

FTC FACTS for Consumers

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FOR THE CONSUMER

FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION

1-877-FTC-HELP



Your Health Online

Going online can be a convenient way to compare prescription drug prices, research health products and services, answer health questions, or do some research ahead of your next medical appointment.

If you've spent much time searching or shopping online, you may already know the usual precautions to take — like making sure you have up-to-date security software on your computer (if not, read *7 Practices for Computer Security* at onguardonline.gov). When you take your health online, the same rules apply, and so do a few others.

OnGuard Online has these tips for being smart and safe when dealing with health information and health care products online:

Know who's on the other end. Before you hand over any personal or financial information, whether to buy something or just get “more information,” remember: anyone can set up shop online under almost any name. If you're thinking about buying a health-related product from an unfamiliar company or website, do some research:

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- Confirm the online seller's physical address (not just a P.O. Box) and phone number, so you know you can reach someone if you need to.
- Do a search for the company name and website, and be sure to look past the first page of results. If you find a lot of negative reviews, you may be better off taking your business elsewhere.
- Check with the local Better Business Bureau (BBB) where the seller is based to see if it has a report on the company. And if you see a BBB logo on the site, check that it links back to the BBB site. Also, read logos and websites carefully. Some companies want to trade on the reputation of the BBB or other trusted organizations, and either misuse logos, or create lookalike logos, seals, and websites.
- Look for indicators the site is secure, like a lock icon on the browser's status bar or a url that begins with "https" (the "s" stands for "secure"). But also know that security icons can be forged, so they aren't foolproof. Avoid sites that ask you to give out personal or financial information over email, or ask you to wire cash.

Consider the source. When you're looking for health information online, it's easy to get a lot of misinformation along the way. Instead of a random search, try starting with trusted sources. Two

great choices are MedlinePlus (medlineplus.gov) and Healthfinder.gov (healthfinder.gov), government websites that let you look up hundreds of health topics and the latest health headlines.

Wherever you start your health search, always consider who's behind the information. Government websites (sites ending in .gov) are a good bet. So are university or medical school websites (.edu) and sites for trusted, nationally recognized health or research facilities, like the Mayo Clinic. Not-for-profit groups with a mission that focuses on research and teaching the public about specific conditions (whose sites typically end in .org) can also be good resources, but keep in mind that ".org" doesn't guarantee a site is reputable. Scammers can set up bogus .org sites.

Only buy prescription drugs from licensed U.S. pharmacies. What looks like an online pharmacy could be a front for a scammer or identity thief. The sites may use official looking seals and logos, promise money back guarantees, and "look" legitimate, but all of that can be faked. You could end up with products that are fake, expired, mislabeled, or the wrong dosage. They could even contain dangerous ingredients. Or, you might pay for a prescription and never get your order — or your money — back.

So how can you tell if you're dealing with a legitimate U.S. pharmacy? To see if a pharmacy is licensed in the U.S., check

with the state board of pharmacy where it's based. The National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP) at nabp.info has information on each state's board. NABP also has a list of online pharmacies that meet extra NABP criteria and have been accredited through its Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Sites (VIPPS) program. Reputable pharmacy websites also should require a prescription, have a licensed pharmacist to answer questions, and provide a physical business address and phone number.

Talk to your doctor or health

professional. As you look for answers to your health questions, you might come across websites or ads for pills or other products that make some pretty big promises. They may say their product will cure a serious condition like arthritis, diabetes, Alzheimer's disease, multiple sclerosis, cancer, or HIV-AIDS, or that one product will cure a range of conditions. Or, the ad might just be for a weight loss pill that says you can lose weight without exercising or changing how you eat.

The products may be called "scientific breakthroughs" or "ancient remedies," or the ads may use scientific-sounding words like "thermogenesis," or safe-sounding words like "natural." Scammers can be creative. But the reality is that most of these products are useless, and at best a waste of money. Others are flat-out dangerous to your health.

Don't trust a website just because it looks professional or has success stories from "real people." The stories may be made up, or the people may be actors or models paid to praise the product. Instead, before you think about trying a health product, ask your doctor about it. Your doctor can tell you about the risks of a product, as well as how it could affect any medicine you're taking or treatments you're getting.

For more on health from the FTC, visit ftc.gov/health.

HOW TO REPORT IF YOU'VE BEEN A VICTIM OF AN ONLINE FRAUD

If you think you may be a victim of fraud, file a complaint with the FTC at ftc.gov/complaint. You also can file a complaint with:

- The attorney general's office in your state. Find yours at naag.org.
- Your county or state consumer protection agency. Check the blue pages of the phone book under county and state government, or visit consumeraction.gov, and look under "Where to File a Complaint."
- The Better Business Bureau at bbb.org.
- Econsumer.gov, where you can report complaints about online and related transactions with foreign companies.

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Report problems with a medication or medical device to the FDA at www.fda.gov/opacom/backgrounders/problem.html.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers

spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters consumer complaints into the Consumer Sentinel Network, a secure online database and investigative tool used by hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

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Federal Trade Commission
Bureau of Consumer Protection
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