

Internet Pharmacy Logo

Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

1. What are the dangers of buying prescription drugs online?
2. Are there any benefits to having access to treatments online?
3. How common is the purchase of medicines over the internet. Are there any stats?
4. How will the new logo help to regulate this practice?
5. What was the thinking behind the logo? Why are the RPSGB involved?
6. How can patients identify legitimate pharmacy websites?
7. Are patients assured safety when they see the logo? Is there any worry that the logo could be counterfeited?
8. Who can apply for use of the logo?
9. What information does a website have to provide the RPSGB to obtain the logo?
10. How are pharmacy services regulated? Are there standards that pharmacists must comply with?
11. Tell me a little about the pilot. How many sites participated?
12. What are the most common types of drugs bought over the internet?
13. What risks does the public face if they purchase medicines from websites that are not connected to registered pharmacies?
14. What is the Internet Pharmacy Logo?
15. Does the RPSGB recommend buying medicines over the internet?
16. What message does the RPSGB have for people considering obtaining drugs from the internet?
17. What is the RPSGB hoping will come from the logo?
18. If a healthcare professional abroad makes an incorrect supply of a medicine within whose jurisdiction does this fall?
19. Is the scheme compulsory for all genuine pharmacies operating on the web? If not, how do they become involved?
20. Is there a cost attached?
21. How many pharmacies are currently registered with the scheme?
22. Is the logo recognised by search engines such as Google?
23. What do I do if I have concerns over a website?

1. What are the dangers of buying prescription drugs online?

While a number of legitimate registered pharmacies provide online pharmacy services, the trading opportunities of the internet has also resulted in medicines being readily available from online suppliers who have no professional qualifications or healthcare expertise. Many of these illegal websites offer to supply prescription-only medicines without a valid prescription. This means that members of the public may acquire medicines without the benefit of a consultation with an appropriate healthcare professional and risk being supplied medicines that are not safe or suitable for them. The safety and quality of products being sold by unqualified internet suppliers cannot be guaranteed. The medicines may be counterfeit, substandard or unapproved new drugs.

Enquires received by the RPSGB, other regulators and consumer groups indicate that there appears to be a great deal of confusion about the regulation of internet pharmacies and that the public are unsure how to distinguish between registered online pharmacies and other commercial sites.

2. Are there any benefits to having access to treatments online?

When used safely and appropriately, online access to medicines and healthcare advice can offer benefits to patients. The greatest benefit for many individuals obtaining medicines and other healthcare services via the internet is convenience. The internet should not replace necessary face-to-face consultation with appropriate healthcare professionals, but it can provide quick and easy access to health information or medicines and help patients identify when further consultation with a healthcare professional may be required. It can offer the elderly, the disabled and patients living in remote areas or working long hours increased access to the pharmaceutical information, products and services they require. The internet can provide anonymity to users, allowing people to access advice or products that they may otherwise be reluctant to approach their prescriber or pharmacist for.

3. How common is the purchase of medicines over the internet. Are there any stats?

Research by the RPSGB reveals that over 2.25 million people buy prescription medicines online. With up to a third of medicines purchased online estimated to be counterfeit, the internet presents a real danger to people's health.

The research also reveals that almost a third of people admit to not having a clue about online regulations. In the UK, although internet users seem to be more clued up about the lack of regulation of overseas websites, until now there has been no real way for people to verify the authenticity of the online pharmacy and the medicines that are being sold.

It's estimated that the global counterfeit medicines market is worth £20bn a year, and between 50 and 90% of medicines in some African and Asian countries are counterfeit. Almost 60% of all spam sent across the internet is in relation to medicines and it's estimated that half of medicines from websites that conceal their physical address are fake. In fact, the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) seizes more than £3m worth of stolen or fake Viagra every year.

4. How will the new logo help to regulate this practice?

One of the main concerns around the supply of medicines via the internet is that members of the public are often unsure how to distinguish between websites which are operated by a registered pharmacy and those which operate illegally. Patients may believe they are purchasing medicines from a registered healthcare professional, when in fact the supplier has no professional qualifications or healthcare expertise. The new logo is designed to help the public identify whether a specific website is linked to a bona fide, registered pharmacy or not.

The logo not only provides a visual means to help patients identify whether a website is connected to a registered pharmacy, but it also provides a direct link to the Society's website so that by clicking on the logo, visitors can verify the registration details of both the pharmacy and the pharmacist(s) behind the site.

The new logo is part of a wider initiative by the RPSGB to help educate the public about the dangers of using websites that are not operated by registered pharmacies.

5. What was the thinking behind the logo? Why are the RPSGB involved?

As the use of the internet has increased, there has been growing concern that members of the public may not be aware that not all websites offering to sell medicines are operated by registered pharmacies.

From a patient safety perspective it is of paramount importance that members of the public who want to purchase medicines over the internet do so from a website operated from a registered pharmacy premises.

Dodgy dealers are selling medicines online. They have no relevant professional qualifications or healthcare expertise. The products they sell can be poor quality at best and dangerous at worst. The medicines they sell can be counterfeit, substandard or unapproved new drugs, which can put the public at risk.

