

Buying statins online could damage your health, scientists warn

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(Medical Xpress) -- Scientists are calling for tighter controls on websites selling statins to the public without prescription. In a paper published this week, they highlight the danger of buying statins from web sites that sell the drugs with little or no advice and which don't list potentially dangerous side-effects.

Researchers at the University of Portsmouth warned that unregulated websites selling statins, which are commonly used to treat high cholesterol, pose a risk to the public because they fail to highlight potential side-effects. Many also fail to warn of the risks of taking the drugs in conjunction with other medicines, for example by people with

additional medical conditions.

They examined information on over 180 websites from at least 17 different countries and found that the majority did not contain sufficient information about the most common or most serious side effects or contraindications and rarely did they quantify the risks to patients.

Writing in the journal *Pharmacoepidemiology and [Drug Safety](#)*, Professor David Brown, from the Department of Pharmacy & Biomedical Sciences, said that most websites studied presented a chaotic and incomplete list of known side-effects and failed to apprise consumers of the potential problems or dangers associated with the medication. Furthermore he said that most of the web sites see patients as customers and market statins as ‘lifestyle’ drugs, promoting the potential health benefits while neglecting the safety aspects.

“Statins are prescription-only medicines in the UK and should only be taken as directed by the patient’s doctor. Under these conditions, statins are considered to have a satisfactory benefit to risk balance.

“But we should remember that all medicines carry associated hazards. Not listing all of the contraindications widens the number of patients who might think that they can use the medicine and creates the illusion that it is safer for them than it may actually be.”

In the UK and elsewhere there are strict rules on information that must be given to a patient before they take a medicine prescribed by their doctor. It is a legal requirement that the patient information leaflet contains comprehensive information written in terms the user will understand. But anyone with an internet connection can access websites and purchase statins without recourse to a healthcare provider.

Less than a third of the websites examined gave a complete list of

contraindications and less than half informed the customer to consult their doctor if taking other medicines despite the British National Formulary listing over 20 classes of drugs with which the statins are known to interact.

Only one-third of websites indicated how the medicine should be taken and less than half indicated that the medicine was for chronic use, where latent safety issues such as liver disease may emerge. Information on how to take the medicine safely, drug interactions and side effects was generally poor with few appreciable differences between different statins.

Professor Brown said: “These data imply that adverts are designed to hide information from patients to widen the number of people who think that they can safely take the medicine to increase sales, or lack of research during site development.”

The research also highlighted a number of web sites offering free prescription medication with an order of [statins](#), in many cases drugs for erectile dysfunction.

Professor Brown said: “These websites were offering free prescription-only medicines to people who have not requested them, without a clinical diagnosis and for whom those medicines may have been contraindicated. Although drugs for erectile dysfunction are not contraindicated in individuals with high cholesterol, they should be used with caution in cardiovascular disease, to which these individuals are by definition predisposed.”

“Those people who are tempted to self-medicate could put themselves at risk by ordering drugs online instead of visiting their GP.”

Provided by University of Portsmouth

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