

What to know when ordering medications online from Canada, Mexico, other countries

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Finding a good deal on medication can be difficult. Even with insurance, prescription medicines can be pricey. Bargain hunters might search for cheaper prices online, but not every Internet pharmacy is legitimate.

Sometimes, people turn to Canada, Mexico and other countries for cheaper drug prices.

Federal regulators gave Florida the OK earlier this month to order certain [prescription medications](#) in bulk from Canada to help save taxpayers millions. The medications would be provided to patients under the state's care, such as inmates, patients who get care at county health departments, and Medicaid recipients.

However, this doesn't mean you can buy the cheaper Canadian medicine.

While some people do order medicines from Canada, Mexico and other countries, it's technically illegal to do so.

Here's what to know:

Can you order medications directly from Canada, Mexico and other countries?

In most circumstances, it's illegal for people who live in the U.S. to buy medications from other countries if the drugs are not approved by the FDA, the U.S. federal agency that oversees drug safety.

"Please note that only medications that can be legally prescribed in the United States may be imported for personal use," according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. "Be aware that possession of certain substances may also violate state laws. As a general rule, the FDA does not allow the importation of prescription drugs that were purchased outside the United States."

The FDA says this is because it can't guarantee that the drugs are safe, legitimate and effective. All medications sold in the U.S. have to meet

the agency's standards. Other countries, like Canada, also require medications to get approval by their version of the FDA before becoming available to the public. This also applies to pet medication.

However, the FDA notes that there are instances when someone might be given the OK to import medication from another country into the U.S. for personal use:

- If the medication isn't to treat a serious condition and has no known significant health risk, such as over the counter medications.
- If the medication is to treat a serious condition and there are no effective treatments available in the U.S. (either commercially or clinically), the medication in question isn't sold or promoted in the U.S. and the drug "doesn't present an unreasonable risk." However, you must provide in writing that the medication is for personal use, and either provide the name and address of the doctor treating you with the medication in the U.S. or provide "evidence" that the medication is to continue treatment begun in another country. If the medication is to treat a serious condition in your pet, get a letter from the licensed veterinarian treating the animal.

Again, remember that importing medications from other countries into the U.S. is illegal and exceptions would be on a case-by-case basis. Speak with your doctor and contact the FDA and U.S. Customs if you have questions.

What if you're visiting the U.S.?

If you live in another country and are visiting Florida or any other part of the U.S. for vacation, work, school or similar reasons, don't worry. You

can bring your medicine with you, and if needed, have additional supplies mailed to you, according to the FDA.

TIP: If you're going to get your medication by mail, the FDA recommends including in the shipment a letter from your doctor, a copy of your visa or passport, and a copy of the prescription in English.

How can you verify if an online pharmacy is real?

Online shopping has made it easier to order medications online and have it shipped to your door from pharmacies like CVS and Walgreens. Amazon has a pharmacy service, too.

But there are a lot of other internet pharmacies around. And it can be hard to tell which ones are the real deal.

"If you're dealing with a pharmacy you're not familiar with, it's a good idea to know a little bit of additional background information on the pharmacy," said Michael Jackson, interim CEO of the Florida Pharmacy Association.

"Where is it located? And who are the pharmacists that are providing those services? Are they licensed in the jurisdiction that they're located? Are they licensed somewhere here in the United States?"

No one wants to get scammed. And no one wants to pay for fake [medication](#).

Here are some tips from the FDA and Jackson to help verify if an online pharmacy is a legitimate business:

- Check the pharmacy's license with your state. In Florida, you can verify the pharmacy's license with the Florida Department of

Health. The FDA has a web page with links to the pharmacy license look-up for other states, too.

Tip: Search for the pharmacy by name, address or license number in Florida's license look-up portal. Pharmacies not physically located in Florida, but that routinely provide services to Floridians, should also be registered in the database as a non-resident pharmacy, according to Jackson. If your pharmacy doesn't appear in the database, that's a red flag.

Any legitimate pharmacy should be able to provide you with its license number and the license number of its pharmacists upon request. If it doesn't, that's a red flag.

- Verify that the pharmacy requires a valid doctor's prescription.
- Make sure the pharmacy provides a physical address and a U.S. telephone number. You'll need this address to help with your license look-up.
- The [pharmacy](#) has a licensed pharmacist to answer your questions. Again, you can verify the pharmacist's [license](#) online through the state health department's online portal.

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