

# How to Avoid Pharmaceutical Scams During COVID-19

Wednesday, May 6, 2020



During a crisis like the COVID-19 global pandemic, we see the best of humanity on display. From the many healthcare professionals who put their own safety and well-being on the line to many others who donate their money and resources to assist in the fight, it is heartwarming to see this display of heroism and selflessness.

At the same time, there are people who use a crisis, like this one, to take advantage of others who are in need. Day-to-day activities like going to your pharmacy to fill a prescription can present a list of challenges during a quarantine, but the alternative, buying prescriptions online, may present an opportunity for scammers.

“The most common COVID-19 scams targeting patients are mostly found online with over 3,000 online advertisements related to COVID-19 identified by various cyber security services [during just one week in late March] alone,”<sup>1</sup> says Pfizer’s Neil Campbell, director of strategic intelligence and product monitoring.

At Pfizer, patient health and safety is our first priority. We've long been on the front lines of the fight against counterfeiters and scammers who scheme to make a profit by price-gouging, selling dangerous fake medicines, or perpetrating scams on unsuspecting customers.

Here are some tips to help you stay vigilant and not fall victim to online scammers:

**Beware of emails or websites and all such offers promising cures or vaccines.** During a crisis, scammers are more prevalent than ever, preying on your fears and targeting those desperate for a solution. Unlike the products approved or authorized by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), fraudulent products that claim to cure, treat, or prevent COVID-19 haven't been evaluated by the agency for safety and effectiveness and might be dangerous to you and your family.<sup>2</sup> The FDA has warned that fake treatments may harm COVID-19 patients directly or cause critical delays in their diagnosis and treatment.<sup>2</sup>

**Beware of fraud and price-gouging.** As the coronavirus pandemic spreads across the country, fear and desperation are creating opportunity for bad actors. Untrustworthy vendors are selling both testing and personal protection equipment (masks, gloves, etc.) at extreme prices (with mark-ups as high as 700%)<sup>3</sup>. In some cases, perpetrators are offering tests and testing equipment that is neither official nor effective. The Justice Department recently cited 3600 complaints, including fraudulent charity drives, fake websites purporting to be governmental, and even legitimate websites that deliver malware to users.<sup>4</sup>

**Use a verified pharmacy for prescription drugs.** When ordering online, it is even more important right now to make sure you're buying prescription medications from a reputable source. Before ordering any prescription, only use a pharmacy that is [VIPPS approved](#) (try using the website name with 'the' or check a website's legitimacy on the LegitScript database). With any online pharmacy, check to see if there is a licensed pharmacist available through the website who can answer questions about how to take the medication. This is not only helpful when seeking information, but also speaks to the legitimacy of the vendor.

**Avoid third-party sellers.** Ordering treatments or OTC medicine from third-party sellers on popular websites like Amazon or eBay, may seem like the best option when under quarantine, however many counterfeit and substandard medicines are often distributed through these sellers and it's best to avoid them.

**Avoid foreign pharmacies.** Many pharmacies located in other countries (including those in Canada) are not licensed in the U.S. It's best to only order prescription medications from websites with ".pharmacy" address<sup>5</sup> and you can visit <https://www.safe.pharmacy> for a complete list of pharmacies.

Finally, if you are experiencing an economic hardship due to the coronavirus, consult patient assistance programs such as Pfizer [RxPathways](#). You can also visit [NeedyMeds](#), [RX Outreach](#) and the [Medicine Assistance Tool](#) to find other patient assistance programs to help you afford your medicines.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://1984.sh/covid19-domains-feed.txt>

<sup>2</sup> Source of new content: [Beware of Fraudulent Coronavirus Tests, Vaccines and Treatments | FDA](#)

<sup>3</sup> <https://newyork.cbslocal.com/2020/03/31/coronavirus-brooklyn-fbi-price-gouging-arrest/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/department-justice-announces-disruption-hundreds-online-covid-19-related-scams>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.pfizer.com/news/hot-topics/why\\_filling\\_prescriptions\\_at\\_a\\_verified\\_pharmacy\\_is\\_important\\_to\\_avoid\\_counterfeit\\_medicine](https://www.pfizer.com/news/hot-topics/why_filling_prescriptions_at_a_verified_pharmacy_is_important_to_avoid_counterfeit_medicine)

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.safemedicines.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Safe-Purchasing-COVID-19.pdf>

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