

Foreign Medications and Myths about Medications

by Dr. Fred Raleigh, Plus Magazine, June 2005

Question: I am planning to travel out of country this summer. My problem is that I take several prescription medications and do not feel comfortable taking these medications with me. One reason I feel uncomfortable is that someone at one of the many security check points may confiscate them. Another reason is that I understand medications are much cheaper out of our country. Consequently I feel I could just purchase the items while traveling and save a significant amount of money.

Do you think my perceptions are right? What can you tell me about buying medications in foreign countries?

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Answer: You have taken a good step to alleviate some of your fears by asking questions to get more answers to help you make a more informed decision when you travel later this year. Many people travel abroad that must take prescription medications. My sense would be that as long as these medications are in properly labeled, prescription containers you should have no fear about your essential medications being seized at one of the “check points” you may encounter. I would also like to provide you with some useful information about prescription medications while in a foreign country and to also shed some light about “cheaper” medications being available in countries other than ours.

To start with, I am sure you are aware that medications have two names. One name is the trade or registered name which is kind of like the company's trade mark for the product. The other name is the common chemical name or the generic name.

Just one example of trade name and generic name is Tylenol™ that has the generic name of



acetaminophen. Why would you want to be reminded about this?

If you travel to a foreign country the trade name of a particular generic product may or may not be the same as it is in this country. A recent report that appeared in the April 2005 issue of Pharmacist's Letter, noted that once you leave this country you cannot be sure that asking for the your product by the U.S. trade name will get you the same generic product in a different country. Here are a few examples.

In our country there is a product whose trade name is Dilacor XR™, whose generic name is diltiazem, used to manage hypertension. Yet, recently when a patient asked for Dilacor while traveling in Serbia he did get Dilacor. However, instead of Dilacor being a brand of diltiazem in Serbia, Dilacor was instead a brand of digoxin, a cardiac medication and in no way related to diltiazem. Unfortunately in this case, the patient wound up in the hospital with a digoxin toxicity. Another example is Norpramin™, a brand of desipramine, which is an antidepressant in our country. However, in Italy, Norpramin is a brand of omeprazole. Omeprazole in this country is known as Prilosec OTC. Omeprazole is commonly used for acid reflux problems.

These few examples are given to shed some light on how trade names may vary from country to country but the generic name will remain the same regardless of the country.

Therefore, when traveling abroad I would suggest that take enough medication to cover your stay. You should also take a separate listing of your current medications. This list should have both the prescription's trade name and the products generic name so that you can avoid possible confusion or receive the wrong product while on foreign soils. If you do not know the products generic name your local pharmacist will be glad to assist you.

Now for you perception about "cheaper" medications being available in other countries. I would suppose that any diligent shopper can always find something for less somewhere or some place else. From what I know the United States has low priced generics and any potential cost savings for generic agents that may be available at lower costs in our neighboring countries, Canada and Mexico, would probably be off set by travel time and the high cost of gasoline these days. And like the famous Latin words "caveat emptor" or let the buyer beware, there are issues to consider when purchasing medications from foreign sources.

In today's contemporary culture there are several myths about obtaining medications from foreign sources. Earlier this year while attending a conference in San Diego earlier I had the opportunity to hear a program presented by Marv Shepherd, Ph.D., chair of pharmacy administration at the University of Texas School of Pharmacy. Dr. Shepherd detailed some of the current myths about medications that have been some how worked their way into our culture. Though space in this column does not permit me to fully detail all of these myths, I have provided you with most of them below.



Myth #1 “It is legal to personally import medications into the U.S.”

This statement is incorrect. Medication importation is illegal. The only groups which can import drug products are pharmaceutical manufacturers. Personal drug importation is illegal. Yet, despite this the FDA has allowed some variances and the laws are evolving rapidly in this arena.

Myth #2 “Drug Importation is a one dimensional issue. It purely is an economic matter!”

This statement is false. Drug importation is a very complex and also complicated one. There are many fronts or issues in the world of medication importation. Political, financial, economic/competition, international trade concerns, legal and liability concerns, other health care matters and social issues are all at play.

Myth #3 “Drug importation is safe. No one has ever been hurt from imported drugs.”



Unfortunately people have suffered harm and some have even died from imported medications. Some imported products contain the correct amount of active ingredient while others contain no active ingredients, or too little or too much. There is big money in counterfeit drugs and some distributors of these counterfeit products are producing bogus medication that is impossible for the average person and even health care providers to tell the difference between the real McCoy and the fake product. Currently it is estimated that over 1% of all medications in this country are counterfeit products. This number is growing.

The following list is just a sample of counterfeit products recently found in our country: Lipitor, Epogen, Viagra, Diflucan, Ambien and some birth control products. Counterfeit Viagra is a world wide problem. The leading sources of fake Viagra are: China, India, Israel, Costa Rica, Thailand and Mexico.

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that 8% of the current world wide medication market is comprised of counterfeit products. The WHO also suggests that the counterfeit drug market has grown to be a \$20-\$40 billion dollar annual business. In addition to the fly-by-night manufacturers of these faux medications the data about the percentage of counterfeit medications being distributed by foreign “pharmacies” is phenomenal: Brazil 45-50%, Mexico 20%, India 15-20%, and South East Asia 30⁺%

Myth #4 “All foreign pharmacies doing business with Americans are licensed and follow U.S. laws and regulations.”

Currently there are over a thousand internet pharmacy sites world wide offering a wide variety of drug products. Many do follow regulations within their country but some of these regulations are less stringent and weaker when compared to U.S. standards. Others do not follow local regulations. Finally, these pharmacies do not have to comply with U.S. regulations to do business with U.S. residents.

Myth #5 “Americans are required to have a prescription to get prescription medications from a foreign pharmacy.”

Many pharmacy sites on the Internet do not require a prescription. All you need is a credit card and a mailing address. In some countries, e.g. Mexico, prescriptions are not necessary for many therapeutic categories of medications. In Canada, it is illegal to fill a prescription written by U.S. physician unless they are also licensed in Canada. Canadian physicians are required to rewrite or co-sign the prescription. Ironically Canada must import over 60% of its medications from over 80 foreign countries. Incidentally all medications that are exported from Canada do not have to be approved by Health Canada. How sure can you be that all the products imported into Canada are legitimate?

Myth #6 “Imported medications are safe and effective products.”

By now you may begin to wonder does this statement has any validity? It does but there are degrees to everything in life. The FDA has determined that problems you may encounter when importing foreign medications include, but are not limited to, the following: sub or super potency, have expired or have a false expiration date, are contaminated, have been stored under suboptimal temperatures and conditions, be counterfeit, be a product that has been withdrawn

from the market due to serious side effects, and finally, be a medication that is approved for animal consumption but not human consumption.

For all of the above reasons I would hope that you consider your personal health above a few possible dollars saved and take enough of your essential medications with you when you travel this summer. Should you run out while traveling you now have more information to help you obtain the correct medication – always ask about where a reliable pharmacy is located.