

2021 SURVEY AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS AND USE OF ONLINE PHARMACIES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In May 2021, the [ASOP Global Foundation](#) commissioned [Abacus Data](#) to conduct a national poll of 1,500 American consumers. The survey measured Americans' perceptions and use of online pharmacies, as well as their awareness of and response to the federal government's final rule on prescription drug importation, which was enacted in September 2020. The following are highlights from the survey.

- **Nearly half of Americans (42%), up 7% from last year, are currently purchasing medications online** largely due to perceived benefits of convenience and cost.
- **More than one-third of Americans are now aware of patient harms linked to online prescription medication purchases, up 9% from 2020.** 38% of Americans are familiar with an event where someone – either themselves, a family member, an acquaintance, or someone on the news – received a substandard or counterfeit prescription medication from an online pharmacy.
- **1 in 4 Americans say they would accept higher risk** when purchasing from an online pharmacy if it meant increased **convenience and savings in return.**
- **Nearly half of Americans would be open to purchasing prescription medicines from an online source *not sanctioned by the FDA*** if it increased their access, decreased their cost, and provided convenience to more medicines.
- **45% of Americans erroneously believe all websites offering healthcare services/prescription medications to Americans via the internet have been approved by the FDA or state regulators.** This misconception is even higher (59%) among those who have previously purchased prescription medicines online.
- **72% of Americans believe verified, safe websites selling prescription medications should appear first in search results** or be clearly identified as legitimate.
- **61% of respondents have never heard about the Drug Importation Final Rule.** Still, when told that the rule allows U.S. pharmacies to buy prescription medicines from Canada, **37% said they would be more likely to consider purchasing medicines from Canadian online pharmacies.**
- **34% say knowing that the rule explicitly prohibits individual American patients from buying medicines from Canadian online pharmacies won't change their behavior.** Even after being told about the prohibition, they are still likely to consider buying from a Canadian online pharmacy.

OVERVIEW

Americans buy their clothes, furniture, and almost every other consumer good you can think of online. And, increasingly, that includes prescription medications. However, unlike many of these everyday consumer goods, extensive federal and state regulations ensure the medicines sold in the U.S. are high-quality, legitimate, and safe.

Yet, of the roughly [35,000 online pharmacies worldwide](#), [95% operate illegally](#), in violation of state and/or federal law and relevant pharmacy practice standards, including selling medicines without requiring a prescription and operating without a pharmacy license. In some cases, the drugs offered by these sellers are substandard or counterfeit, containing little or no active ingredient. And unlike receiving a cheap copy of a brand-name product, many consumers may never know that the medications they receive aren't what they claim to be. Even worse, drugs sold by rogue online pharmacies have been found to contain harmful ingredients, making them downright dangerous and, in some cases, [deadly](#).

The coronavirus pandemic has compounded this public health threat by driving more consumers online and creating global demand for COVID-19 cures and treatments. And this surge in demand has led to an explosion of [thousands of new, malicious websites](#) designed to defraud patients.

These are alarming trends to patient safety advocates – and should be equally terrifying for healthcare professionals and policymakers – because, as suggested by a [June 2020](#) survey commissioned by the ASOP Global Foundation, most Americans think they know more than they do about online pharmacies, elevating their exposure to potential health risks.

Adding to this concern, recent approval of the Drug Importation Final Rule – which allows the wholesale importation of certain prescription drugs from Canada through FDA-authorized, state-sponsored programs – may give Americans the false perception that they can safely find cheaper medications from sources abroad. Though the rule prohibits imported drugs from being bought online, it seems to signal a false sense of security to consumers, leading many to believe *all* Canadian medicines sold online are safe and legitimate when they are not, as noted in the [FDA's own research](#).

To measure changes in Americans' perceptions and use of online pharmacies and their awareness of and response to Drug Importation Policies, the ASOP Global Foundation commissioned Abacus Data to conduct a national poll in May 2021 of 1,500 American consumers. This new survey builds on the national survey conducted by the ASOP Global Foundation in [June 2020](#).

The results are troubling on multiple fronts. As predicted by the June 2020 survey, the demand for convenient, lower-cost medications sold online has clearly been accelerated by COVID-19, and this trend will continue post-pandemic. Though awareness about some of the risks associated with purchasing prescription medication online is slowly improving, awareness isn't enough to overcome powerful purchasing drivers like convenience and cost. And nearly half of consumers are willing to roll the dice with their health by purchasing medications from unregulated online sources. Consistent with last year's survey results, many consumers still have dangerous misconceptions about online pharmacies, and knowledge of how to verify legitimate sources online remains low.

