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## Study: Few buy drugs online

### Survey finds safety concerns inhibit use of Web

**NEW YORK (AP) -- Only 4 percent of Americans have used the Internet to buy prescription drugs -- and even fewer do so through foreign pharmacies -- despite Web sites maintained by a handful of states to help U.S. residents import medicines more cheaply from Canada, a new study finds.**

Sixty-two percent say they believe drugs bought online are less safe than those purchased from a local pharmacy, accepting the federal government's stated concerns in opposing drug imports, the Pew Internet and American Life Project said in a report Sunday.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration said it cannot guarantee the safety of drugs sold through foreign pharmacies, but it has not stopped states from setting up sites to help consumers buy drugs through Canadian pharmacies.

Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Dakota and New Hampshire are among states that established such sites before Pew's May 15-June 17 survey period. Rhode Island linked its state-run prescription drug site to Wisconsin's. Illinois put its program online later in the summer.

Of the 4 percent of Americans who bought online, the vast majority went to pharmacies based in the United States, meaning the population of online drug importers is even smaller. Most said the site required a prescription and said they had one from their doctor.

The online drug buyers tend to live in higher-income households and have six or more years of online experience. Three-quarters of the online drug buyers say their most recent purchase was for a chronic medical condition, such as arthritis or high blood pressure, and most said they were satisfied and planned to order online again.

Most cited convenience and cost savings as reasons for buying online.

Susannah Fox, Pew's director of research, said Americans may be cautious now, but they will likely grow more comfortable as friends and neighbors order without trouble.

For now, the Internet is chiefly used to research drugs. Pew finds that 26 percent of Americans have used the Internet to find information about prescription drugs, either by themselves or having someone else do it for them.

### Web used mostly for research

David MacKay, executive director of the Canadian International Pharmacy Association, said member Canadian pharmacies that ship to the United States use Web sites chiefly as a marketing tool. Patients research prices and other information, but "inevitably they don't use the Internet to place the final order," MacKay said.

Only 10 percent of orders come through the Internet, and most of the rest use a toll-free phone number, he said.

Experts note that the elderly population most likely to be needing prescription medications for chronic illnesses are also the least likely to have an Internet connection.

Nonetheless, Internet sales are growing. IMS Consulting estimates online sales at \$407 million in 2003, up from \$160 million a year earlier.

The Pew survey was conducted using random telephone calls to 2,200 adults 18 and older, including 1,399 Internet users. It has a margin of sampling error of plus or minus 2 percentage points.

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