

## 2020 NATIONAL SURVEY ON AMERICAN PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE PHARMACIES

### OVERVIEW

Illegal online pharmacies have long dominated the Internet and now online criminals are exploiting the COVID-19 pandemic for further profit. At any given time, there are 35,000 active online pharmacies operating worldwide, 96% of which are operating illegally in violation of state and/or federal law and relevant pharmacy practice standards. These sites threaten American lives by selling medicines without a prescription, operating without a license and peddling fake drugs. The coronavirus pandemic has only made the problem more prevalent with an [explosion of thousands of new malicious websites](#) with the sole purpose of scamming patients with fake COVID-19 cures and treatments.

In July 2020, the [Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies](#) (ASOP Global) commissioned [Abacus Data](#) to conduct a national poll of 1500 American consumers' perceptions of online pharmacies. Building on a similar [2017 survey](#) of consumers in Indiana, the poll sought to measure awareness and perceptions of online pharmacies and uncover any influence the COVID-19 pandemic has had on consumer behavior.

A majority of Americans take prescription medication daily and a growing number of them are buying them online for convenience and cost. Despite most consumers having little first-hand experience or knowledge with the dangers illegal online pharmacies pose, their perceived awareness and comfort with purchasing medicines via the Internet is high and growing. And while a third of Americans turn to doctors, pharmacists and nurses for information about purchasing drugs online, only half of these healthcare professionals are highlighting the potential risks to their patients.

These survey results are particularly timely. Illegal online pharmacies have long dominated the Internet, but now online criminals are [exploiting fears about COVID-19](#) for further profit. At the same time, the pandemic is accelerating the already growing digitalization of consumerism trend – including the use of online pharmacies and telemedicine.

Findings from the July 2020 survey are helpful in understanding current U.S. consumer perception and behavior related to online pharmacy access and use, which stakeholders can leverage to craft a comprehensive set of legislative and regulatory policy solutions aimed at promoting public health and patient safety. While these stand in opposition to current [drug importation](#) proposals, federal policymakers can act to protect patients online by addressing COVID-themed fraud and misinformation online, combating the illegal internet sale of opioids, lowering prescription drug prices and increasing [internet accountability](#), through a number of key advocacy efforts, including Section 230 reform, restoring WHOIS data transparency, locking and suspending suspicious domain names, and expanding the scope and role of the pharmacist in patient care.

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 through the Internet safely. ASOP Global has [tools and resources](#) that healthcare providers can use to learn more and share with their patients.

## KEY FINDINGS

### **A majority of Americans take prescription medication daily and a growing number of them are buying them online for perceived convenience and cost benefits.**

- 6 in 10 Americans are on a prescription medication, with half taking 3 drugs or more a day.
- 35% of Americans have now reported using an online pharmacy to buy medication for themselves or someone in their care, up from just 1 in 4 from a 2013 survey by the [U.S. Food and Drug Administration](#).
- 4 in 10 Americans who are on 3+ prescription medications have purchased medications from an online pharmacy – more than 3 times those who are not taking a prescription drug on a daily basis.
- 16% of Americans say that their purchasing of prescription-only medications over the internet has increased in the past year.
- Across all demographics, the decision to purchase prescription medications from an online pharmacy is driven primarily by convenience (62%) and cost (56%).

### **During the past three years, there has been a major increase in American’s comfort level for buying medicine via the internet for the perceived convenience and cost benefits online pharmacies offer.**

- Building on a similar [2017 survey](#) conducted on behalf of ASOP Global with consumers in Indiana, the 2020 survey results show that consumers in Indiana are becoming significantly more comfortable with the idea of buying medicine online. 82% of Indiana residents in 2020 say they would either be comfortable purchasing or have purchased medications online, up from 55% in 2017.
- This willingness to buy online cuts across therapeutic classes, jumping 49% points in three years for medicine for acute short-term conditions like infections and insomnia, 46% points for both over-the-counter medications (e.g. cough and cold medicine) and specialty medications (e.g. cancer and hormone replacement therapy), and a 36% increase for medicines for chronic conditions like high blood pressure and cholesterol.
- A growing number of consumers in Indiana say convenience (20% in 2017 and 52% in 2020) and cost (42% in 2017 to 67% in 2020) are the driving factors for their decision to purchase medication online.

