

DAILY MAIL
UNITED KINGDOM
SATURDAY JUNE 2, 2007

Warning over fake batch of 'lifesaving' cancer medicine

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Last updated at 13:52pm on 2nd June 2007

Thousands of cancer patients have been warned to be on alert for a fake batch of a 'lifesaving' medicine.

Drug regulators recalled a batch of the prostate cancer drug Casodex after the discovery of counterfeit tablets.

A police investigation has been launched after a recent surge in the number of fake copies of key drugs for serious medical conditions.

The alert is the third in a week, and follows similar discoveries of a counterfeit schizophrenia drug and blood thinning drug.

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), which announced the recall, said: "We take this very seriously and a criminal investigation is being carried out."

Patients are urged to contact their chemist as soon as possible if they are taking 50mg tablets of Casodex with the batch number 65520 printed on the packaging.



A police investigation has been launched after a recent surge in the number of fake copies of key drugs (file photo)

The MHRA, the Government agency that oversees the safety of medicines, said it was contacted by a wholesaler who had been offered a suspicious batch of tablets.

Similar recalls have recently been issued over the schizophrenia drug zyprexa and the anti-thrombosis drug plavix.

Police have carried out five raids since those recalls, which were both linked to the same drugs wholesaler. This third recall is also thought to be linked.

Most counterfeit medicines are believed to come from China, Pakistan or India. Casodex, made by the pharmaceutical company AstraZeneca is used to treat 12,000 Britons.

Tests on the seized Casodex samples showed they contained only around three quarters of the quantity of active ingredient on the label. Further checks are now being carried out to see if they contain any harmful ingredients.

A spokeswoman said: "At present there is no evidence of patients having any adverse reactions specifically related to the counterfeits.

"Patients should consult their GP if they have any treatment or health concerns."

It contains the active ingredient bicalutamide and works by blocking the action of the male hormone testosterone in fuelling prostate cancer.

Dr Chris Hiley, head of policy and research at The Prostate Cancer Charity, said: "We are aware that counterfeit casodex is available from suppliers over the internet but have not felt this has been a problem in the UK.

"This is because the NHS prescription system means that there is no need for men to seek out these suppliers to save money or to afford treatment in the first place.

"However, this is the first time we have heard of counterfeit supplies of a well known prostate cancer treatment arriving and, possibly, being dispensed in the UK through the 'legitimate' supply chain. This is clearly of great concern.

The wholesaler who alerted the MHRA should be commended. "We have to wait and see how many of the batch are located and whether in fact men have taken any of them and, if so, for how long.

"Any men with any doubts about what they have been taking should visit their pharmacist or GP with their casodex and packaging with batch number as a matter of some urgency.

"We can only reiterate the MHRA's advice that not only might the counterfeit medicine contain harmful ingredients but that the dose they have been taking may not have been effective as it is only 75 per cent of what it should have been."

Each year nearly 32,000 men are diagnosed with prostate cancer in the UK and 10,000 die from the disease.

Prostate cancer is now the most common cancer diagnosed in men in the UK.

A spokesman for AstraZeneca said: "AstraZeneca's manufacturing and supply chain processes are monitored on a continuous basis.

"On this occasion AstraZeneca has been the target of the illegal practice of counterfeiting and as a result, counterfeit bicalutamide 50mg has been introduced illegally into the UK supply chain."

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