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HSA UPDATES

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HSA & INTERNATIONAL COUNTERPARTS CONTINUE TO CLAMP DOWN ON THE ILLEGAL ONLINE SALE OF HEALTH PRODUCTS

The illegal online sale and supply of adulterated and counterfeit health products are a global and growing phenomenon. To protect members of the public from the harm brought by these dangerous products, the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) and international counterparts¹ are committed to clamping down on such activities through information exchange and joint global operations.

2 In recent years, the prevalence of online shopping has grown exponentially. While health products were, in the past, purchased with greater caution and usually in retail shops, consumers are now more open to buying them online. Convenience and lower prices add to their appeal. However, some sellers maintain anonymity. Even those that provide contact details may not be verifiable. This means that there is no knowing what the products contain, where they are from and how they were made.

LIFESTYLE HEALTH PRODUCTS REMAIN IN HIGH DEMAND

3 Of the illegal online sales postings detected by the Health Sciences Authority (HSA) this year, more than 32.5% were lifestyle health products such as those for weight loss and sexual enhancement. These products are often marketed to be “100% natural”, “100% safe” or made of “herbal ingredients”. They may also promise or deliver unexpectedly quick and miraculous results, or carry exaggerated claims. In

¹ HSA's international counterparts include INTERPOL, the World Customs Organization (WCO), the Permanent Forum of International Pharmaceutical Crime (PFIPC), the Heads of Medicines Agencies Working Group of Enforcement Officers (HMA WGEO).

recent years, HSA detected weight loss products which were found to contain the banned substance sibutramine², and some potent medicinal ingredients such as ephedrine, pseudoephedrine³ and potent laxatives. From 2015 to October 2019, HSA received 6 adverse event reports related to online purchases of adulterated lifestyle health products. However, there may be unreported cases of consumers who experienced possible adverse effects without realising that they were caused by these products. They may also not have informed their doctors that they had taken these products.

HSA'S ENFORCEMENT ACTIONS

4 HSA has been working with the local e-commerce websites and online forums to detect and remove posts that sell adulterated and counterfeit health products. From January to October 2019, HSA directed the removal of 1194 product listings from local e-commerce platforms. All sellers were issued advisories or warnings to educate them on the regulatory controls. Recalcitrant offenders were investigated and prosecuted.

5 On the international level, HSA works with INTERPOL to combat the illegal online sale of counterfeit and unlicensed medicines, such as during Operation Pangea, an international Internet week of action that targets the illegal website trade and the people behind the illegal activity. INTERPOL's analysis of the results of Pangea over the past decade reveals that at least 11% of medical products sold online are counterfeit, and all regions of the world are affected.

EFFORTS IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

6 Over the years, HSA has also raised awareness on the dangers of buying health products from dubious sources through press releases, advisories and public education campaigns. The objective is to educate consumers on its potential dangers and reduce the demand for such products. HSA has also produced a video to educate consumers on the risks associated with buying health products online. This video can be viewed at https://youtu.be/dmjl_bSqJgA.

² Sibutramine was previously available as a prescription-only weight loss drug but has been withdrawn from Singapore since 2010. This was due to an increased risk of heart attacks and strokes, as well as other serious adverse effects such as hallucinations or hearing voices, palpitations and breathlessness.

³ <https://www.hsa.gov.sg/announcements/press-release/hsa-alert-'ke-le'-weight-loss-product-sold-online-found-to-contain-potent-medicines-used-to-treat-cough-and-blocked-nose>

CONSUMER ADVISORY

7 Members of the public are advised that:

- Caution is needed when buying health products online. It is not certain what these products contain, and where and how they were made. They could potentially be counterfeits or adulterated with undeclared potent or banned ingredients which can seriously harm one's health.
- Be wary of health products and websites that look questionable. Such websites may have spelling mistakes, no physical address, or make exaggerated claims like "100% safe", "no side effects" or "quick results". Products bought online may be cheaper and appear to offer better value. In reality, however, the lower price could be due to unsafe or inferior ingredients, poor manufacturing methods and substandard or unhygienic storage conditions.
- If buying health products online, you are encouraged to buy them from websites with an established retail presence in Singapore.
- Weight loss medicines that are approved by HSA are available only from a doctor or pharmacist as these are potent medications which should only be taken under medical supervision. There is no quick and easy way to lose weight – it's about achieving and maintaining a lifestyle that incorporates the principles of healthy eating and active living.

Visit the HSA website to learn about [how to stay safe when buying health products online](#).

SALE AND SUPPLY OF ILLEGAL HEALTH PRODUCTS

8 HSA takes a serious view against those engaged in the sale and supply of adulterated and counterfeit health products, and will take strong enforcement action against such persons. Anyone who supplies illegal health products is liable to prosecution and if convicted, may be imprisoned for up to 3 years and/or fined up to \$100,000.

9 Members of the public who encounter illegal, counterfeit or other suspicious health products are encouraged to contact the Enforcement Branch of HSA at Tel: 68663485 or email: hsa_is@hsa.gov.sg.

**HEALTH SCIENCES AUTHORITY
SINGAPORE
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- **About the Health Sciences Authority (HSA)**

The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) applies medical, pharmaceutical and scientific expertise through its three professional groups, Health Products Regulation, Blood Services and Applied Sciences, to protect and advance national health and safety. HSA is a multidisciplinary authority. It serves as the national regulator for health products, ensuring they are wisely regulated to meet standards of safety, quality and efficacy. As the national blood service, it is responsible for providing a safe and adequate blood supply. It also applies specialised scientific, forensic, investigative and analytical capabilities in serving the administration of justice. For more details, visit <http://www.hsa.gov.sg/>.

For more updates on public health and safety matters, follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/HSAsg.

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The “HSA Updates” seeks to provide current information, in a consistent and accurate manner, on topics of public interest. For all issues of HSA Updates, please visit www.hsa.gov.sg click “News & Events”, and select “HSA Updates”.

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