulations," says NABP executive director Carmen Catizone, R.Ph.

Some Americans may feel that [Canadian pharmacies](#) are safe. A July 2012 *CR Best Buy Drugs* annual poll found that 2 percent of Americans who regularly take a prescription medication, or roughly 4.6 million people, say they have ordered medication online from outside the U.S. to save money in the last year. Canadian pharmacies that ship prescription medication to the U.S. aren't subject to Canadian regulatory authority, according to the U.S. Department of Justice. And, the FDA doesn't have authority over foreign medications and says it can not help consumers if they have problems with their medication ordered from outside U.S. regulation and oversight.

Moreover, some websites that appear to be Canadian actually operate from elsewhere in the world, says Sarah Clark-Lynn, FDA spokesperson. "But the FDA cannot ensure the safety and effectiveness of products that are not FDA-approved, that come from unknown sources, and may not have been manufactured under proper conditions. These unknowns put patients' health at risk."

If you order online for convenience, stick with online drugstores that you already know and trust - such as the chain drugstores, big-box stores, or your local, mom-and-pop pharmacy. Otherwise, check that your pharmacy is licensed, located within the U.S., and requires you to submit prescriptions. For guidance, check [NABP's Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites program](#), which lists safe pharmacies. NABP also has an extensive list of [Not Recommended websites](#). Also, look for the "VIPPS" seal, issued by NABP to accredited, licensed online pharmacies.

If you fill expensive prescriptions or don't have insurance that covers medication, ask your doctor or pharmacist about money-saving options at legitimate U.S. pharmacies. Many stores offer discounted, generic drug programs where you could get your medication for as little as [\\$4 a month](#) or \$10 for three months. Some pharmacies also offer additional loyalty programs where members can receive discounts on other [generics](#) or even brand-name medications.

—*Lisa Fields*