

AVOID MEDICATION FRAUD

Medications, especially prescription drugs, have become expensive. Insurance coverage is often incomplete, or nonexistent, and, frequently, confusing. This is especially a problem for seniors who often have a greater need for medication and fewer resources than the general population.

Consequently, many seniors will look at alternate sources for medication to help keep costs in control. They turn away from the corner drug store to use on-line, mail-in, cross-border, or other non-traditional pharmacies. While there are many choices, many of which can offer lower prices for the same medication, some of these choices may be dangerous and you have to be careful. Most of the alternate pharmacy operations will look professional and promise deep discounts. However, they can operate from anywhere in the world, so controls may be lax or nonexistent, and will sometimes ship counterfeit, contaminated, or altered drugs, offer unproven products, or even provide dangerous addictive drugs to anyone with a credit card.

To get a good value and be safe, you need to be able to identify the legitimate pharmacies and stay away from the dangerous operations. There are a number of precautions you can take.

- Know your current medications: Be able to recognize them by shape, size, color, taste, side effects, etc.; this will allow you to spot counterfeits and substitutions which may be ineffective, or even harmful.
- Inspect the packaging: Do not use drugs if containers have been altered, unsealed, or have had their labels changed.
- The prescription is key: Do not buy from a seller that doesn't require a prescription. Importantly, do not deal with anyone who will write a prescription based on a questionnaire without seeing you in person. This is a dangerous practice and reputable pharmacies will not do this.
- Know the pharmacy: There are a number of ways to identify a valid pharmacy. First, check to see if they are licensed by contacting the National Association of Boards Pharmacy (847-698-6227 or www.nabp.net). Further, reputable sellers will have a licensed pharmacist available to answer questions. Beware of on-line or mail-in pharmacies that do not list an address (or only a P O Box) and do not provide a toll free phone number to contact a pharmacist in case of a problem. Also, avoid ones that only sell "life style" medications, e.g. for obesity, herpes, impotence, etc. They often count on privacy concerns to sell products that do not work and/or are dangerous.
- Beware of "Miracle Drugs": Many of the firms offering new "cures" for serious diseases are simply scams to prey on peoples' problems. There is a place for alternate medicine, but it must be researched carefully before you try it.

Shopping for medication properly is far more important than shopping for a new car. You must become a well informed, educated consumer. Fortunately, there are a number of places to go for help.

- Start with your current medical professionals – doctors, nurses, pharmacists. Tell them what you are planning to do and ask advice.
- The FDA has tips on buying medications that can be accessed at www.fda.gov.
- The Mayo Clinic has an excellent web site with a very detailed section on “Drugs and Supplements” – www.mayoclinic.com
- Your local library has internet access and reference books that can help you.

If you believe you have purchased a counterfeit drug, or you have dealt with a supplier that does not have a license, contact the FDA’s Medwatch program at 1-800-332-1088. Above all, do not take chances with your health.

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