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## **Companies, Government Push E-Prescribing**

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The widespread use of electronic systems to send prescriptions from doctors to pharmacies promises to prevent thousands of life-threatening medical errors, save billions of dollars in health care costs and even drive more business to drug stores.

Still, the vast majority of U.S. physicians have yet to adopt electronic prescribing, or e-prescribing, for the estimated 4 billion prescriptions they write annually, a situation that a phalanx of corporations and the government are working to change. One coalition promoting e-prescribing estimates that as many as 20 percent of the 550,000 practicing U.S. physicians had the technology to send e-prescriptions but that only 5 percent actually have been using it.

With e-prescribing, physicians can use hand-held or desktop computers or "smart" mobile phones to send patient drug prescriptions to pharmacy computers.

Beyond conveying prescriptions, systems can alert doctors to potential drug interactions or dosing problems, eliminate handwriting errors, automate the time-consuming renewal process, provide data on a patient's drug plan, and potentially cut thousands of pharmacy calls to doctors. Hospitals, insurers, technology companies, regional collaboratives and pharmacies have been working to advance adoption of e-prescribing.

Earlier this year clinical software maker Allscripts Inc., joined computer maker **Dell** (nasdaq: [DELL](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) Inc. to form a broad coalition - the National ePrescribing Patient Safety Initiative - in a \$100 million effort to provide for free Allscripts' Web-based e-prescribing technology to every physician in the United States.

The NEPSI coalition, which estimated the number of doctors using e-prescribing, includes health insurers **Aetna Inc.** (nyse: [AET](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) and **WellPoint** (nyse: [WLP](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) Inc., technology giants **Microsoft Corp.** (nasdaq: [MSFT](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)) and **Cisco Systems Inc.** (nasdaq: [CSCO](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)), **Fujitsu Ltd.** (other-otc: [FJTSY.PK](#) - [news](#) - [people](#))'s U.S. computer business, **Google Inc.** (nasdaq: [GOOG](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)), **Sprint Nextel Corp.** (nyse: [S](#) - [news](#) - [people](#)), SureScripts, **Wolters Kluwer N.V.** (other-otc: [WTKWY.PK](#) - [news](#) - [people](#))'s health division, and several academic medical centers.

The coalition targets doctors in small group practices, aiming to address concerns about costs and difficulty, among other barriers to their adoption of e-prescribing technology.

"A doctor can sign up within an hour," Allscripts Chief Executive Glen Tullman, co-chair of NEPSI, said in an interview. The coalition isn't providing statistics yet but Tullman said the effort is "making great progress."

Allscripts' Tullman said the coalition's effort so far has added thousands of more physicians nationwide to the ranks of e-prescribers. He expects "a very strong, very high-visibility" ramp up in September, with large employers, more managed-care companies and other institutions that pay for health care to join the coalition. He also expects state governments to become active in mandating electronic prescribing.

After recent updates to state laws and regulations, e-prescribing is now legal in 49 states and soon will become so in all 50 with the addition of Alaska, according to SureScripts President and Chief Executive Kevin Hutchinson.

E-prescribing proponents, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, point to a study that estimates adoption of e-prescribing technology could save \$27 billion in U.S. health care costs by reducing adverse drug events and improving work flow.

"Clean and correct scripts safeguard our patients' safety, save our pharmacists time and increase our business," **Walgreen Co.** (nyse: WAG - news - people) chairman David Bernauer told the National Association of Chain Drug Stores at a meeting in April.

HHS, in a recent report to Congress, cited expert projections that e-prescribing could avoid more than 2 million adverse drug events annually, 130,000 of which are life-threatening. Even so, five government-funded e-prescribing pilot projects did not establish the effect on patient safety, the report said, noting the role of office staff members in handling e-prescribing tasks. The effect on safety requires more study, the report said.

The Allscripts-Dell coalition cites statistics from the nonprofit Institute of Medicine of the National Academies that 1.5 million patients a year are injured and more than 7,000 die as the result of preventable medication errors.

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