The RPSGB is the professional and regulatory body for pharmacists in Great Britain, and one of its goals is to make Britain the safest place to take medicines. In achieving this goal, we feel it is necessary to highlight the dangers of buying medicines from illegitimate sites and to assist members of the public in identifying registered pharmacy premises who are offering professional services over the internet.

6. How can patients identify legitimate pharmacy websites?

The RPSGB has produced an Internet Pharmacy Logo that acts as a visual aid for members of the public who want to buy medicines online. It can only be displayed by bona fide registered pharmacies providing professional services in Great Britain.

This logo should be used in combination with several other checks as follows:

- Check the registration status of the pharmacist
- Look for the name and address of the pharmacy operating the website (it should be connected to a genuine “bricks and mortar” pharmacy)
- Avoid websites that offer to supply prescription-only medicines without a prescription (it is not legal in Great Britain, and it is not safe)
- Observe whether you are asked questions before purchasing your medicine or not (registered pharmacies are required to check that a medicine is suitable for a patient to use before selling it – it’s a form of online consultation with a health professional)

7. Are patients assured safety when they see the logo? Is there any worry that the logo could be copied?

As with many logos found on the internet, there may be potential for the Internet Pharmacy Logo to be copied. This is why it is of paramount importance that members of the public undertake the additional checks as described above. The use of the word ‘pharmacy’ on the logo has specifically been included – this is a protected title. Any person who is found to be using the logo illegitimately could be the subject of legal proceedings by the RPSGB. In

addition, if they are supplying medicines unlawfully, they are likely to be the subject of other criminal proceedings.

The use of the title 'pharmacy' is restricted under section 78 Medicines Act 1968. Any person using the title in an unauthorised manner may be committing a criminal offence and if so is liable to prosecution.

8. Who can apply for use of the logo?

All retail pharmacies in Great Britain, including those providing internet services, must be registered with the RPSGB. Only websites operated from registered pharmacies can display the Internet Pharmacy Logo. It is not compulsory for registered online pharmacies to display the logo on their website, but we believe by doing so this will assure confidence in the safety of medicines purchased online by the public.

9. What information does a website have to provide the RPSGB to obtain the logo?

The applicant must either be the pharmacy owner or the superintendent pharmacist. They must provide details about their registration and also complete a self assessment form for their internet pharmacy services. In addition they must comply with the conditions of use for the logo.

10. How are pharmacy services regulated? Are there standards that pharmacists must comply with?

The RPSGB has a team of inspectors who undertake the routine monitoring and inspection of all pharmacy premises including those that provide internet pharmacy services. Monitoring of internet pharmacy sites is also undertaken via the inspectorate.

Pharmacists must also comply with the Society's Code of Ethics which sets out the standards of conduct, practice and performance expected of pharmacists and pharmacy technicians. Failure to comply with the requirements of the Code could put a pharmacist or pharmacy technician's registration at risk. One of the principles of the Code of Ethics is to 'Make the care of patients your first concern'. In addition, the Society has developed professional standards and guidance documents to supplement the requirements of the Code. One of these documents, *Professional Standards and Guidance for Internet Pharmacy Services* expands on the principles of the Code of Ethics to set out the professional responsibilities for

pharmacists and pharmacy technicians who are involved in the sale and supply of medicines via the internet.

11. Tell me a little about the pilot. How many sites participated?

We piloted the logo in early 2007. In total 20 pharmacies across Great Britain were involved. The pilot was successful, and highlighted areas of the application process that could be strengthened. In addition, the participant's views were sought on how successful they felt the pilot had gone.

12. What are the most common types of drugs bought over the internet?

PROZAC - A pack of 30 tablets costs £20 from online pharmacies. More than 3.5 million people in Britain take antidepressants, with Prozac among the most widely prescribed of its type. There have also been reports of club-goers "self-medicating" with Prozac to counter the come down from taking ecstasy. In 2003, 81 deaths were attributed to overdoses of these types of drugs and there have been reports of these causing some people to commit suicide.

VIAGRA - About £50 for four genuine tablets. Viagra nets more than £1bn a year for Pfizer and many more millions for the thousands of counterfeit copies that are available. While genuine, branded Viagra tablets will cost around £10, fakes are available for as little as £2 each. Doctors are concerned that it has also become a "clubbers' drug" with people mixing it with illegal substances such as ecstasy despite warnings that it can carry risks of heart problems.

VALIUM - About £50 for 30 tablets online. Recently, doctors have begun reporting a rise in the number of young women using the relaxant to sleep after taking cocaine or amphetamines. They are buying it online or obtaining it through the same dealers selling them illegal drugs. The Priory Hospital in Roehampton estimates that up to one in 10 patients at its addiction centre is now hooked on Valium.

RITALIN - About £20 for 60 tablets. It has a chemical formula similar to cocaine and because it is an appetite suppressant, young girls and teenagers have been known to take it to keep slim.

