

# ONLINE PHARMACIES: AN EMERGING TREND IN INDIAN HEALTHCARE SCENARIOS

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## Abstract: -

India has witnessed the emergence of online pharmacies with extensive promotions to consumers. Online pharmacies are taking mileage over the conventional pharmacies due to doorstep delivery of medicines with massive discounts. The primary objective of this paper is to understand various advantages and concerns for people's health due to controversial online pharmacies in India. Online pharmacy can provide convenience in drug distribution, but serious health issues are associated with irregulated e - pharmacies. There are no clear rules and regulations, counterfeit medicine, determinations of geographical boundaries, sales of illegal medicines are the concern areas. Better policies can be designed and developed for the regulation of online pharmacies in India. To fight against the health threats arise due to online pharmacies, proper regulation and certification mechanisms must be developed by the government in India.

**Keywords-** Online Pharmacy, Prescription drugs, Counterfeit medicines.

## Introduction: -

The emergence of e-commerce has influenced the various dimensions of society and business in India. Entrepreneurs are exploring the use of e-commerce in various business and social domain; healthcare is also among one of them, new experiments and opportunities are explored in healthcare i.e. e-health, e-prescription, Telemedicine, and online pharmacy etc. Online Pharmacy is also known as Internet Pharmacy, cyber pharmacy, e-pharmacy, and virtual pharmacy/drugstores<sup>[1]</sup>. Online pharmacies had become an area of concern from the day when the first online pharmacy was introduced in the United States to sell prescriptions and other products to consumers<sup>[2]</sup>. The growth of the internet is supporting the development of online pharmacies along with other e-commerce businesses in India and government initiative regarding e-health and e-governance is further strengthening this trend. Online medicine sales have the advantage of a significant reduction in overhead expenses as compare to traditional pharmacies. The use of the internet has increased efficiency and reduced the admirative cost, of pharmacy operations which result in a significant saving. Online pharmacies are passing this mileage of operational efficiency to consumers in terms of price discounts.<sup>[3]</sup> Online pharmacies can ensure the timely delivery of medicines to semi-urban and rural areas for chronic disease patients. As per Ernst and Young analysis, the domestic market including chronic and acute medications, online pharmacies has a total target market size of ~US\$9.3 billion in 2019 and it is expected to scale up further US\$18.1 billion by 2023 in India.<sup>[4]</sup>

Online Pharmacies has four major types that sell prescriptions and other products to consumers: (a) conventional retail chain pharmacies with a web presence; (b) independent community pharmacies with a web presence; (c) stand-alone, exclusive pharmacy sites; and (d) "rogue" pharmacy sites<sup>[5]</sup>.

The healthcare system is facing a new issue of procuring medicines outside the traditional drug-supply-chain. The Indian healthcare system does not have clear rules and guidelines to deal with an online source of medicines. The patients get affected by these online

sources of medicines as they cannot analyse the potential benefits and problems associated with the purchase of prescription drugs from online pharmacy. [6]

The emergence of online pharmacy has created a big challenge for conventional retail pharmacies in India as online pharmacy offers certain benefits to consumers. The privacy of information given by the customer while purchasing medicine online is a matter of great concern for the customer. Online pharmacy is preferred by patients with chronic diseases as they receive a 20 to 30 percent discount on medicines purchased in bulk or refilled for monthly consumption. [7] It has been observed in various studies that regular online shoppers are more likely to purchase medication online. The online trade in India is growing at a fast pace in various product and services categories is also reflecting on the growth of online pharmacies. [8] The online pharmacies have various advantages over conventional pharmacies because access to medicines became easy, especially for elderly or physically challenged or housebound patients. Anytime, anywhere access, availability of multiple brands of medicines, privacy in consultancy and information search on embarrassing medical conditions and price discounts on the purchase of medicines are some reasons that make online pharmacies acceptable in Indian consumers.

E-pharmacies now constitute around 3% of the Indian pharmaceutical market. But they are growing rapidly. There are around 282 e-pharmacy start-ups in India, including big ones like Netmeds, 1mg, Medlife and Pharmeasy, according to data from start-up tracker Tracxn. [9] This growth trend in online pharmacy indicates that the number of patients will also increase in the future, who will purchase medications from online pharmacies.

**Material and Methods** – This research study is based on secondary data published in different sources about online pharmacies in recent times. A literature review is done to understand the issues, challenge, benefits, and risk associated with online pharmacy and its regulations.

