
Complementary medicines - the risks of buying online

Summary

- Complementary medicines should be treated with the same caution as prescription medicines.
 - Using products purchased over the Internet can be risky for a range of reasons.
 - Avoid the temptation to self-diagnose and self-medicate with medicines bought online.
 - Always see your regular medical doctor (GP) about any health concerns and tell them about any complementary medicines you are taking or thinking of taking.
 - Never stop taking your prescription medication or alter the dose without your doctor's knowledge and approval.
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Unlike prescription medicines, complementary medicines are readily available to buy without a doctor's authorisation. Countless sites on the internet sell complementary medicines, usually at very cheap prices, which can seem like a great deal to the consumer. However, using products bought from online sites can be risky for many reasons.

A growing number of Australians are using some kind of complementary medicine (sometimes known as 'complementary and alternative medicines' or CAM). Examples include herbal preparations such as Chinese medicines, homeopathic products and certain vitamin or mineral products.

It's important to understand the potential benefits and risks of any therapy, medicine or treatment. The complementary therapy you are considering may be safe and may work for others but it may not be the best treatment for you.

Always consult with your regular medical doctor (GP) before using a complementary therapy and don't stop taking your prescription medication or alter the dose without your doctor's knowledge and approval.

The dangers of self-diagnosis and self-medication

Searching for health and medical information was among the top 10 internet activities for online Australians over 16 years of age in 2010. Estimates suggest that many Australian online health consumers use the internet to help them decide whether or not to seek medical attention.

Easy access to health information on the internet and social pressure to take responsibility for your own health can lead to self-diagnosis. You may be tempted to self-diagnose and then decide to self-medicate with medicines bought online. This is very risky. Always see your doctor for diagnosis and treatment advice.

Safety issues include:

- The diagnosis may be wrong.
 - Self-medication may delay your visit to the doctor and may mean you miss out on a proper diagnosis.
 - Without proper medical attention, you may not receive the appropriate treatment for your condition.
 - In the case of serious illness, a delay in medical treatment may cause even more serious issues (such as preventable health effects, greater difficulty or impossibility in achieving a cure) or even death.
 - The complementary medicine itself may cause health problems. For example, it may have unwanted side effects, change the way prescription medicines work in your body, interact with alcohol and other drugs or treatments, or contain harmful ingredients not shown on the label.
 - If the complementary medicine isn't effective or appropriate, you are wasting your money.
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Many people believe that complementary medicines are safer than prescription medicines because they are more 'natural'. This is not always true. Complementary medicines should be treated with the same caution as prescription medicines. It is very important that you tell your doctor about any complementary medicines you are taking or thinking of taking.

Quality and safety issues of products bought online

Complementary medicines made in Australia are subject to regulations that may not apply to products bought from other countries. For example:

- The medicine may be regulated as a diet product or food supplement, rather than as a medicine – this may mean lower or inadequate controls over its use.
- Some products may contain substances that are illegal in Australia.
- If not processed properly, some herbs retain toxic compounds that may cause unwanted side effects.
- A poorly manufactured product may be contaminated.
- The product may include dangerous ingredients. Studies published since 2000 have examined Asian herbal products and dietary supplements available for sale in Europe, US and UK, and raised concerns that some may contain toxic substances including heavy metals (such as arsenic or mercury), pesticides and microbes.
- The website may offer limited or non-existent health and safety information or dose recommendations for their product, which prevents you from making an informed decision.
- A disreputable website may sell out-of-date, low-quality or fake products.
- You are not protected under Australian consumer laws if you buy a complementary medicine from overseas.
- The product may be a 'quack' treatment.

Quack treatments

A 'quack' treatment is the term often used to refer to any type of medical treatment about which the claims of health benefits are false or misleading. Some products marketed as complementary medicines are actually quack treatments.

Danger signs that a website may be selling a quack treatment include:

- The promise of a cure for conditions that are incurable such as AIDS or arthritis
- Evidence to support the claims is anecdotal, not science-based
- Any suggestion that doctors don't support the product because of a conspiracy
- Any advice to ignore or stop trusting your doctor
- A suggestion that prescription medications provided through your medical doctor (GP) are 'poison' and that you should stop taking them or that the treatment replaces prescription medication.

Suggestions for buying online

If you would like to buy complementary medicines online, it is strongly suggested that you:

- Don't self-medicate. Always see your regular medical doctor (GP) for proper diagnosis and treatment before taking a complementary medicine.
- Don't just take the advice or recommendations of well-meaning family members, friends, workmates or any other person who may not be qualified to give you advice. These people are unlikely to know about your personal health details and what is best for your health.
- Ask your doctor to recommend a reputable online site.
- Look for Australian-made products that are marked 'Registered Aust R' or 'Listed Aust R', which means the product was manufactured in a laboratory licensed by the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA). The TGA is an Australian government department that ensures medicines available in Australia are of an acceptable standard.

- Use common sense. Don't trust a website that offers a miracle cure for a medical condition that you know is currently incurable. If unsure, consult with your doctor.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- In an emergency, always call triple zero (000)
- Pharmacist
- Medicines Line (Australia) Tel. 1300 MEDICINE (633 424) – for information on prescription, over-the-counter and complementary medicines
- Adverse Medicines Events (AME) Line Tel. 1300 134 237 – to report a problem with your medicine
- Victorian Poisons Information Centre Tel. 13 11 26 – for advice when poisoning or suspected poisoning occurs and poisoning prevention information (24 hours, 7 days)
- NURSE-ON-CALL Tel. 1300 60 60 24 – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- Complementary Healthcare Council of Australia Tel. (02) 6260 4022
- Australian Government (TGA) – Office of Complementary Medicines Tel. (02) 6232 8634 or 1800 020 653 or TTY Tel. 1800 555 677 (then ask for 1800 020 653)

Things to remember

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