### **Americans think they know more than they do about online pharmacies – elevating their exposure to potential health risks.**

- Perceived awareness of online pharmacies is high - 6 in 10 report being at least somewhat familiar with them.
- Half of Americans would consider purchasing medication online for everything from OTC medicines for coughs and colds to medicines for chronic conditions such as blood pressure and cholesterol, to COVID-related products like hydroxychloroquine and vaccines and specialty medications such as cancer and hormone replacement therapy, if needed.
- While consumers are willing to utilize online pharmacies, many are unaware of the risks associated with such use. Nearly three quarters of Americans (71%) have never even experienced, read or heard about the risks of receiving a substandard or counterfeit prescription medication from an online drug seller.
- Americans are split on the risks of online pharmacy purchases. 37% see little risk inherent in the online purchase and only 15% believe purchasing prescription medications online is “very risky.”
- Half of those surveyed believe that regardless of the level of risk, the benefit provided makes an online prescription purchase worthwhile.
- This sentiment increases to 71% among those who have already purchased from an online pharmacy.
- Among consumers more likely to say buying medicines online is worth the risk for the benefits they provide are those in urban communities, higher-income, higher educated, younger and male consumers.
- 7 in 10 Americans erroneously believe that if an online pharmacy website appears high up in a search engine search, it is likely to be legitimate.
- 4 in 10 Americans believe incorrectly that [all websites](#) offering healthcare services and/or prescription medications via the internet have FDA or state regulator sign off.

- Survey respondents say that things like FDA warning letters against illegal websites (72%), automated pop up warnings (74%), visible verifications (70%), search engine rankings (59%) would be effective policies to steer them clear of using illegitimate websites.

**The COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating the already growing trend toward the digitalization of consumerism – including the use of online pharmacies.**

- Of those consumers who have bought prescription medication online, 31% did so for the first time this year because of the pandemic.
- Consumer intent to shop online will continue to increase even after the COVID-19 crisis abates. 72% of survey respondents who have used an online pharmacy in the pandemic say they will continue to do so.
- COVID-19 has impacted 16% of Americans’ ability to access medication for themselves or a family member, either because of decreased access to physicians/doctors and pharmacies (closures) or through deteriorating finances and insurance loss by way of job loss.
- 1 in 3 Americans have increased their use of the internet for healthcare-related services in the past year.
- Higher-income, more educated, and younger consumers are more likely to buy goods – including medicine – online.

**With a heightened comfort and perceived benefits of online purchasing, more conversations with healthcare providers about buying medicine on the Internet are happening – but patients are getting dangerous, mixed messages.**

- In ASOP Global’s 2017 survey of consumers in Indiana, 89% of people who have bought medicine online never discussed the risks with a healthcare provider. In 2020, that number dropped down to 49%.
- Some Americans are now turning to their healthcare professionals (38% doctor/physician, 28% pharmacist, 12% nurse) for help locating online pharmacies.
- 1 in 3 Americans have discussed locating online pharmacies with a healthcare professional, but only half of survey respondents report that they have talked with their provider about the potential risks associated with buying medicines online.
- 30% of Americans report that they are likely to use a website to order prescription medicines without consultation with a healthcare provider. That number jumps to half for those who have previously purchased from an online pharmacy.
- Healthcare professionals must be educated about the dangers of illegal online pharmacies so they can give their patients accurate information about how to stay safe when buying medicine online.
- ASOP Global has [tools and resources](#) that healthcare providers can use to learn more and share with their patients to protect them online.

**ABOUT ASOP GLOBAL**

The Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies (ASOP Global), a 501(c)(4) nonprofit organization headquartered in Washington, D.C. with activities in U.S., Canada, Europe, Latin America and Asia, is dedicated to protecting consumers around the world, ensuring safe access to medications, and combating illegal online drug sellers.

**SURVEY METHODOLOGY**

This survey was conducted by Abacus Data with 1,500 American adults from July 24 to 26, 2020. A random sample of panelists were 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%.