Awareness of the Drug Importation Final Rule is also limited, even for those who have purchased from an online pharmacy before. Yet, when provided basic information on the rule, many say they support it largely for

perceived benefits of cost and access to medicines. Many also incorrectly assume that the Drug Importation Final Rule allows individual patients to buy directly from Canadian pharmacies online. Even when these misconceptions are corrected, a third of Americans say it won't impact their behavior, and they are still likely to consider buying from a "Canadian" online pharmacy. As the digitization of consumerism and healthcare continues to accelerate, these survey results highlight the need to educate Americans of the risks they may face when purchasing medications online and the need for regulations and policies that require greater accountability online.

KEY FINDINGS

Nearly half of Americans have previously or are currently purchasing medications online, largely for perceived benefits of convenience and cost.

- Consistent with last year's results, **6 in 10 Americans are currently on some sort of prescription medication**, particularly once they hit 25 years of age, with most of them taking three or more daily.
- **4 in 10 Americans (42%) have purchased medications from online pharmacies, either for themselves or family members under their care**, which has increased by 7% over the past year. Of those Americans currently taking medications, this percentage is slightly higher at 1 in 2.
- **Americans continue to purchase a wide range of prescription drugs online**, from medicines to treat chronic, ongoing conditions such as high blood pressure, asthma, and diabetes (23%) to specialty prescriptions such as medications for cancer and hormone replacement therapy (11%).
- **Americans across all demographics have purchased medications online**, and consistent with last year, the decision to buy prescription medications from online pharmacies is **driven primarily by convenience (60%) and cost (56%)**.

COVID-19 has accelerated consumer use of the internet for healthcare and prescription medications, and this behavior is likely to stay.

- Of those consumers who have ordered prescription medications online, **49% report having done so for the first time in the past year**.
- **64% of those individuals who purchased prescription medication online for the first time this year report that they will continue to do so after the pandemic ends**. The primary drivers for these individuals are also convenience/accessibility (47%) and cost (49%).
- Of those Americans who purchased medication online before this past year, the majority report either increasing their use of online pharmacies (29%) or keeping their use consistent with the previous year (56%).

Awareness of the risks of purchasing medications from online pharmacies is increasing, but knowledge isn't enough to overcome powerful drivers like convenience and cost.

- **Over half (54%) of Americans describe purchasing prescription medications online as risky**, up 6% from 2020. This is particularly prevalent among those who purchased prescriptions online this year due to COVID-19 (66%).
- **Awareness of patient harms linked to online prescription medication purchases is also increasing.** 38% of Americans are familiar with an event where someone – either themselves, a family member, an acquaintance, or someone on the news – has received a substandard or counterfeit prescription medication from an online pharmacy, up 9% from 2020. The number of individuals who have personally received substandard or counterfeit medication or been harmed by prescription medication purchased online has nearly doubled since 2020.
- Yet, despite increased awareness of the risks of purchasing medication online, when asked generally, **1 in 4 Americans (25%) say they would accept higher risk when buying from an online pharmacy if it meant they would receive convenience and savings in return.**
- When asked directly, **46% said they would be open to purchasing prescription medicines from an online source *unsanctioned* by the FDA** if it gave them access to medicines they would otherwise not have access to or medicines at cheaper prices or faster service.

Consumer willingness to accept risks may stem from misperceptions and expectations that all online pharmacies are verified and safe.

- **Nearly half of Americans (45%) erroneously believe that all websites offering healthcare services and/or prescription medications via the internet have been approved by the FDA or state regulators for compliance with all applicable laws** – an increase of 7% from last year. This misperception is even higher (59%) among those individuals who have purchased medication online before.
- Consistent with these misperceptions, Americans report that they expect some level of protection online. **Nearly three-quarters of Americans (72%) believe that verified, safe websites selling prescription medications should appear first in search results** and/or be clearly identified as legitimate in social posts and online marketplace listings. Unfortunately, this is not the case.
- This is particularly alarming, as **1 in 5 Americans (21%) exclusively rely on online search platforms and social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) to locate the online pharmacies they visit.**

Many Americans are also likely to disregard drug importation prohibitions of online drug purchasing to access more medicines and cheaper prices.

Before answering questions about the Drug Importation Final Rule, respondents were informed that the rule allows U.S. states and territories to submit proposals to the FDA for plans allowing U.S. pharmacies to purchase and import certain prescription drugs from Canada for sale in the U.S.

