Are medications purchased on the Internet safe?

Buying on the Internet is one way of reducing your cost of prescription medications, though it may be at the expense of safety and lack of benefit. There’s no guarantee that Internet-purchased medications are manufactured according to GMP standards and are safe, pure, and effective.

The global problem of counterfeit medications is increasing. The WHO estimates that 10 percent of medications worldwide are counterfeit, and that includes 19 of the world’s 25 best-selling medications. The Internet is the source of these fake medications. For sildenafil (Viagra), the impotence medication, there is an estimated $2 billion a year in lost sales, which is similar to the reported legal sales in 2007.

What are the potential problems?
Some Web sites may sell unapproved medications, while others sell counterfeit products. These counterfeit products may look exactly like FDA-approved medications, but quality and safety are unknown, since it is often not possible to determine where a medication is manufactured. The counterfeiters want to make a profit, so they focus on popular and expensive medications. We sometimes read in newspapers that the U.S. Customs service confiscates shipments of counterfeit medications, but this represents only a small fraction of what makes it into our national medication supply.

Counterfeit medicines, defined by the World Health Organization as drugs that have “been deliberately and fraudulently mislabeled with respect to identity and/or source,” are a growing problem worldwide. A study by the European Alliance for Access to Safe Medicines found that 62 percent of medications sold online were fake or substandard. Ninety-six percent of the Web sites operated illegally. More than half of the medication shipments to some countries contain no proper ingredients. Special targets are medicines for anti-malaria, HIV/AIDS, and tropical diseases. The resulting health problems include lack of any clinical benefit (due to no active ingredient), development of drug resistance (due to suboptimal doses), and death (due to addition of lethal substances). Tens of thousands of people may be dying from counterfeit drugs. If the pharmaceutical companies lowered the prices of their medications in developing countries, the economic incentive for the counterfeiters would be reduced.
What is being done about the problem with counterfeit medications?
Stopping counterfeit medications has not been a high priority for law enforcement agencies worldwide. FDA officials say the agency is unable to stop the flow of counterfeit medications sold on the Internet. If you are looking on the Internet, it may not be possible to distinguish a reputable operator from a counterfeiter, and there are several precautions to take in this regard (see below).

The tens of thousands of fake online pharmacies are difficult to track down, as they operate globally from overseas jurisdictions. The pharmaceutical manufacturers are trying to make the packages more difficult to copy, but nevertheless, buying medications on the Internet can be a risky business.
**What precautions could I take?**

If you are thinking of using the Internet to purchase medicines, there are some things you should consider to protect yourself. If there is no way to contact the Internet site pharmacy by telephone, if prices are dramatically lower than the competition, or if no prescription from your physician is required, you should be especially cautious.

The following are the features of a safe Internet pharmacy:

- Located in the United States.
- Licensed by the state board of pharmacy where the Web site is operating (visit www.nabp.net for a list of state boards of pharmacy).
- Have a licensed pharmacist available to answer questions.
- Require a prescription from your health-care professional, who is licensed to prescribe medicines.
- Provide contact information and allow you to talk to a person if you have questions or problems.

Internet pharmacies should display the Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites Seal, also known as VIPPS Seal, from the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy. The seal signifies that an Internet pharmacy meets state board of pharmacy licensure requirements and other VIPPS criteria.

**Key messages**

- Internet purchases of medications are inexpensive, but can be risky.
- Some Web sites sell unapproved or counterfeit medications.
- Warning signals of potentially unsafe Internet pharmacies are lack of contact information, dramatically lower prices, and no prescription required.
- Internet pharmacies with the VIPPS seal are safer.