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Cure that isn't

Beware fake medicines which aggravate illness instead of treating it, writes **Nadia Badarudin**

HAS it ever crossed your mind that some of the medicines you buy may be counterfeit and contain pesticides, arsenic, heavy metal, chalk, brick dust or printer ink?

And what if you find out that the shiny, yellowish tablets you swallowed were actually laced with varnish and yellow paint.

Many people have bought fake medicines from peddlers, illegal or unregistered outlets, traditional medicine retailers or even grocery stores in their neighbourhoods.

The convenience of making purchases on the Internet has also encouraged some to buy online without knowing that, according to the World Health Organisation, over 50 per cent of medications bought via cyberstores are fake.

WHO defines counterfeit medicines as those which have been deliberately and fraudulently mislabelled to hide the identity or source of the medicines to make them appear genuine.

They range from pain killers and antibiotics to hormones, treatments for cholesterol-lowering or life-threatening conditions such as malaria, tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS, as well as lifestyle supplements.

FAKING IT

Fake medicines are hazardous to one's health and can lead to various complications such as treatment failure, poisoning or death.

Locally, the Sale of Drug Act

1952, under regulation 7(1)(A)(a-g) Control of Drugs and Cosmetic Regulation, cites that all medicinal products must be registered with the National Pharmaceutical Control Bureau at the Ministry of Health before being marketed.

"Fake medicines are usually unregistered, may have none or false registration numbers and do not have safety hologram labels.

"Counterfeit drugs may also be adulterated, or contain ingredients, which differ from the original formula or feature packaging information dissimilar from the approved version," says the Health Ministry's senior assistant director of the Pharmaceutical Services Division, Mazlan Ismail.

According to him, a report by Espicom (2008) found that "counterfeiting still persists and makes up an estimated five per cent" of the pharmaceutical market in the country.

"The top three types of fake medicines in our country are sex stimulants, slimming products and facial-whitening cosmetics.

"Among our concerns is the rising in the consumption of sex stimulants or slimming agents in the form

of unregistered food supplements or so-called health drinks such as coffee," he says.

BE SAFE

It is always better to be safe than sorry, and consumers must be aware of the Do's and Don'ts in purchasing medicines.

DON'T BUY:

- Medicines from online pharma-

cies.

- Medicines from grocery stores, coffee shops, street vendors or roadside stalls.
- Medicines with incomplete or incorrect labels or packaging. Dubious-looking packaging is an obvious sign of counterfeits.

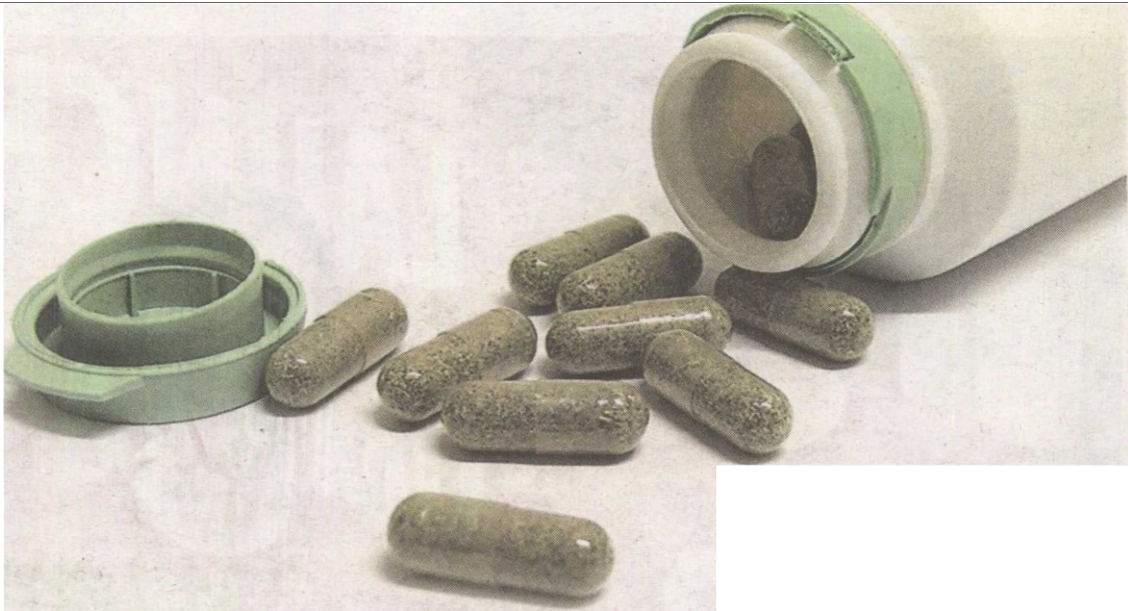
DO:

- See your doctor and get a written prescription before purchasing;
- Buy medicines only from reputable pharmacies.
- Read and examine the label on the packaging.
- Ensure that the drug is registered with the Ministry of Health and carries the Meditag, the secure holographic self-adhesive label, which guarantees that the product is produced by registered importers or manufacturers. The authenticity of the label can be checked using a special decoder available in almost 2,000 licensed pharmacies.
- Be wary of purchasing drugs sold at extremely low prices or through "bargain deals", especially from online stores.
- Check with the Pharmaceutical Services Department or log on to these websites if you're suspicious of a product that you're consuming: www.pharmacy.gov.my, www.bpfk.gov.my or www.knowyourmedicine.gov.my

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Can you tell the difference? **Fake** (left) vs **authentic** (right)



Some fake medicines are manufactured in **dirty backyards or premises** that do not comply with good manufacturing practices

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