- **The majority of Americans (61%) have never heard of the Drug Importation Final Rule.** Only 10% of Americans are confident they have heard about it, although awareness is higher (18%) among those who have purchased from an online pharmacy before.
- When purchasing prescription medications online, **75% of Americans say the country where the seller is located matters.** Of those individuals, 32% report comfort with buying from Canadian-based online pharmacies.
- Of the 25% of Americans who do not care where their pharmacy is located, **42% responded that it is because they assume pharmacies everywhere are safe and regulated.** And 46% responded that as long as they know what the drug is, it should not matter where it comes from.
- When told that the Drug Importation Final Rule allows U.S. pharmacies to buy prescription medicines from Canada, **most Americans support the rule (58%), citing reasons such as affordability/cost benefits, availability, and assurance that prescription medicines from Canada are safe.** Support for the Drug Importation Final Rule is even higher (67%) among those who have purchased from an online pharmacy before.
- When asked if the Drug Importation Final Rule allows American patients to buy prescription medicines directly from Canadian online pharmacies, most are unaware (52%) or incorrectly believe this to be the case (28%). **Only 20% are aware of or correctly assume that the Drug Importation Final Rule prohibits Americans from buying prescription medicines directly from online Canadian pharmacies.**
- This misconception is significantly higher among those who have previously purchased from an online pharmacy, particularly among those whose use of online pharmacies increased this year. **42% of those who have used online pharmacies before incorrectly believe that the Drug Importation Final Rule allows American patients to buy prescription medicines directly from online Canadian pharmacies.** This number jumps to 61% for those who increased their use of online pharmacies this year.
- **For 37% of Americans, hearing basic information about the Drug Importation Final Rule makes them more likely to consider buying medicines from Canadian online pharmacies.** Again, this behavior is significantly more likely among those who have previously purchased from an online pharmacy (55%), particularly among those whose use of online pharmacies increased this year (76%).
- Among the 37% of Americans who report that hearing basic information about the Drug Importation Final Rule makes them more likely to consider buying medicines from Canada online, **once told that the rule explicitly prohibits American patients from buying medicines from Canadian online pharmacies, only 25% say knowing this information changes their behavior and they won't buy from a Canadian online pharmacy,** 42% say they would think twice before buying from a Canadian online pharmacy, and another 34% say knowledge of the prohibitions has no impact on their behavior.

Healthcare professionals remain the most trusted resource for those seeking information about online pharmacies. However, as Americans become more comfortable purchasing medications online and hold misperceptions that all online pharmacies are safe and verified, many are choosing to bypass provider guidance.

- **27% of Americans report having exclusively sought the guidance of healthcare professionals when searching for online pharmacies** and, overall, 49% of Americans have consulted doctors/physicians, 30% have consulted pharmacists, and 12% have consulted nurses as a part of their search for online pharmacies.
- However, consistent with last year, **29% of Americans say they would likely use a website to order prescription medicines without consulting a healthcare provider**. That number jumps to 50% for those who have purchased medication online in the past. This is particularly prevalent (59%) among those who've used an online pharmacy for the first time this year because of COVID-19.
- Not surprisingly, 30% of Americans use popular search engines to locate online pharmacies. Still, one-fifth of Americans (**21%**) **rely exclusively on online search platforms and social media platforms to locate the online pharmacies they visit**.

WHAT POLICYMAKERS AND HEALTHCARE PROVIDERS CAN DO NOW TO KEEP PATIENTS SAFE ONLINE

A significant number of Americans erroneously believe that all online pharmacies are safe and verified. As more of these consumers turn to the internet to buy medication, the majority are also willing to accept the dangers illegal online pharmacies pose in exchange for greater convenience and cost savings. Additionally, misunderstandings about the Drug Importation Final Rule fuels consumer confusion and exposes them to new health risks by allowing unapproved, substandard, falsified, and counterfeit medicines to infiltrate the closed, highly regulated American drug supply chain.

Policymakers and healthcare providers should leverage the findings from this new survey to craft a comprehensive set of legislative and regulatory policy solutions and education efforts aimed at protecting and promoting public health and patient safety.

Policymakers can act to keep patients safe online by reforming [drug importation](#) policies to prioritize protecting patients from illegal online drug sellers masquerading as "Canadian pharmacies". Lawmakers must also address [internet accountability](#) with no-cost solutions that already exist, like [restoring WHOIS data transparency](#), mandating registries and registrars [lock and suspend suspicious domain names](#), and reforming [Section 230](#), and by endorsing bipartisan legislation, such as the [PACT Act](#), [SHOP SAFE Act](#), and [INFORM Consumers Act](#).

The survey also highlights the important role healthcare professionals play in protecting patients online and points to the need for more support to help providers educate their patients about risks and how to buy medicines safely via the internet. The [Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies](#) and the [ASOP Global Foundation](#) have tools and resources that healthcare providers can use to learn more and share with their patients.

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

Abacus Data conducted this survey with 1,500 American adults from May 19 to 21, 2021. A random sample of panelists was invited to complete the survey from a set of partner panels based on the Lucid exchange platform.

The data were weighted according to census data to ensure that the sample matches the USA's population to age, gender, educational attainment, and region. The margin of error for a comparable probability-based random sample of the same size is +/- 2.51%.

ABOUT ASOP Global Foundation

The ASOP Global Foundation is a 501(c)(3) charitable, nonprofit organization dedicated to addressing the growing public health threat of illegal online drug sellers, concentrating its activities in research and education to inform consumers and policymakers.