

E-PHARMACIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract - Before 8 months nobody was aware about the corona virus (COVID-19) and now this virus has reached in almost all countries, infecting 86,162,875 peoples with 1,861,846 deaths.(as on 05th January 2021 ,09:08 GMT ,Source-Worldometer information).Almost all countries are trying to make vaccine against corona virus but yet all are in developing stage. Now COVID -19 pandemic has reached a dangerous phase of second wave which is imposing the relock down worldwide. The economy of all entire countries has facing a huge slow down, suddenly falling stock markets, moving restrictions, lack of supply, unemployment are the major challenges worldwide. The healthcare systems of countries across the world are collapse due to the pandemic. Due to the fear of getting infected from corona virus and to maintain the physical distancing most of peoples are moving towards online purchasing during the lockdown period. Purchasing of the medicines through the digital platform is also not exemption for it due to ease of access in one click with safety during COVID-19 pandemic. E- Pharmacies with existing pharmacies have played the important role to help the nation in COVID -19 pandemic fight for 24 × 7.This research paper focuses on COVID-19and E-Pharmacy from different dimensions.

Keywords- COVID-19 pandemic, E-Pharmacy, Consumer perspectives, Government initiatives etc.

E-PHARMACIES AND COVID 19 PANDEMIC

COVID -19 pandemic has reached an uncertain stage and has collapse the economy of all entire worlds. Declining stock markets, moving restrictions, lack of supply, unemployment are the major challenges worldwide due to the lockdown in COVID-19 pandemic. The health care system of entire world is also damaged in pandemic. The important thing to protect from virus is to maintain physical distancing, continuously washing of hands and use the mask. Old aged, co-morbid patients and children are recommended to stay at home only.

COVID-19 pandemic has call for new way of thinking to avoid the contact with public and to minimize the movement. Therefore digital and e-services turn into more central in COVID-19 pandemic situation. Purchasing of the medicines through the digital platform is also rising due to ease of access in one click with safety during COVID-19 pandemic.

E- Pharmacies with existing pharmacies have played the important role to help the nation in COVID-19 pandemic fights for 24 × 7.Though the frontline workers are being openly exposed to the virus, the E-Pharmacies worked day-and-night to keep the services available and taking care to fulfill the health care needs and medicines of public with safety.

E-Pharmacy sector in India showing healthy growth during the pandemic. According to Dharma Sheth (Founder of Pharma Easy) the demand of medicines for cold, flue and cough was increased on online platforms during the COVID-19 pandemic because people wanted to keep stock available of these medicines irrespective of it being needed or not by patients.

E-buying of medicines has considered as essential service during the pandemic by home ministry of India which have strengthen the E-Pharma sector in COVID-19 pandemic.

Anupam Mishra (Pharma Analyst at global data) comments that E-consultation services with heavy discounts on medicines and health care products are the major factors contributing to rise in demand for Netmed and Pharma Easy in novel corona virus pandemic.

The market shares of Indian E-Pharma industry was 20 billion dollar in 2019 out of which 47% shares are contributed by addressable medicines, which will be enhance to 60% by 2023.(Source-statistic portal statista)

Major online pharmacy companies are Pharmeasy Medlife, 1MG, Netmeds Myra, CareOnGo and Pharmasafe operates online trade. Medlife is leading with about 30% market share of the total online Pharma market in India.

In India E-Pharmacy is in initial stage not started in full fledged manner compared to purchasing the rest of products through the various shopping sites like amazon,flipkart snap deal etc.In India online pharmacy is in beginning stage now which will have the huge potential to become the larger industry coming years.

Advantages and disadvantages for E-Buying of the medicines and health care products –

Advantages	Disadvantages
Increased numbers of smart phones	No physical evaluation in place
Internet penetration	Need to use same online pharmacy
Competitive pricing	Safeguard issue
Ease of access	Chances of fraud
E-consultation	Encourage self medication
Heavy discount	probability of delayed delivery
Time/Money saving	probability of misdiagnosis
24/7 service	Chance of misuse
Convenient	Drug addiction
Policy of refund	Adulteration of drugs
Price comparison	Doctor- Pharmacist- Patient: this tricycle may split
Policy of refund	Influence business of offline pharmacists
Price comparison	
Variety	
Physical distancing in lockdown	

LITERATURE REVIEW

Singh, H, Majumdar A, Malviya N (2020) studied the basic issues and challenges related to online pharmacy and how can it be beneficial to society and pharma sectors in the pandemic situation. Researcher studied the impact of E-Pharmacy on society in COVID-19, Pharma sector in pandemic situation, impact of COVID -19 on pharma sector.

FICCI E-Pharmacy white paper-E-Pharmacies at COVID-19 frontline (August 2020) discussed the digital health in India –Need of hour. They also extended the discussion on consumer perspective towards buying the medicines in pandemic, shifts towards E-Consultation in pandemic, as well as Governments policy during the pandemic regarding the E-commerce. (<http://ficci.in/spdocument/23316/FICCI-ePharmacy-Whitepaper.pdf>)

Saraswat S, Jain R K, Awasthi S. (2020) studied various advantages and concerns for people’s health due to controversial online pharmacies in India. Researcher concluded that to overcome with the challenge posed by the online pharmacies to Indian patient’s and minimize risk and enhances benefits, the government should work on the development of policy and regulatory framework to control the practices of online pharmacies.

