THE THREAT OF FALSIFIED MEDICINES

What are falsified medicines?

The European Medicines Agency defines falsified medicines as 'fake medicines that pass themselves off as real, authorised medicines'. Their aim is to look like the genuine medicines produced by legitimate manufacturers.

Since they are manufactured illegally, falsified medicines do not comply with the stringent quality, safety and efficacy standards required by EU law.

Alongside falsified medicines, unlicensed medicines also pose a serious risk to public health. Unlicensed medicines are medicines that have not been authorised by national regulatory bodies and their sale constitutes a crime in many European Union countries.

Risks & impact

Falsified medicines:

- Lack or contain insufficient amounts of active ingredients
- Contain active ingredients in excess of the required dose
- Include toxic and harmful substances

These products are often made by unqualified workers in dirty, underground and unsanitary laboratories, which increases their risk of contamination from bacteria and other agents.

Their consumption can have severe effects on patients' health.

In the best case, falsified medicines fail to treat patients. In the worst case, they interfere with other medications taken by patients, cause unexpected or excessive reactions and side effects, or even death.

The threat of online purchase of medicines

With the rise of the internet and e-commerce platforms, consumers have increasingly turned to online websites to purchase medication.

However, the use of online websites can be problematic, as many existing online services are unregulated or operated by illicit actors who sell falsified or unlicensed medications that have been removed from the market due to their adverse effects or have not been authorised for sale by national regulatory authorities.

These illicit providers target a wide range of products, from medication for weight loss, erectile dysfunction or hair growth, to those used to treat life-threatening conditions like cancer, heart disease or HIV.

The online trade in falsified medicines is also a source of income for organised criminals, who take advantage of the lack of a uniform EU criminal enforcement regime and high profit margins. Alongside it, they often commit crimes such as card fraud and identity theft.

Keeping EU consumers safe online

In 2015, the EU introduced a common logo (pictured right) to help consumers identify legally operating online pharmacies in their own country.

The logo certifies that the online pharmacy or retailer is licensed (registered with the national regulatory authority) and the products it sells meet EU quality standards. Every legally operating online pharmacy or retailer must clearly display the official logo on their website to be able to sell medicines online.

The logo comprises the national flag of the EU country where the pharmacy is registered. Clicking on it redirects users to the website of the national competent authority, which lists all the legally operating pharmacies and retailers in the country.

The European Medicines Agency has compiled a list of national registers of legally operating online pharmacies, maintained by national regulatory authorities. The list is available here.

SPOT THE FAKE MEDICINE

RED FLAGS TO LOOK OUT FOR WHEN PURCHASING MEDICINES

PRICE

IS CONSIDERABLY LOWER THAN THE PRICE FOR THE SAME PRODUCT IN A PHARMACY OR REGISTERED RETAILER

PACKAGING

IS OF POOR QUALITY
IS NOT SEALED OR APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN TAMPERED WITH

DOES NOT HAVE AN EXPIRY DATE

APPEARS TO BE DIFFERENT FROM PACKAGING IN EARLIER PURCHASES

THE INFORMATION IN THE OUTER PACKAGING DOES NOT MATCH THE INFORMATION IN THE INSIDE

MEDICINE'S APPEARANCE

THE MEDICINE APPEARS TO BE DIFFERENT IN SHAPE, SIZE, TASTE, SMELL OR COLOUR

TABLETS LOOK CRUMBLY, MOLDY OR BROKEN

THERE ARE VISIBLE DIFFERENCES IN RELATION TO PREVIOUS PURCHASES

RETAILER'S WEBSITE

OFFERS MAJOR DISCOUNTS

SELLS PRESCRIPTION MEDICATION WITHOUT PRESCRIPTION

DOES NOT HAVE A VERIFICATION LOGO

DOES NOT PROVIDE CONTACT DETAILS OR AN ADDRESS

LABEL & LEAFLET

ARE MISSING FROM THE PRODUCT OR PRINTED WITH POOR QUALITY

CONTAIN INCORRECT INFORMATION

ARE IN A DIFFERENT LANGUAGE

SPELLING ERRORS

THE NAME OF THE PRODUCT, ITS MANUFACTURER OR KEY INGREDIENTS ARE MISPELLED ON THE PACKAGING OR ON THE LABEL

THERE ARE OBVIOUS GRAMMAR MISTAKES IN THE LEAFLET OR THE PACKAGING

WHAT TO DO IF YOU SUSPECT THAT A MEDICINE IS FALSIFIED

- Immediately discontinue use
- Report it to your doctor, national regulatory authority or the local police.

  Bring the medicine with you to your doctor's appointment
- Keep the packaging and other documents and records (i.e. receipt) for reporting

Did you know?

In 2011, the EU enacted the Falsified Medicines Directive, which introduced harmonised measures to fight medicine falsification and keep EU consumers safe. These measures include barcodes, anti-tampering devices, distributor verifications and the EU-wide logo, among others. To access the Directive and learn more about the EU's work in this area, scan the QR code.

To learn more about falsified medicines and stay up to date on the topic, please visit the official webpages of the World Health Organisation and the European Medicines Agency, or consult the online page of the national regulatory authority in your country.

STAY INFORMED