



Counterfeit Medications

Counterfeit crime. It has a certain ring of intrigue. But when it comes to counterfeit medications, there's much more at stake than breaking the law. People's lives also hang in the balance.

What exactly is counterfeit medication? In short, it's fake medicine. It may be contaminated with hazardous ingredients, contain the wrong ingredients or dosages, or have no active ingredients at all. And it may be mislabeled or wrapped in fake packaging, making it appear to be the authentic product. Whether brand or generic, this type of medication is deliberately and fraudulently sold under a product name without proper authorization.

The results can be devastating. Counterfeit medications may cause allergic reactions and other side effects, or worsening of a condition—even death. During a meningitis epidemic in Niger about 10 years ago, for example, more than 50,000 people received inoculations with fake vaccines. As a result, 2,500 people died.

It's estimated that 10 percent of drugs worldwide are counterfeit—up to 50 percent in some countries. Due to strict oversight by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), counterfeit medications are rare in the United States. However, the number of counterfeit investigations by the FDA has quadrupled since 2000. And the Center for Medicine in the Public Interest predicts that, by the year 2010, counterfeit drug sales will reach \$75 billion worldwide, an increase of more than 90 percent since 2005.

To address the problem, the FDA is conducting an initiative to work with drug manufacturers, wholesalers, and retailers. Among other things, it is exploring ways to use special technology that can help identify counterfeit medications.

You, too, can play a role. To begin, be sure to purchase your medications only from U.S. state-licensed pharmacies, such as mine. This assures that your medicine comes from a reputable source. If you buy drugs over the Internet, be especially careful. That's because the Internet is a major source of counterfeit medications in industrialized countries. To protect yourself, you can check to see if the pharmacy is in good standing. Do this by contacting the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy (NABP) at <http://www.nabp.net> or (847) 698-6227. Or buy only from Web sites with the Verified Internet Pharmacy Practice Site (VIPPS) Seal. These are licensed, FDA-approved pharmacies.

It is difficult to tell whether or not a medication is counterfeit just by looking at it. But, it helps to stay alert. Any time you receive a prescription; take note of any changes in color, texture, shape, or taste, or any changes in packaging. Did you have side effects or not get the results from the medication that you expected? If so, talk with your pharmacist right away. If you suspect a medication may be counterfeit, you can contact the FDA at (800) 332-1088.