

COVID-19: PRODUCT FRAUD ALERT

Counterfeit, Falsified and Substandard Medical Products and Medicines

WARNING

Emergency response measures to protect people from the COVID-19 virus must include the urgent need to protect them from fake, falsified and substandard medical and healthcare products and medicines.

Ineffective, fraudulent products undermine public health and efforts to stem the pandemic. In the hands of citizens, infected patients and healthcare professionals, these illicit products heighten risk to exposure and create a false sense of security that accelerates the spread to others. Falsified versions of treatment options (such as Hydroxychloroquine and Azithromycin) will harm or kill already vulnerable patients.

Current shortages of medical and healthcare products are rapidly being exploited by criminal organisations in total disregard of patient health and safety. And while legitimate manufacturers are working overtime to keep up with demand, the availability of fakes and fraudulent products on the Internet is expected to increase dramatically, especially with the closure of retail stores and the imposition of population distancing strategies.

Internet shopping websites and popular social media platforms are already vulnerable to fake and fraudulent product offerings misleading advertisements, and Interpol reports thousands of links to fraudulent advertising of COVID-19 related medical products.

Law Enforcement authorities in the US, UK, China, Germany, Uganda, France, India, Indonesia, Vietnam and elsewhere are taking action and have already begun seizing fake and falsified medical products. These are expected to increase as more illicit products enter the market.

PRODUCT ALERT – WHAT TO LOOK FOR

- Fake, falsified and substandard medical products and medicines: surgical masks, hydro-alcoholic gels, testing kits, thermometers, gloves, sanitizers and engineering monitors to measure body/head temperatures and treatment options currently explored such as Hydroxychloroquine and Azithromycin.
- Counterfeit, substandard healthcare and consumer products that are in exceptionally high demand because of the pandemic and the consequential lockdowns: cleaning solutions, toilet paper, anti-bacterial wipes, indoor sports equipment, refrigerators and freezers, food products and reading materials.

FOR IMMEDIATE ACTION

GOVERNMENTS

- Prioritize the response to fraud among COVID-19 emergency measures, allocate resources to blocking distribution of fake, falsified and substandard medical products and medicines. Reiterate these messages by top government officials.
- Increase vigilance to securing supply chains (e.g., warehouses, hospitals) for genuine COVID-19 related medical products and medicines targeted by criminal organizations.
- Warn consumers about the risks of fake and fraudulent products and medicines, especially online sales of COVID-19 related high-demand and quick-fix products.
- Warn businesses, especially small and medium-sized, about the dangers of buying products from unfamiliar or unauthorized supply chains.
- Step up collaborative work with Internet-based shopping websites and social media networks to accelerate prevention and removal of suspicious sales offers.
- Impose immediate sanctions on the manufacture and sale of fraudulent COVID-19 related products and pursue effective enforcement.

LAW ENFORCEMENT

- Establish a coordinated national strategy to deal with pandemic-related fraud.
- Increase vigilance for theft of targeted medical products and substandard and falsified medicines such as counterfeits, expired, tampered and illegally diverted medicines.
- Share intelligence and best practices and cooperate on cross-border investigations and enforcement actions with other jurisdictions and the private sector.

INTERNET PLATFORMS

- Increase policing and takedown of online offerings and advertisement of COVID-19 related medical products and medicines purporting remedy to COVID-19.
- Warn online shoppers of the insurgence of fake, fraudulent and substandard COVID-19 related products available on the subject platform.

BRAND OWNERS

- Support law enforcement by sharing data from compromised supply chains.
- Raise awareness about online shopping fraud and increase monitoring of online offerings of counterfeit and other illicit products.
- Increase vigilance to securing supply chains for genuine COVID-19 related medical products and medicines that are highly targeted by criminal organizations.
- Collaborate with health authorities and WHO by rapidreporting of all confirmed incidents of falsified medicines.

TRACIT RESOURCE CENTER

This document and other resources: <https://www.tracit.org/covid-19.html>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES ONLINE

- INTERPOL, Global operation sees a rise in fake medical products related to COVID-19, at <https://www.interpol.int/en/News-and-Events/News/2020/Global-operation-sees-a-rise-in-fake-medical-products-related-to-COVID-19>
- World Customs Organisation, COVID-19 Urgent Notice: counterfeit medical supplies and introduction of export controls on personal protective equipment, at http://www.wcoomd.org/en/media/newsroom/2020/march/covid_19-urgent-notice-counterfeit-medical-supplies.aspx
- Europol, How criminals profit from the COVID-19 pandemic, at <https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/how-criminals-profit-covid-19-pandemic>
- UK National Crime Agency, Beware Fraud and Scams during Covid-19 pandemic fraud, at <https://nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/news/fraud-scams-covid19>

INDIA SPECIFIC RESOURCES

- India Today, #OperationCoronaMasks: India Today unmasking substandard mask factories, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/-operationcoronamasks-india-today-unmasks-fake-mask-factories-1660034-2020-03-26>
- Deccan Herald, Coronavirus: 12,300 Fake N95 Seized in Bengaluru, at <https://www.deccanherald.com/city/top-bengaluru-stories/coronavirus-12300-fake-n95-masks-seized-in-bengaluru-819813.html>
- India Today, Fake hand sanitiser racket busted in Hyderabad after 1 lakh bottles sold for Rs 1.4 crore, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/fake-sanitiser-racket-busted-in-hyderabad-after-1-lakh-bottles-sold-for-rs-1-4-crore-1656765-2020-03-18>
- India Today, Coronavirus in India: Delhi's illicit mask factories unmasked, at <https://www.indiatoday.in/mail-today/story/coronavirus-in-india-delhi-illicit-mask-factories-unmasked-1660178-2020-03-27>

POST CRISIS SOLUTIONS

The COVID-19 Pandemic underscores the urgent need for a strong international policy framework to combat the illicit trade of fake, falsified and substandard medical products and medicines. This framework must include stronger provisions for preventing the availability of illicit products online. Stronger measures are also needed to keep illicit pharmaceuticals out of the physical supply chain, including postal and express carrier infrastructures. Finally, consumer awareness must be increased internationally. It is imperative to protect patients, healthcare systems and the wider society from the negative impacts of substandard, falsified, unregistered and unlicensed medical products.
