

Purchasing Prescription Drugs Through the Internet: Who's Buying?

Although prescription drugs are readily available through the internet, little is known about the prevalence of internet use for the purchase of medications without a legitimate prescription or the characteristics of individuals obtaining non-prescribed drugs through online sources. In an article in the current issue of "*Drug and Alcohol Dependence*," researchers report on an examination of five national data sets from the U.S. with the purpose of estimating: 1) how common obtaining prescription medications from the Internet actually is, 2) who are the typical populations of "end users" of these non-prescribed medications, and 3) which drugs are being purchased without a prescription.

Hilary L. Surratt, Ph.D., and colleagues from the Center for Drug and Alcohol Studies at the University of Delaware, addressed these questions using data from three data sets from the Researched Abuse Diversion and Addiction-Related Surveillance (RADARS®) System, and the remaining data sets were from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) and the Monitoring the Future (MTF) Survey. The RADARS System is composed of seven programs that target diverse populations across the United States, while the National Survey of Drug Use and Health is a federally sponsored annual household survey that gathers data on substance use and abuse among household populations ages 12 and above. Monitoring the Future is an ongoing study of the behaviors, attitudes, and values of 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students.

Among the 4,008 respondents in the RADARS System Survey of Key Informants' Patients (SKIP) Program, the three most frequently accessed sources for acquiring a primary prescription drug were dealers (62%), friends and/or relatives (52%), and a doctor's prescription (41%), with the Internet accounting for only 3%. Compared to other drugs, hydrocodone was more frequently acquired via the Internet, whereas controlled-release oxycodone was less frequently acquired. Moreover, there seemed to be a declining use of the Internet as a source, ranging from a high of 4.3% in 2006 to 1.5% in 2008. Among the 9,008 respondents in the RADARS System Opioid Treatment Program, the three most frequently accessed sources for acquiring a primary drug were dealers (78%), friends or relatives (44%), and a doctor's prescription (23%), with the Internet accounting for only 2.1%. Taken together, their analysis yielded uniformly low rates of prescription drug acquisition from online sources across all five data systems examined. The consistency of these findings across very diverse populations suggests that the Internet is a relatively minor source for illicit purchases of prescription medications by the individual end-users of these drugs.

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