THE 12 GOLDEN RULES

Things you need to know before buying medications online
Do’s and don’t’s to avoid counterfeit medications

The sale and distribution of medications are regulated in all countries, because medications aren’t an ordinary mass market item. These regulations apply to e-commerce as well. Because the internet isn’t a regulation-free zone, most countries have adopted laws regulating the sale of medications online. But despite these laws, the internet is still the marketing channel most favored by traffickers for the sale of counterfeit medications on a large scale. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), one out of every two medications sold online is counterfeit. In addition, various studies have shown that less than one out of every 20 e-pharmacies is legitimate. Despite these risks, which consumers are often unaware of, many people buy drugs online, because of the low prices available there – not to mention the convenience of making online purchases.

• What criteria can I use to find a reliable online pharmacy?
• How can I be sure that I’m not buying counterfeit medications, which could potentially pose a health hazard?
• Are there any robust safeguards ensuring that medications can be bought safely online?
Here are 12 golden rules that you should strictly follow in order to avoid endangering life and limb when purchasing medications online.
Is it legal to buy medications online in my country? If so, which medications am I permitted to buy there?

All of this hinges on the laws in your country of residence.
Find out about the laws in your country or in the country where you’re placing an order

In adopting laws on the sale of medications online, most countries began by taking into account the conditions under which medications are accessed (i.e. prescription or over the counter drugs).

Hence when it comes to the sale of medications online, a distinction can be made between three types of countries:

- Those that authorize the online sale of all medications.
- Those that authorize the online sale of all over the counter medications, but not the sale of prescription drugs.
- Those that ban all sale of medications online.

In addition, a number of other conditions may be added to this first criterion (see the other rules):

- The obligation that a licensed pharmacist be available.
- The obligation to be affiliated with a bricks and mortar pharmacy
- The obligation to be licensed by the public-health authority.

Do’s and dont’s

1. Do an online search to find out what the laws are in your country of residence.

2. For example, google the following: “Ministry of health + country name + medications online”

3. Among the items at the top of the results list you’ll find an official site for the public health authority in your country. You should consult this list.
What's the most reliable way to avoid purchasing counterfeit medications?

Check the reliability of the website that sells the medications in question.
Look into the legality of the website in question

In the interest of enabling consumers to determine the legality of a website that sells medications, most countries have created lists of the sites that are the only ones authorized to sell medications online.

• If such a list does in fact exist, it is crucial that any site you’re thinking of buying medications from be on the list.

• If the site in question isn’t on the list, it’s an illegal site and sale of the medications it carries is against the law in your country. These drugs are also reputed to be potentially hazardous.

Lists of authorized online pharmacies are updated regularly. In case of doubt, do not hesitate to contact the public health authority or authorizing body in your country.

Do’s and dont’s

1. Go to the site of the public health authority in your country of residence (e.g. ministry of health, national association of pharmacists).

2. If relevant, enter the name of your country or region of residence.

3. Make sure that the address (URL) of the website in question appears on the list of authorized online pharmacies (when using a search engine, preferably use copy and paste to avoid typos).
Is there a label that authenticates legitimate websites?

Yes, various countries or associations have developed logos that authenticate such websites.
In the interest of making the online sale of medications safe, various countries or international associations have developed logos that allow for the authentication of legitimate e-pharmacies. The latter are required to display such logos on their website.

For example, the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (USA, Canada, Australia) has created the **VIPPS** (Verified Internet Pharmacy Practices Sites) label. While such labels can potentially provide an extra measure of safety, they are unfortunately **not used everywhere and can be falsified.**

A standard logo for all European e-pharmacies will come into effect in July 2015. All e-pharmacies will be required to display this logo on their homepage, and it will be the common logo for all legal e-pharmacies in Europe.

**Check for the presence of authentication labels.**

In the interest of helping you to familiarize yourself with the existing labels:

The websites of all VIPPS-accredited e-pharmacies display the VIPPS logo on their homepage.

If you click on the icon, you will be directed to the NABP VIPPS website, where you’ll find information about the e-pharmacy in question.

You can also go to the VIPPS website (www.nabp.net) to find a VIPPS-accredited pharmacy that meets your needs.

A list of accredited pharmacies is available at

www.nabp.net/programs/accreditation/vipps/find-a-vippsonline-pharmacy/.

As from July 2015, you’ll see this logo on all European e-pharmacies that are accredited by their national authorizing bodies.

If you click on the logo, you’ll be directed to your country’s official organism that keeps track of the e-pharmacy websites that are legal in your country.
Whenever possible, purchase online medications from a website that’s located in your country of residence.
Whenever possible, purchase online medications from a website that’s located in your country of residence. This will accomplish the following: ensure that the vendor is subject to the same laws as you are; facilitate your transaction; reduce the risk of lawsuits. Also, it’s easier to contact a pharmacist residing in your country should you need additional information about a drug you’ve ordered.

