

Health-related spam

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A new study in *PLoS Medicine* has found that a third of all spam messages advertise health products such as drugs and natural health products and that it is easy to purchase prescription drugs and controlled substances advertised in these messages.

Peter Gernburd and Alejandro Jadad at the Centre for Global eHealth Innovation, University of Toronto and University Health Network, Canada, studied e-mail messages sent to three accounts over a one month period. The three accounts received 4,153 spam messages (82% of the total messages received), and a third of this spam was health-related.

The health-related spam mostly came from the US (73%), followed by China (16%) and the Democratic Republic of Congo (5%).

The researchers were able to successfully purchase products purported to be Valium and Xanax (sedatives), Tramadol (an opiate pain killer), Cialis (a drug for erectile dysfunction), and Meridia (an anti-obesity drug), as well as several mixtures of natural health products to promote weight reduction or improvement of male sexual function.

"As the number of people who turn to the Internet looking for health or lifestyle problems increases," say the authors, "merchants will rise to the occasion, matching the demand. As this study has shown, current regulatory, legal, and geographic boundaries are unable to contain the flow of products across the world."

Source: Public Library of Science

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