SEROSTIM - About £6 for one injection. It is used to help build up the strength of Aids patients who suffer debilitating weight loss. Body builders are buying it online to bulk out muscle and it also enables them to recover faster from work-outs. Women are even injecting it in an effort to combat the effects of ageing and there have been reports of people in the film industry using it to make their skin look tighter and younger.

PROVIGIL - About £90 for 30 tablets online. Provigil is marketed as a treatment for narcolepsy, a condition that causes excessive sleepiness and can make it impossible for

people to stay awake. Suggestions that it could also help boost weight loss and mood have made it even more popular. Clubbers are using it to keep partying through the night, while businessmen are buying it to help them through long days in the office, and students are taking it to keep revising.

13. What risks does the public face if they purchase medicines from websites that are not connected to registered pharmacies?

Those operating illegal websites supplying medicines have no relevant professional qualifications or healthcare expertise. The products they sell can be poor quality at best and dangerous at worst. The medicines they sell can be counterfeit, substandard or unapproved new drugs, which can put the public at risk. Pharmacists are experts in medicines. Pharmacists assess the suitability of a particular medicine for each individual patient – excluding the pharmacist from involvement in the supply of medicines has the potential for severe consequences for patient safety, including serious side effects, or in extreme cases, death.

14. What is the Internet Pharmacy Logo?

The RPSGB has developed an Internet Pharmacy Logo so the public can easily distinguish a safe and legitimate site to buy medicines. The logo – a voluntary scheme – displays the pharmacy's individual registration number. When the logo is clicked the user will be directed to a page on the RPSGB website which confirms the registration details of that pharmacy. The logo should be used in conjunction with additional checks in order to identify legitimate online pharmacy practices.

15. Does the RPSGB recommend buying medicines over the internet?

We would recommend buying medicines over the internet only where these are purchased from a registered pharmacy (in Great Britain) providing online pharmacy services. When obtaining medicines over the internet, using a registered pharmacy (& one displaying the logo will help to ensure that those medicines obtained are safe and of high quality). There will be occasions where a face to face consultation will be needed, but you will be advised of this if you are seeking advice, information or purchasing medicines from a website operated from a registered pharmacy premises.

16. What message does the RPSGB have for people considering obtaining drugs from the internet?

Make sure you are buying your medicines from a registered pharmacy. Make the appropriate additional checks. Visit the RPSGB website, www.internetpharmacylogo.org, for more information.

17. What is the RPSGB hoping will come from the logo?

It is clear from research that the majority of the public simply aren't aware that many internet suppliers of medicines are not legitimate. The RPSGB want to raise awareness of this problem, and encourage the public to ensure they use a genuine pharmacy in Great Britain. We want to make it safer for the public to buy medicines online and make it clear where they can receive high quality medicines and professional advice. The aim is not to dissuade the public from obtaining medicines over the internet but to do so safely.

18. If a healthcare professional abroad makes an incorrect supply of a medicine within whose jurisdiction does this fall?

The RPSGB is responsible for the regulation of pharmacists in England, Scotland and Wales. Pharmacists making errors or practicing unethically abroad are subject to the regulatory bodies in their respective countries. We would always encourage people to purchase their medicines from a registered pharmacy in Great Britain. The safest way to do this is by looking for the new Internet Pharmacy Logo and making the other background checks we have identified in order to ensure the pharmacy is legitimate.

19. Is the scheme compulsory for all genuine pharmacies operating on the web? If not, how do they become involved?

The scheme is voluntary and is open to pharmacies in England, Scotland and Wales. Genuine pharmacies operating online will apply to the RPSGB in order to register with the scheme. The applicant must either be the pharmacy owner or the superintendent pharmacist. They must provide details about their registration and also complete a self-assessment form for their internet pharmacy services. In addition they must comply with the conditions of use for the logo.

20. Is there a cost attached?

There is a registration fee payable for the administration of the scheme. The charge covers the cost of registering the website with the Society, background checks, creation of the individual logo and the ongoing administration of the scheme.

The following fees apply:

- £50 application fee
- £50 annual fee, payable from 1 April 2009

21. How many pharmacies are currently registered with the scheme?

There are currently 47 pharmacies registered throughout Great Britain with 19 registrations being processed. The RPSGB expects this figure to increase significantly over the next 12 months.

22. Is the logo recognised by search engines such as Google?

The logo is not currently recognised by search engines however we are working to rectify this issue.

23. What do I do if I have concerns over a website?

If you have concerns about a website that is supplying medicines and the website is not operated by a registered pharmacy premises in Great Britain, please contact:

Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA)

e-mail: info@mhra.gsi.gov.uk

0207 084 2000

If you have concerns about a pharmacy or pharmacist registered in Great Britain or would like further information about the internet pharmacy logo, please contact:

RPSGB Legal and Ethical Advisory Service

e-mail: ftp@rpsgb.org

Tel: 0207 572 2308

If you have a query about the registration status of a pharmacy or pharmacist, please contact:

RPSGB Registration Division

e-mail: registration@rpsgb.org

Tel: 0207 572 2322