

# Buying Drugs Online?

## KNOW THE RISKS

Anusha had returned to work following the birth of her first child. A working single parent, she had not stocked up on the essential products for her baby while on maternity leave. Shopping online was the best thing that she could think of at this crucial time. She ordered almost all the baby products on the internet and got them delivered home for a lesser price too.

While online shopping proved to be helpful for Anusha, her friend Saarika did not have a very pleasant experience shopping at an online pharmacy. She was looking for a weight loss pill on the internet and was directed to a website located offshore. She was billed an exorbitant amount after entering her credit card details on the website. It came as an added shock to her when the weight loss pill turned out to be fake. While shopping on the internet in India has proved to be a boon for customers like Anusha, doctors have mixed opinion on buying medicines online. While there are benefits, one should not overlook the risks involved, they say.

### WHY BUY MEDICINES ONLINE?

Apart from price discounts and the comfort of shopping from home, people also buy medicines such as aphrodisiacs and benzodiazepines (medicines to treat insomnia and anxiety), out of their desire for privacy. And for those living in remote areas and consumers who are short of time and for whom reaching the pharmacy is difficult, ordering online has obvious advantages.

"If the same medicine is available at a lesser price online, then customers will buy it online than going to a pharmacist. Pricing is the key to online pharma players," says Dr RK Singhal, principal consultant & director, BLK Super Specialty Hospital, New Delhi.

### RISKS AND CONCERNS

Illegal or unethical online pharmacies sometimes send outdated, counterfeit medications or substitutes. But doctors argue that this can happen at medical shops too. "We cannot be sure that the medicines sold in pharmacies are not fake. It's the same with online pharmacies too. It's not about how the medicine is sold, but about how the regulatory bodies intend to behave," says Dr Arvind Kasargod, director of medical services, Clouidine Group of Hospitals, Bengaluru.

Other concerns include the location of these pharmacies. The internet has removed the boundaries between countries. The brand names may often be confusing. There may be the same brands but with different medicines, or even lookalike drugs with different ingredients. Ultimately, the patient is at the receiving end of wrong medicines.

"Sometimes, medicines sold online without prescription may be counterfeit, have no active ingredients and may even contain harmful ingredients," says Dr Pranav Kumar, neurosurgeon, Indraprastha Apollo Hospitals, New Delhi.

Experts say there is no proper technical infrastructure in place to monitor the sale of online drugs. Those who complain against online pharmacies say that they encourage self-medication, customers make illegal purchases of habit-forming drugs, prescriptions are not verified online and patients buy drugs without original prescriptions.

### ADVANTAGES

Despite all the risks and concerns, online



Shopping for medicines online is catching up like all e-purchases. However, make sure you are in the safe zone, writes Megha Reddy S

### PRICE IS THE KEY

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**Dr RK Singhal,** Principal consultant & director, BLK Super Specialty Hospital, New Delhi

pharmacies still have some advantages. Vivek Srivastava, CEO, HealthCare atHOME, says, "This business will grow in India and one of the biggest advantages is that it has better access to consumers and increased access to those in the hinterlands."

### LAWS FOR ONLINE PHARMACIES

Online pharmacies in India do not have a specific law to govern them but multiple laws govern them in an indirect manner: The Drugs and Cosmetics Act, 1940, and the Drugs and Cosmetics Rules, 1945, have guidelines on the sale of Schedule H and Schedule X drugs. These drugs can be sold only on prescription and there are specific rules for labelling and bar coding.

"Online pharmacy is not an illegal thing in India and it is covered by the Drugs and Cosmetics Act. However, there are certain grey areas in terms of certain schedule of drugs — schedule X and schedule V," says Jayant Singh, sen-

### Tips to Protect Yourself from Fake Online Pharmacies

- The pharmacy should be located in India
- It should have a licensed pharmacist available on call
- It should ask for a prescription when we buy prescription medicines
- It should provide contact information and allow you to talk to a person if you have queries
- The online pharmacy should have the required licence for selling drugs
- Before ordering the medicines, check the cost of the drug, shipping and other hidden costs and also check its refund policy
- Be careful when you share your credit card information



### Red Flags

- The pharmacy sends you drugs with unknown quality or origin
- It doesn't provide a way to contact the website by phone
- It offers cheaper products or medicines without a prescription
- It may not protect your personal information

storage (temperature) for retaining potency. There is no assurance of temperature control either at their storage points or during transport.

Another major challenge they face is logistics. Unlike other items, drugs and medicines must be delivered within a given time frame.

Online pharmacies are facing stiff opposition from their offline counterparts too. Recently, medical shops across India went on a strike to protest against online pharmacies, saying this system encourages irrational use of medicines and sale of fake drugs.

### COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTION NEEDED

"A foolproof system has to be put in place by doctors, hospital regulators, pharma-

cists and consumers. A panel has to be formed and a technology process needs to be created for this to function effectively," says Clouidine's Kasargod.

"Prescriptions should be digitally made and not scanned and sent to online pharmacies. Doctors should send digital prescriptions as this will also avoid prescription errors," he adds.

The success of online pharmacies depends on how well the pharmaceutical retailers will manage to fit themselves into the legal framework and also sell genuine medicines. Customers, for their own safety, should ensure that the prescriptions are real.