**Results and Discussion** – As per the industry estimates, the e-pharmacy sector is catering only to 3% retail pharmacy market in India. The online e-pharma business will be approximately 2,000-2,500 crore across India. Customers from across the country buy medicines via e-pharmacies and the majority of sales are from patients of chronic therapies like diabetes and hypertension, who need their medication regularly. [10]

Online pharmacies offer discounts 20 to 50% on the online purchase of medicines. online pharmacies are quite popular among chronic patients due to discounts offered by them. The Canadian Drugstore, a cyber pharmacy, highlights up to 50% discount on prescription medicines in advertisements i.e “brings Canadian drug prices to the world” and “saves consumers up to 50% on all prescription drugs”. [11]

Online pharmacy ensures the privacy of the patient's disease and medical record with the convenience of receiving his medical supplies at his/her doors step, a significant advantage for many elderly patients. Online pharmacies have empowered the patients to purchase medicines and get a consultation with high privacy by a pharmacist from their homes. The Indian online pharmacies offer Ayush therapies, fitness products, food supplements, personal care products, family care products, medical devices along with prescription medicines with the veiled prescription upload. The online pharmacy also offers medical information to the patients regarding disease and lifestyle medication, patient education content for better therapeutic outcomes in text and video formats.

Online pharmacy provides services to patients 24\*7 throughout the year where patients can compare prices of different brands or can find a better generic option which can further lead to substantiate savings for patients.

**Table 1 Benefits of Online Pharmacy**

• Lower prices and discounts
• Privacy
• Convenience
• Medical Information
• Round the clock availability
• Price comparison
• Availability of generic brands

Dispensing medicines through the internet is becoming an accepted practice; getting prescription drugs online has certain risk factors associated with it. Online pharmacies are perceived as a major risk factor for people's health amongst medical fraternity across the globe.

Getting prescription-only drugs merely by answering a questionnaire or without a valid prescription is the biggest issue related to patient health risk as medicines cannot be treated like any ordinary commodity sold on the internet as they have severe health or life-threatening consequences as consumed without a valid prescription. The Internet pharmacist gives advice and medicines with limited information about the patient's medical history. E-pharmacy sites are encouraging self-diagnosis and medications by ignoring valid prescriptions for dispensing various categories of drugs. This ignorance of traditional doctor patients' relationships can create health risks and side effects from inappropriate consumption of medicines and dangerous drug interactions.

**Table 2 Risk of online Pharmacy**

• Unlicensed dispensing
• Counterfeit drugs
• Unknown geographical Locations
• Hidden charges (e.g. shipping fee, account set-up fee)
• Prices Fluctuations
• Dispense medicine without a valid prescription
• Fears about the counterfeit medicines supplied
• Bypassing the health professional-patient relationship
• No clear rules and regulation for online pharmacies

Efforts to bridge the digital divide in India may increase access to Internet-sourced drugs amongst those in lower socioeconomic groups may increase the role of the Internet in drug abuse.<sup>[12]</sup> Rough pharmacies are overruling in the international e pharmacy market, which has resulted in higher risk for patients as they buy medicines from these illegal sites.<sup>[6]</sup>

Direct access to medicines on the internet is creating a risk for patients due to difficulty in the determination of counterfeit drugs or illegal medicines. The counterfeit medicines are 10% of worldwide trade of medicines online and 30% of counterfeit medicine trade is done in developing countries such as Africa, Asia, India, and Latin America.<sup>[8]</sup> Besides, these certain habit-forming medicines are used for off level uses, and misuse of antibiotics, due to online purchase of medication, has increased the risk of resistance in patients.

The delay in finalizing the e-pharmacy regulations in India is also causing a headache for the e-pharmacy industry, as they currently operate in a regulatory grey area leading to conflicting court orders. Ordinarily, regulation of pharmacies is state role and the internet has made state regulation of online pharmacies difficult. The Indian law to regulate medicines sales i.e. Drug and Cosmetics Act 1940, Drugs and Cosmetic Rules 1945, Pharmacy Act 1948, Indian Medical Act 1956 and Laws related to e-commerce are defined under the Information Technology Act, 2000 are not able to address issues and challenges posed by online pharmacies.<sup>[13]</sup> Interstate (and international) nature of online pharmacies, has made law enforcement and policymaking to regulate the online pharmacy extremely challenging.

**Conclusion-** To overcome with the challenge posed by the online pharmacies to Indian patients and minimise risk and enhance benefits, the government should work on the development of policy and regulatory framework to control the practices of online pharmacies and on other hand patients must be made aware about the risks of purchasing medicines from rough pharmacies.<sup>[14]</sup>

### Conflict of Interest

This study is exploratory research based on secondary data; therefore, a conflict of interest is hard to find out. But the study can be extended for the specific issues like regulation and legal framework, counterfeit medicines, customer perception on online pharmacies, e-health and telemedicine, availability of generic medicines and application in spreading the network of janaushadhi stores in the form of online pharmacies and other impacts on other socio-economic variables.

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