Bear in mind that it’s perfectly legal to buy medications from a foreign website, provided that the site is accredited by your national authorizing body.

If purchasing prescription drugs online is legal in your country, your online pharmacy is required to ask you if this is the case.

1. **The site address (URL)**, which must be located in your country of residence (a foreign, vague, or fictitious address should make you suspicious).

2. **The phone number**, which must be in keeping with the phone numbers in your country (e.g. 134567890). Beware of cellphone numbers, as well as call rerouting services.

3. **The presence of the flags of various countries in all likelihood means that the site sells to customers worldwide.**

4. **Make sure that you’re asked to supply a doctor’s prescription** – providing of course that buying prescription drugs online is legal in your country.
Bear in mind that medication counterfeiters go to great lengths to create an illusion of legitimacy.

How can I be sure that a given website is legitimate?
Do’s and don’t’s

1. Look closely at the site in question; but be sure to also examine the content on pages other than the site’s homepage.

2. If you come across foreign, strange, or inappropriate words indicating a poor translation; or if you see a poorly rendered logo, or a spelling or grammar mistake, this is a sure sign that the site you’re looking at is illegal.

3. Check to ensure that the site doesn’t allow you to purchase prescription drugs without a prescription.

4. Make sure that the site doesn’t ship worldwide.

Bear in mind that medication counterfeitors go to great lengths to create an illusion of legitimacy. Clandestine e-pharmacies use any means possible to make you believe that you’re on a legitimate website that meets the relevant quality and safety standards.

Nonetheless, in some cases careful scrutiny of a website will reveal that it is in fact an illegitimate operation.
Can I contact the pharmacist?
Test out direct contact with the support team of the following website

For whether a pharmacist is selling drugs online or in a bricks and mortar pharmacy, he is more than just a medication vendor; in that part of his job is providing patients with advice and information. It is for this reason that most countries require that a pharmacist be available by phone and/or online.

Before buying medication online, the patient is required to provide personal information such as his age and weight, and information about his state of health (current treatments, allergies and the like) via a contact element that enables the pharmacist to provide each patient with suitable advice.

In many cases, it is required that you be able to contact a pharmacist by phone and/or online.

1. Ask the site pharmacist for additional information. He is required to respond via e-mail or chat.

2. His response should not contain any element urging you to purchase medications.

3. The site pharmacist is required to verify that you have fully understood any advice he gives you – by, if necessary, asking you to confirm this.

4. The site pharmacist is required to do the following: keep all exchanges with patients confidential; provide a secure method that enables you to ensure that you’re dealing with a bona fide pharmacist.
Prices are lower online!

Any authentic medication is subject to a price that cannot be lowered beyond a certain point.
And as is the case with all online merchants, the prices offered by e-pharmacies may in some (but not all) cases be lower than the prices at bricks and mortar pharmacies. But then again, any authentic medication is subject to a price that cannot be lowered beyond a certain point, owing to the following factors: drug development costs; maintaining the relevant quality standards; maintaining the safety of the drug’s logistics chain; various taxes. It’s for this reason that the difference between the price of an online drug and the same drug sold in a bricks and mortar pharmacy cannot and should not be unduly large.

So in purchasing medications online, exercise the same common sense that you apply to all of your online purchases. What would you think of a car, a pair of jeans, or a handbag made by your favorite manufacturer that was 20 or 30 percent cheaper than its usual price?

By the same token, an unduly large difference between the price of a drug sold online and the same drug sold by a bricks and mortar pharmacy should alert you to the fact that you may be purchasing a potentially dangerous knock-off.

1. Before purchasing medication online, find out what the price normally is for the drug in question at a bricks and mortar pharmacy in your country.

2. Compare this price with the online price of the drug you’re thinking of buying?

3. If the difference is greater than more than around 30%, be extremely vigilant about all of the other safety criteria (see the other rules).

4. As a basic precautionary measure, purchase relatively small quantities when dealing with an e-pharmacy for the first time. Such quantities may also be subject to statutory limits.
Incredible – a pill that magically makes you lose weight!!

A medication is not a magic cure!
Do’s and dont’s

Beware of unduly appealing advertising and of magic formulas

A medication is not a magic cure! An illness, and the pain and discomfort that sometimes accompany it, can potentially make you feel vulnerable, and prone to believe unreasonable claims concerning the efficacy of a given medication.

- **Tread carefully** when consulting websites that make extravagant claims about the efficacy of a particular remedy or that offer you medications for free.
- **In case of doubt, consult a healthcare professional.**

Following are some examples of wording that is frequently used by dangerous online charlatans. Such formulations are a sure sign that you’re dealing with organized fraud.