E-Pharmacy Market Global Research Report 2020 investigated the effect of COVID-19 on e-Pharma Industry. According to the report the E-Pharmacy market will be enhance at considerable rate between 2020 to 2025.Report also includes the analysis of impact of COVID-19 on global economy and E-Pharma industry.

(<https://www.marketresearchfuture.com/reports/epharmacy-market-6615>)

S.Priya Nair, Anil Middha (2019) discussed the findings of Survey on evaluating the online medicine purchase habits of youngsters pan India and to access their knowledge and perception towards e-pharmacy.

OBJECTIVES

1. To understand the consumers perspective towards buying the medicines in COVID-19 pandemic.
2. To study the impact of COVID-19 pandemic on Indian online pharma sector.
3. To analyze the impact of E-Pharmacies on society during COVID-19 pandemic
4. To review the government initiatives towards E-Pharmacies during COVID-19 pandemic.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data collected is descriptive. Secondary research was conducted to review the impact of E-Pharmacies during COVID-19 pandemic. The information and data for the research is collected through secondary sources i.e. published articles, journals, newspapers, reports, books and website.

DISCUSSION

CONSUMER'S PERSPECTIVE

COVID-19 pandemic has invited to new way of thinking to maintain the physical distancing and to minimizing the movement, which has pushed the people towards digitalized path. Buying of medicines through the digitalized platform is also not exemption for it.

Consumer perspectives towards e-buying of medicines are changed during COVID-19 pandemic.

As lockdown extended peoples moved towards e buying of medicines and the demand to purchase medicines through the various e-Pharmacies was increased during the lockdown as peoples wanted to keep the stock of medicines in emergency.

Moreover as per the latest study on understanding the consumer behavior after the lockdown (post June 2020) more than 70% consumers mentioned that e buying of medicines is increased or remains constant after the unlock. So shift towards online purchasing of medicines retained with growth in unlock phase .Non metro consumers also preferring online buying of medicines which count for 25% of E- pharmacy in GMV in FY 2020.

Expenditures on E- Buying of medicines changed from pre lockdown to Unlock (June 2020 onwards)

Particular	Decreased (%)	Constant (Remains same) (%)	Increased (%)
Online medicine purchase Overall	25	48	27
Online medicine purchase Metro consumers	30	45	25
Online medicine purchase Non metro consumers	23	49	28

(Source: FICCI E Pharmacy white paper)

Hence, due to COVID-19, digital platforms to purchase the medicines is retained with growth in unlock phase and E-Pharma companies have been became more capable to expand their coverage in non metro areas also.

INDIAN ONLINE PHARMA SECTOR DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Lockdown restriction during the novel corona virus epidemic shifted people's towards E- Commerce industry due to cheaper, faster and safe mode of purchasing than physicals stores in pandemic situation. To purchase the medicines and health care products online is also not exception for it.

For instance once the lockdown was announced in March 2020, 1mg (Leading E-Pharmacy) shown the 100% growth in order in early 3 to 4 weeks. At the end of June 2020 growth rate of demand was 40% greater than pre-COVID mentioned by Prashant Tondon (Cofounder of 1mg).

Digi Prex (Digital subscription platform for patient with chronic disease) has reported 100% growth in sell throughout the lockdown.

True med, another online pharmacy platform company seeing 35 to 40% rises in orders month by month during the pandemic, said by the Akshay Nayyar (Cofounder, True med).

Further Akshay Nayyar comments that due to the COVID-19 peoples are pushed towards digital platforms, we have noticed the changes in their behavior also.

According to FICCI E-Pharmacy white paper the no. of households in India preferring online pharma services during the novel corona virus pandemic lockdown was grow up from 2.8 million to 8.8.millions.When lockdown in progress buying the medicines online become much easier and safe option for public.

Due to the growth in E-Pharmacy sector leading E-pharma companies are trying to increase their market shares. According to the report by Global Profession Services firm EY online pharma market will be reached to 18.1 million dollar by 2023.

U.S leading E-commerce company Amazon have started the online pharmacy services in India.Relaince retail has taken the majority of shares in Chennai base E-Pharma company Netmed .Pharmeasy is going to merge in Medilife.

According to the report of Indian express (August 2020) all these business moves in online pharma industry are because of behavioral shift of people towards E-Commerce industry during COVID-19 pandemic. These happenings in online pharma industry are the witness of growth in online pharma industry in post COVID-19.

E PHARMACY SECTOR IN POST COVID-19

As per the recent survey of consumers, more than 70% respondent reported that they will prefer online pharmacy services in future also due to great experience during the pandemic, 16% respondent reported that due to fear of infection of corona virus online pharmacy may be the safes option,12% respondent cited that due to subscription to E-Pharma company to purchase the medicines frequently for chronic diseases E-Pharmacy platform is the best option to purchase the medicines due to discounts and variety,27% respondent opted for offline pharmacy.

