

AVOID SCAMS & COUNTERFEITS:

Quick Tips to Safely Purchase Medicines Online

OVERVIEW

Since COVID-19 reached the United States, brick-and-mortar and online stores have been experiencing shortages of items such as hand sanitizer, paper products, medicines, and medical supplies. Americans who cannot find important over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription medicines locally may seek them from new online sources, especially if they are facing hardship because of the pandemic. Scam artists have also stepped in to prey on fearful people by selling fake COVID-19 protective equipment, treatments and “cures.” The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has warned that fake treatments like these may harm COVID-19 patients directly, or cause critical delays in their diagnosis and treatment.¹

In this environment, it is even more important that Americans know how to safely purchase medicines online and save money while avoiding scams, counterfeits, and substandard products.

Report scams to the [FDA’s Health Fraud Program](#) or email FDA-COVID-19-Fraudulent-Products@fda.hhs.gov.

1. Avoid retailers or online sellers offering a “cure”, a “vaccine”, or a test for COVID-19.

- The FDA Commissioner has warned U.S. residents to speak to their doctors before trying any “cure” for COVID-19.² As of March 2020, there are no vaccines or drugs approved to treat or prevent COVID-19. Patients may seriously risk their health by taking untested products.³
- Test kits are not sold online and are only administered by licensed medical professionals and institutions, governmental entities or other reputable organizations.⁴

2. Buy Over-The-Counter (OTC) medicines and medical supplies in-store or via reputable online pharmacies.

- Retailers may be experiencing a shortage of OTC medicines or and medical supplies such as face masks and hand sanitizers. Please don’t hoard them, as that could create shortages. A 30-day supply of OTC medication is sufficient. Please don’t hoard masks or gloves as that prevents access for medical professionals.
- Beware of online marketplace sellers that claim to have items that are in short supply. Counterfeit and substandard products are commonly sold by third party sellers on large retail platforms such as AlibabaExpress, eBay and Amazon.⁵

¹ FDA News Release, “Coronavirus Update: FDA and FTC Warn Seven Companies Selling Fraudulent Products that Claim to Treat or Prevent COVID-19,” March 9, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2J6qH30>.

² Stephen M. Hahn, “FDA Commissioner: Be Wary of Anyone Claiming They Can Cure COVID-19. Talk to Your Doctor,” *USA Today*, March 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/33DFuvC>.

³ FDA News Release, “Coronavirus Update...,” <https://bit.ly/2J6qH30>.

⁴ Aileen Wingblad, “U.S. Attorney Warns of COVID-19 Scammers,” *The Oakland Press*, March 17, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2J6GS0p>.

⁵ Alexandra Berzon and Daniela Hernandez, “Amazon Battles Counterfeit Masks, \$400 Hand Sanitizer Amid Virus Panic,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 11, 2020, <https://on.wsj.com/2UCnnIM>.

- **Only** purchase OTC medicines and medical supplies in U.S. licensed pharmacies (brick-and-mortar or .pharmacy online).

3. Buying prescription medicines online? Choose .pharmacy websites.

- Do not use foreign pharmacies. Canadian mail order pharmacies are not licensed in the U.S. and not safe for U.S. patients.
- Patients who buy their medicines online should **only purchase from online pharmacies whose websites end in .pharmacy**. (Go to <https://www.safe.pharmacy> to see the list.) Be sure to inform your local pharmacist of all the medications you take to watch for drug interactions. Talk to your pharmacist about your needs to have enough medicine to shelter in place.

4. Is cost a concern? Seek lower prices the safe way.

- **If you are experiencing an economic hardship due to the coronavirus, consult patient assistance programs.** Use [NeedyMeds](#), [RX Outreach](#) and [Medicine Assistance Tool](#) to find patient assistance programs to help you afford your medicines.
- **Ask a pharmacist** whether it is cheaper to use insurance/Medicare or pay cash and whether there are other ways to reduce the price of your prescriptions.
- **Discuss with your doctor or pharmacist** whether a less expensive generic might be as good an option for your treatment.
- **Use a prescription discount program.** [NeedyMeds](#) has a free prescription discount card (and a phone app) that more than 65,000 U.S. pharmacies accept.
- If you or anyone in your household suspects you may have been infected COVID-19, **contact your pharmacy by phone first** before going there. Ask about home delivery or drive thru service.

5. Keep yourself healthy by following the advice from medical professionals like the CDC.⁶

- **Clean your hands often**
- **Avoid close contact; practice social distancing**
- **Stay home if you are sick**
- **Cover coughs and sneezes**
- **Wear a facemask if you are sick or caring for a sick person**
- **Clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily**



Have you seen fake COVID-19 treatments or counterfeit protective equipment?

Report them to the [FDA's Health Fraud Program](#) or the Office of Criminal Investigations at FDA-COVID-19-Fraudulent-Products@fda.hhs.gov.

⁶ "How to Protect Yourself," Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Page last reviewed: March 18, 2020, <https://bit.ly/2QKxmUN>.