- “MIRACLE REMEDY”
- “EXCLUSIVE PRODUCT”
- “SECRET FORMULA”
- “FIGHTS AGING”
- “IMPROVES SEXUAL PERFORMANCE”
- “TRADITIONAL INGREDIENT”
- “SCIENTIFICALLY PROVEN”
- “ABSOLUTELY RISK FREE”
Beware, of spam!

Too late!!!
A legitimate e-pharmacy will never send you unsolicited e-mails.

On the other hand, spam has long been an intrusive and aggressive marketing technique used by traffickers to sell their merchandise on a large scale.

Spam always directs you to sites that sell illegal medications and that are very likely to be purveyors of counterfeit medications.

**Do’s and don’t’s**

1. **Never respond to an unsolicited e-mail.**

2. **Before signing up for an e-pharmacy newsletter, make sure that the pharmacy is legal (see other rules).**

3. **If you receive such a suspicious e-mail, send it to the public health authority in your country of residence. They can investigate the matter, and if necessary prosecute the website host, or lacking that, the vendor itself.**
Traffickers imitate the original to trick you into believing that their products are authentic.

Counterfeit medications?!?
But it’s the same box!!!
Be vigilant about the packaging and origin of your medication

Be vigilant upon receiving medications that you’ve purchased online. Traffickers imitate the original to trick you into believing that their products are authentic. Although the knock-off techniques in use today are often too sophisticated to enable a patient to differentiate between a counterfeit and an authentic drug without a chemical analysis, sometimes it’s enough to simply be attentive and vigilant.

- **Check the origin** of your parcel by looking at the stamp attached to it or the post office stamp on the parcel. If the parcel was sent from an exotic country, the medication inside is very likely to be counterfeit. And in any case, you have no guarantee that the package was shipped in accordance with good distribution and dispensing practices.

- **Carefully inspect the product packaging** to determine whether it’s the exact packaging used for the same product sold in your country. The packaging should be intact, and the medication should be packaged in a hermetically sealed box.

- **All pharmaceutical drugs are required to have a package insert** that’s written in or translated into your native language.

**Do’s and dont’s**

1. Never buy medications from a website that indicates that the drugs come from a foreign country.

2. When you receive the drug you’ve ordered, make sure that it looks like the drug that you normally take.

3. If the packaging or the product insert contains a spelling mistake; or if poor quality adhesive has been used that doesn’t keep the packaging properly sealed, then this is a sure sign that the medication is probably counterfeit.
From now on, I’m only going to effect payment using a secure method.

Be sure to verify that your online transactions are secure.
Always pay for your medications using a secure payment method

A counterfeit website created by traffickers for the purpose of selling counterfeit medications can also be a way to steal your payment details in order to use them for fraudulent purchases later on. Hence, it’s essential that the e-pharmacy you’re dealing with enables you to effect payment using a payment method that’s secured by a debit card or another secure online payment method such as Paypal, 3D Secure, Google Checkout, or paylib.

1. When effecting payment using a debit card, the payment module will ask you to enter your name, debit card number, debit card expiration date, and a visual cryptogram. At this point, check to ensure that the URL on the page begins with “https.” This is your assurance that your transaction will be encrypted and completely secure. If the page’s URL does not begin with “https,” do not make a purchase from that website.

2. Never send such information via a simple non-secure form (e.g. contact form, Word document, PDF document).

3. Never provide your bank card PIN code when making a purchase.

4. If possible, keep a copy of the payment record indicating the order number, the vendor’s contact details, and the amount of the transaction. Such information may come in very handy if you file a claim or lawsuit.
This medication’s kind of strange; and anyway, what are you supposed to use it for?

Decide against buying the drug – and report it to the authorities.
In case of doubt, report the suspicious drug to the authorities

If you’re certain or even suspicious that you’re in the presence of a counterfeit medication, do not purchase the drug – and report it to the authorities.

In the interest of stemming the rising tide of counterfeit medications, public health authorities and pharmaceutical companies have created websites or phone numbers that enable consumers to report counterfeit drugs.

If you don’t have internet access, you can simply bring the suspicious drug to any pharmacy or to your physician, who will take it from there.

Do’s and don’t’s

1. In case of doubt, refrain from making a purchase.

2. Tell a pharmacist or physician about the drug in question, so that he can verify its legitimacy.

3. In some cases, you can report a suspicious drug directly to your public health authority, by either e-mailing or phoning them. For example:
   - USA: www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/ucm59315.htm or email PSI: www.fda.gov/Safety/ReportaProblem/ucm59315.htm; or e-mail PSI at: psi@psi-inc.org
   - UK: counterfeit@mhra.gsi.gov.uk / Dedicated 24 hour hotline at 020 3080 6701.

4. You can also contact the company that makes the drug via its website. Drug company websites often have a page for this purpose, containing an emergency number.