

HEALTH

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Getting Your Drugs From a Vending Machine

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There's a new antidote for long lines at the drugstore pharmacy: machines that serve up your prescription refills like a can of Coke or a Snickers bar.

The idea behind the machines, which look much like a typical bank ATM, is to expedite a process that is often bogged down by long lines and frustrating waits.

Once customers have filled an initial prescription with the pharmacist, they can register to retrieve and pay for their refills at a vending machine inside the store — even when the pharmacy counter isn't open. Consumers order their refills in the usual way, either online or by phone. A pharmacist then fills the script and places packaged medicines in the machine. To pick up the order, consumers log on with a user name and password and swipe a credit or debit card. Their pre-wrapped package drops into the bin.

The California and Virginia pharmacy boards have cleared the way for the machines in their states, granting waivers of rules that require a pharmacist be present in order for drugs to be dispensed. And other states are considering allowing the machines.



A ScriptCenter drug-dispensing machine

In California, the State Board of Pharmacy has proposed a permanent rule change that could speed the spread of the technology. Between the stores that already have machines, and the ones that are considering it, "we're getting inundated with waiver requests," says the board's executive officer, Patricia Harris. The state Office of Administrative Law is expected to make a decision early next year.

One of the first drug-dispensing machines, called ScriptCenter, was installed in December at a Longs Drug Stores location in Del Mar, Calif. ScriptCenters are also on their way to an Ahold Giant Food store in Reston, Va., and a Safeway Inc. Vons supermarket in Southern California. Asteres Inc., the closely held Del Mar company that developed the ScriptCenter, says it is discussing sales and leasing deals with a number of large drugstore chains around the country.

A similar, rival kiosk — the Automated Pharmacy Machine from Distributed Delivery Networks Corp. (DDN) — is being tested at White Cross Drug Store in San Diego.

Both companies recently made presentations to the Wisconsin Pharmacy Examining Board, which is exploring options for improving access to prescription drugs for people who live in rural areas.

The ATM-like machines are raising questions among pharmacists and state regulators who oversee prescription-drug dispensing. One worry is that patients might end up with the wrong drug. Some pharmacists also don't like the machines because they cut out traditional face-to-face consultations with patients. The concern is that patients might be discouraged from asking pharmacists about such things as whether alcohol should be avoided with a medicine, or possible drug interactions.

"There's lots of leering on the part of regulators and the fear that something like this could replace the pharmacist," says Mary Ann Wagner, vice president of pharmacy regulatory affairs for the National Association of Chain Drug Stores, a trade group in Alexandria, Va.

That can be a difficult argument to make given how many drugs are now dispensed by mail order. Indeed, driving this effort is a need by drugstore chains to boost competition against mail-order pharmacies by making pickups faster and easier. Mail order accounted for 14% of prescription drug sales last year, up from 10% in 1999, according to IMS Health Inc., a drug information and consulting firm in Fairfield, Conn. The machines will be particularly attractive to 24-hour supermarkets that want to cut back their pharmacists' working hours to reduce costs, says Christopher Thomsen, a pharmacy consultant in Kansas City, Mo.

"So far, there hasn't been a line at the machine," says Sid Schuman, holding up a sealed plastic bag that he has pulled out of a ScriptCenter machine at the Longs pharmacy on a recent day. The 69-year-old retired garden-supplies distributor says he placed an online order a couple of days earlier and just popped into the store to pick it up. There are no transaction fees for the customer.

A spokeswoman for Longs Drug Stores says the machines will free up pharmacists to spend more time talking with patients who have questions.

Device proponents say that security and accuracy concerns regarding the machines are overblown. Longs says it tested a ScriptCenter prototype for about six months at its corporate headquarters in Walnut Creek, Calif., to be sure that it wouldn't dispense the wrong drug. And Bill Holmes, president of DDN, a unit of Amistar Corp., says its Automated Pharmacy Machines use bar code and other technologies to avoid errors. Each prescription package has a unique bar code that is read when it is put into the machine and again before it is released to the patient. "If there's no match, the door won't open," says Mr. Holmes. "To date they haven't dispensed a single one inaccurately."

The Asteres and DDN systems are very similar. In fact, Asteres has accused DDN and San Marcos, Calif.-based Amistar of "misappropriation of trade secrets" in a lawsuit filed in a California state court last August. Mr. Holmes and Asteres founder Linda Pinney are both alumni of Pyxis, a maker of an inventory-management and drug-dispensing system used by nurses in hospitals that was acquired in 1996 by Cardinal Health Inc., a giant health-care concern in Dublin, Ohio. "We are aggressively defending ourselves against this litigation," Mr. Holmes says. A trial is set for September.

At the University of California at San Diego's medical center, researchers are planning an academic study of drug-dispensing technology's impact on patient care and pharmacy management. The researchers say they aim to have a ScriptCenter machine installed in a clinic building in the next few months.

The drugstore machines are different from another growing drug-dispensing technology called InstyMeds that is used in about 20 urgent-care centers and hospital emergency rooms. The InstyMeds machines, often located in the waiting room, are prestocked with commonly used drugs. Physicians working in those centers can send an electronic order for a prescription to the machines, which print up a label and dispense the drug to the patient.

"We don't have any present plans to move into drugstores," says Ken Rosenblum, founder and chief executive of Minneapolis-based Mendota Healthcare Inc., developer of the InstyMeds machines.