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Counterfeit Drugs - A Worldwide Danger

We all expect that when we buy medicines, we are getting the real thing. However, counterfeit drugs are sold in many countries. Learn about the dangers of counterfeit drugs and how to protect yourself.

What is a counterfeit drug?

The definition of a counterfeit drug varies by country, which makes the fake drug trade difficult to track across international borders.

Generally, counterfeit drugs are unauthorized and unregulated copies of genuine medicines. Most counterfeits contain no active ingredients. Some are made with the correct ingredients, but at incorrect or inadequate levels. Some counterfeit drugs contain alternate and harmful ingredients not listed on their packaging. Of the known fake drugs in circulation, more than 8 percent contain what WHO calls "high levels of impurities and contaminants."

Drugs are also considered counterfeit if they are labeled with misinformation about the country of manufacture or source of ingredients. Counterfeiters often use inaccurate, fake packaging as part of their effort to deceive consumers. Sometimes this packaging is virtually identical to that used for the real drug, which makes it nearly impossible to determine if the medicine is real or counterfeit based on packaging alone.

Drugs that have been counterfeited in the past include antibiotics, hormones, analgesics, steroids, and antihistamines. Most fake drugs are in tablet and capsule form, and almost half of all counterfeit drugs sold are antibiotics.

Counterfeit drugs should not be confused with generic medicines. Generic drugs contain the same active ingredient as the "brand-name" medicine they replace. Generics are both medically and legally approved and safe. Counterfeit drugs are completely unauthorized and unsafe.

Where are counterfeit drugs being sold?

The problem exists worldwide. In fact, the World Health Organization estimates that fake drugs account for 6 to 10 percent of all global pharmaceutical commerce! The problem is not limited to developing nations; almost 40 percent of all known fake drug sales have occurred in developed nations.

The fake drug trade is particularly active in countries where strong regulations have not been established for the manufacture, importation, distribution, supply and sale of medicines. It is also prevalent in nations where enforcement of such regulations is slow or weak.

In wealthier countries, the most frequently counterfeited drugs are new products such as hormones, steroids, anti-asthma, and anti-allergy medicines. In

developing countries, most of the fake drugs are those used to treat life-threatening conditions such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS. A WHO survey of seven African countries revealed that between 20 and 90 percent of their antimalarial drugs were not up to standards.

Why do people create fake drugs?

The fake drug trade is financially lucrative. Drugs are in high demand and a counterfeiter can spend relatively little on ingredients, especially if using low-quality active ingredients or omitting active ingredients altogether.

Many nations also lack legal parameters that solidly define drug counterfeiting as a crime. Thus even if a counterfeiter is caught, the risk of being criminally prosecuted is sometimes low. This makes drug counterfeiting a relatively safe business for criminally minded people.

The fake drug trade is also spurred by the population's incorrect use of prescription medication. The over-the-counter supply of antibiotics is a case in point. When popular demand for a drug exceeds the available supply, counterfeiters often take advantage of this gap. Such a condition may arise in a pandemic flu situation; Roche has created guidelines http://www.tamiflu.com/consumer_guidelines.asp to help consumers ensure their Tamiflu capsules are actual, active doses.

How can a fake drug harm my health?

Most obviously, a fake drug may contain an unlisted ingredient that is harmful to human health. A counterfeit cough syrup that harmed children in Haiti was found to contain a toxic element of antifreeze. You may be allergic to an ingredient that remains unlisted on a counterfeit package and suffer a reaction to an unknown agent.

Because counterfeits are unregulated there is no system in place for an effective drug recall. If a batch of counterfeit drugs is found to be contaminated or harmful, there is no way to notify consumers to stop taking the medication.

Additionally, fake drug use allows your medical condition to go untreated. Medical professionals prescribe medication you need to recover your good health, and fake drugs interfere with proscribed treatment plans.

Finally, the use of counterfeit antibiotics may contribute to the development of drug-resistant diseases.

Ensure That Your Medicine is Safe and Authentic Purchase medicine from legitimate sources such as licensed pharmacies, health centers and clinics. Inspect the packaging carefully for a batch number, manufacture date, date of expiration and manufacturer name. Only use the product if the package is intact.

Avoid drugs sold by peddlers, whether in marketplaces, on the streets or via the Internet. Be wary about medication that seems unusually inexpensive or easily obtainable. If buying drugs on the Internet, make sure that the source is a certified pharmacy in good standing.

If you are taking a prescription medication and experience adverse reactions, or your condition does not improve, notify the medical professional who prescribed the drug.

The World Health Organization launched IMPACT <<http://www.who.int/medicines/services/counterfeit/en/index.html>> (International Medical Products Anti-Counterfeiting Taskforce) in November 2006. The taskforce will work on global plans to combat counterfeit medical products.

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