E Pharmacy sector in post COVID-19

Particular	Respondent (%)
Prefer Pharmacy in future due to great past experience	71
Due to fear of infection of corona virus online pharmacy is safer option	16
Subscription to E-Pharmacy for frequent purchase of medicines for chronic diseases will prefer E-Pharmacy	12
Discontinue the Epharmacy after the pandemic	27

(Source: FICCI E Pharmacy white paper)

Due the plenty of benefits of online pharmacy and great past experiences, shift towards the digital platform during the pandemic, online pharma industry have the huge potential to grow in future.

IMPACT OF E-PHARMACIES ON SOCIETY DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As lockdown started peoples moved towards e buying of medicines and the demand to purchase medicines through the various e-Pharmacies was increased during the lockdown due to ease of access in one click with safety during COVID-19 pandemic.

The consumers were benefitted from E-Pharmacies during the lockdown by getting the supply of medicines, hand sanitizers, face masks, and other health care products. It was safe shopping process for consumers in lockdown. Consumers could able to order the medicines in any time during the restriction forced in lockdown. Patients who are already sick and can't go outside to purchase the medicines for them E-Pharmacy was the lifeline in pandemic situation. Every order was verified by registered pharmacist. Without prescription, order was not dispatched in pandemic. Orders are dispensed by the registered pharmacist only in tamperproof packaging.

During the lockdown period major E-pharma companies has taken the various initiatives to fight against the novel corona virus pandemic and to maintain the continuity in supply of safe and quality medicines to consumers during the pandemic. These initiatives includes-digital payments, collaboration with local administrations, hospital networking, tie up with local pharmacies, social awareness initiatives, training to staff regarding hygiene and safety. These initiatives are enjoyed by the public during the COVID-19 pandemic which has gain the popularity of E Pharmacy in pandemic.

Online pharmacies have not only served the public during the pandemic but also supported to no. of old aged persons with chronic disorders by delivering the medicines to their doorsteps.

Yogesh Shukla (Director of Medilife) said that online pharmacies are crucial during the pandemic situation for steady supply of medicines and which will to be continuing during the post COVID-19 also. Competitive pricing, ease of access, E-consultation, heavy discount, time/Money saving, 24/7 service, Convenient, physical distancing, increased smart phones, internet penetration etc. are the catalyst which has pushed peoples towards online pharmacy in pandemic.

GOVERNMENT INITIATIVES TOWARDS E-PHARMACIES DURING COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Recognizing the crucial role of online pharmacy during COVID-19 pandemic induced lockdown the union ministry of central government has considered the E-commerce industry to supply the medicine and health care products in the essential services during pandemic.

(Vide order no.403/2020 D on 24/03/2020)

After the release of order by Central government of India almost all states have been issued the separate order to consider the online pharmacy as essential services during the COVID-19 pandemic induced lockdown.

Central government of India has taken this decision in right time which is benefitted to consumers for safe online purchasing of medicines. The decision also helped to boost the online pharma companies market during the pandemic.

After recognizing the importance of the digitalization during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown government has introduced the Janaushadhi mobile app (1 May 2020) to provide the benefits of Janaushadhi scheme. The Janaushadhi app gives the detail information about medicines, nearby centers, and details about the schem.

Union ministry of India has also reported that E-pharmacy sector is significantly contributing to fulfill the aim of national development and digital India. Realizing the importance and scope of digital health care system in pandemic, we need to develop the stronger digital health care system for future.

Still our country is lacking the highly digitalized healthcare system to support in such pandemic circumstances. To grab the potential of E-pharmacy during post COVID-19, we have also need the strong regulatory support system to make E-pharmacy model more foolproof which will enable to overcome the challenges faced Indian online pharma Industry.

CONCLUSION

Due to movement restriction in lockdown and to maintain the physical distancing, the COVID-19 pandemic has called the new way of thinking. Digital and E-commerce industry are becoming the more important due to the pandemic.

E-Pharma industries also growing significantly due to the pandemic induced lockdown as peoples recognized the E-buying of medicines is the safer way to purchase the medicines to protect from the infection.

Consumers are benefited through E-Pharmacy in lockdown by getting the steady supply of medicines, hand sanitizers, face masks and other health care products with safety and convenience.

Central and state government also revealed the encouraging guidelines towards the online pharmacy by considering delivery of medicines through the E-commerce platform are the essential services in pandemic period.

Recognizing the potential of online pharma sector in future (post-COVID) the big E-commerce industries like Amazon, Reliance retail have started to invest in E-pharma sector. Due to complete value proposition offered by E-pharma companies, past experiences, and shift towards digital platforms due to COVID-19, online pharma industry has the huge potential in coming years.

We also need to develop the strong regulatory support system to make the E-pharmacy model more foolproof to overcome the various challenges faced by Indian online pharmacy industry.

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