

Louisiana Pharmacists Association Educates Patients about Safe Pharmacy Websites

Safe pharmacy websites represent a very small percentage of the growing online availability for prescription drugs. According to the Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies (ASOP) Global, there are roughly 35,000 active online pharmacies at any given time, of which 96% are not compliant with local pharmacy laws and practice standards. They estimate about 600 new illegal pharmacies are launched every month.¹ The National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP) in the United States has reviewed 12,000 pharmacy websites and concluded that 95% were in violation of pharmacy laws and standards of practice designed to protect the consumer. They estimate that only 4% of pharmacy websites are safe.

The NABP identifies these consumer risks when using unverified sites:

- purchasing pills with harmful fillers
- identity theft
- email addresses targeted with other scams and viruses.

The harmful pill fillers have led to death in the worst cases.² According to ASOP Global, these illegal pharmacies often sell products manufactured in unsafe conditions, that contain no active ingredients, and/or contain harmful ingredients, such as wax, mercury, concrete, road tar, paint thinner, anti-freeze and other dangerous chemicals.³ Additionally, many of these illegal websites are avenues for prescription drug abuse contributing to the opioid epidemic.² A growing number of consumers are using pharmacy websites to purchase prescription drugs. A poll conducted by ASOP Global, of voters in Indiana representative of the US population in May of 2017, found that 55% of consumers would consider buying at least one medication online and young online shoppers with higher incomes were most likely to consider this.¹ With the ever-increasing use of online shopping, this poses a potential public health risk.

The NABP has created a program to help consumers identify safe pharmacy websites in the US and Canada. They verify *.pharmacy* applicants and provide *.pharmacy* top-level domain names to the applicants that meet certain standards. These standards require the website applicants to:

- be licensed, registered, or hold appropriate permits where headquartered and where its customers reside
- dispense prescription medications only after receiving a valid prescription
- protect patient medical and financial information
- have a clean disciplinary record²

Online pharmacies interested in becoming verified can apply at www.nabp.pharmacy/programs/dotpharmacy/apply.⁴ The NABP also provide tips and resources for consumers, as well as a platform to report suspicious websites.⁵ ASOP Global provides resources to find safe online pharmacies in the US, Canada and Europe, with a plan to add resources for Latin America, India and China in the future.⁶ It is important for consumers to use verified *.pharmacy* websites to shop online for prescription medication.

In an online world of misinformation, scams and identity theft, unverified pharmacy websites pose a dangerous health risk and contribute to the prescription drug abuse epidemic. It is important for consumers to be educated and provided with resources to navigate these perils. Anderson, Mackey, Attaran and Liang identify organizations that provide resources for the public in aiding online pharmacy navigation. Organizations determined as actively engaged in public health promotion include: Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies, The Center for Safe Internet Pharmacies, U.S. Food and Drug Administration, General Pharmaceutical Council, International Criminal Police Organization, LegitScript, Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency, National Association of Boards of Pharmacy, and Partnership for Safe Medicines.⁷ The National Association of Boards of Pharmacy provides a vital resource in www.safe.pharmacy.html, as well as verifying safe pharmacy websites through the *.pharmacy* program.⁸ Globally, the Alliance of Safe Online Pharmacies works to promote these standards of safe online pharmacies by providing resources for consumers worldwide. Visit www.buysaferx.pharmacy/find-safe-online-pharmacies.html to find resources for locating safe online pharmacies worldwide.⁹ In the United States and Canada, to find verified, safe pharmacy websites, as well as a list of safe practices associations and consumer advocacy groups, visit www.safe.pharmacy/buying-safely.html.⁵

Resources:

1. The Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies Global. Online Pharmacy Consumer Behavior and Perception Survey. <https://buysaferx.pharmacy/public-awareness-campaigns/canadian-online-pharmacies/factsheets/online-pharmacy-consumer-behavior-and-perception-survey.html>. 2018. Accessed Dec 18, 2018.
2. .Pharmacy. <https://www.safe.pharmacy.html>. 2018. Accessed Dec 18, 2018.
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4. National Association of Boards of Pharmacy. Apply. <https://nabp.pharmacy/programs/dotpharmacy/apply.html>. 2018. Accessed Dec 18, 2018.
5. .Pharmacy. Find a Safe Site. <https://www.safe.pharmacy/buying-safely.html>. 2018. Accessed Dec 18, 2018.
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7. Allison C. Anderson, Tim K. Mackey, Amir Attaran & Bryan A. Liang (2016): Mapping of Health Communication and Education Strategies Addressing the Public Health Dangers

of Illicit Online Pharmacies, *Journal of Health Communication*, DOI:
10.1080/10810730.2015.1095816

8. National Association of Boards of Pharmacy. .Pharmacy Verified Websites.
<https://nabp.pharmacy/programs/dotpharmacy.html>. 2018. Accessed Dec 18, 2018.
9. The Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies Global. Find Safe Online Pharmacies.
<https://buysaferx.pharmacy/find-safe-online-pharmacies.html>. 2018. Accessed Dec 18, 2018.

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