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## **Save a little but lose big online Medicine you buy may be fake, potentially deadly** By MARV SHEPHERD

How much can you "save" by buying cheap drugs over the Internet?

Be careful, consumers. You may, in fact, be paying for dangerous knockoffs that could cost a lot more than you bargained for.

In August, knockoffs of Johnson & Johnson's OneTouch Test Strips were traced to China. One year prior, they had surfaced in 700 pharmacies across 35 U.S. states and Canada.

In July, police in China seized a ton of fake Viagra tablets, a million counterfeit diabetes strips, and a huge store of knockoff Tamiflu cap-sules destined for Internet sale.

On three separate occasions between 2005 and 2006, British officials found counterfeit Lipitor being sold, unwittingly, in brick-and-mortar pharmacies.

These phony medications are not just harmless look-a-likes. Manufactured in places like Pakistan and the former Soviet republics, they are commonly laced with industrial-grade impurities. Dosages may be wildly off.

One Chinese factory boasts that it's producing fake Viagra that's three times stronger than the real thing. For those who are taking cholesterol-lowering drugs for high blood pressure, such a dosage could be lethal. "If you've ever been into a chemist shop in the west and bought a packet of Viagra, there's a chance it may have come from my factory," says notorious counterfeiter Gabriel Zhang, whose Chinese-based factory produces knockoffs of everything from Zyprexa to Casodex, schizophrenia and prostate cancer treatments, respectively.

You can get very sick, or even die, taking counterfeits. In fact, such tragedies occur all too frequently. Earlier this year, for instance, a Canadian woman died after ingesting counterfeit drugs contaminated with heavy metals.

The World Health Organization (WHO) has catalogued several thousand deaths world-wide over the past decade that can be attributed to people ingesting counterfeit medicines.

In 1995, 50,000 patients in Niger were inoculated with fake vaccines during a meningitis outbreak. Of these, 2,500 people died. In 1997, 89 Haitian children died after drinking cough syrup that contained diethylene glycol, a toxic chemical used to make automobile antifreeze.

This past spring, more than 100 people in Panama were killed after ingesting poisonous cough syrup.

Three months ago, the discovery of a counterfeiting syndicate forced Kenyan authorities to order a massive recall of anti-malarial drugs produced in China.

Nonetheless, millions of Americans think they are getting a great deal by purchasing cheap drugs from illegal Web sites. That's partially because U.S. consumers have a false sense of security, as there have been few documented counterfeit-related tragedies in this country.

But that is likely to change as the international counterfeiting industry continues to boom.

In the last decade, knockoff drugs have become a massive worldwide problem. The WHO estimates that at least "10 percent of medicines available globally are counterfeits" and pose a "serious health hazard."

Phony drugs purchased from foreign Web sites are now popping up in the United States with increasing frequency. Last year, the FDA investigated 54 cases. It's no longer just "lifestyle" drugs — like treatments for obesity, baldness, and impotence — that you need to worry about.

Fake versions of the popular anti-arthritis drug Celebrex and the cholesterol drug Lipitor have also become increasingly common — with the individual packets/tablets often physically indistinguishable from the real product.

Even seemingly "legitimate" sellers have the temptation to substitute cheap look-a-likes in order to quadruple their profits.

The FDA closely monitors drugs produced within the United States, but foreign knockoffs — which are mailed from abroad or can be readily smuggled in bulk from Mexico, Canada or elsewhere are much more difficult to screen.

Medications are easily concealed and the FDA lacks the manpower to physically inspect the huge volume of imports. Other countries — including Canada and Britain — have the same problem.

It can be hard to tell if an online pharmacy is legitimate, so consumers who wish to purchase drugs online should avoid Web sites of pharmacies they don't recognize as brick-and-mortar companies. Web sites that don't require a prescription or have a working toll-free number are almost certainly suspect.

Americans who purchase cheap drugs from illicit Web sites should know that they're playing Russian roulette with pills. It may be cheap to get into the game. But the stakes don't get any higher.

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