



# A patient's guide to **fake medicines**

# Introduction

Today, we have lots of choice of where and how to obtain the medicine our doctor prescribes. That increasingly wide choice can be confusing. More and more fake (counterfeit) medicines are being sold each year and they could be harmful if taken.

You might not even know when you have been given a fake medicine – they often look exactly like the real thing and it can be very hard to tell the difference between the genuine medicine your doctor prescribes and a fake product. Because of this, you should always get your medicines from a reputable pharmacist whom you know and trust. Taking the genuine medication is important, not just for your health and wellbeing but so that your doctor can plan future care based on accurate information. It is also important for your safety because fake medicines have been found to contain very dangerous substances.

## What are fake medicines?

Fake medicines are deliberately and illegally mislabelled. For example, the labelling may be dishonest about what the medicine is called, where it came from (the medicine company who makes it) or the ingredients. Fake medicines include medicines that:

- ★ have the right ingredients but fake packaging
- ★ have the wrong ingredients
- ★ do not have any active ingredients that are normally in the medicine
- ★ do not have enough active ingredients to work properly.

**Remember:** any medicine or medical device (e.g. an inhaler) can be faked.



# Are fake medicines dangerous?

Yes, fake medicines can be dangerous if you take them.

- ★ The criminals who make the fake medicine may not provide truthful information about the ingredients or who made the medicine.
- ★ Fake medicines may be produced in unsupervised, dirty environments, and therefore may be unhygienic and contain dangerous ingredients.
- ★ Taking fake medicines could prevent you from feeling better and stop your condition from improving.
- ★ If you take a fake medicine that has little or no active ingredient, it may affect your medical condition, and cause side effects which can result in irreversible harm or death.



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# If I purchase medicines over the internet, should I be concerned about fakes?

The internet is the biggest unregulated market in the world – and a place where you can easily become the victim of dishonest online pharmacies. The World Health Organization suggests that over 50% of medicines purchased on the internet may be fake. Shockingly, a recent report by the European Alliance for Access to Safe Medicines (EAASM) found that 62% of prescription-only medicines bought online were fake or substandard. The report is available at: [www.eaasm.eu/Media\\_centre/EAASM\\_reports](http://www.eaasm.eu/Media_centre/EAASM_reports).

## If buying online:

1. Do not buy from sites that offer to sell you prescription medicines without a prescription, or sell medicines that are not approved by The European Medicines Agency.
2. Do not buy from websites that do not have a registered pharmacist available to answer questions.
3. Do not buy from websites that offer 'bulk discounts', 'sample packs', 'new cure' or 'amazing results'. It is illegal in Europe to offer bulk discounts on prescription medicines, so do not trust companies that offer this.
4. If the website offers an 'online consultation', be very careful. Unlicensed websites often offer this service to make them look professional and legal.
5. Only buy from safe, reputable pharmacies. Make sure the online pharmacy is properly regulated. You can check this with your national regulator (please see page 5).



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# How can I tell if my medicines are fake?

The problem with fake medicines is that sometimes it is really hard to tell the difference between the real thing and the fake – even for people who have been taking the medicine for a long time. Sometimes only expert investigators can tell the difference and even then often only after scientific analysis.

Here are some steps that can help you avoid taking fake medicines.

## Check the packaging

1. Make sure you know what every aspect of your medicine's packaging looks like, including the blister pack or dispensing system (if it has one).
2. Every time you renew your prescription, compare these aspects against your previous pack. You are looking for even the tiniest difference in clarity of print, colour, seals, etc.
3. Check that the medicine is in date and that the dosage is correct.
4. Check that there is a patient information leaflet in the correct language.

## Check the medicine

Check carefully that it is consistent in colour and texture with your previous prescription.

1. Does it crumble?
2. Is the colour different from your normal medicine?
3. Does it smell or taste different?

If you notice any differences in appearance, report them to your pharmacist and your national regulator straight away. A list of national medicine regulators is available at: [www.easm.eu/Useful\\_links/List\\_of\\_national\\_regulators](http://www.easm.eu/Useful_links/List_of_national_regulators).



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# Top tips

## Talking to your doctor

Make sure you talk to a doctor before using any medication for the first time. Your doctor will check your medical history and will be able to prescribe the right medication to treat your condition.

Sometimes, you may feel like you cannot talk to your doctor. You may be confused about a new or existing condition, or you may be embarrassed to discuss some issues with your doctor. For whatever reason, you should never attempt to treat your condition without first having a medical consultation.



## Patient groups

Patient groups offer support to people who are looking for advice. They can also provide educational material about specific conditions and information about help in your area. Patient groups cannot diagnose a condition or give out medication, so they should not be consulted instead of a doctor. However, they can be helpful in supporting you and addressing any concerns, even before you visit your doctor.

## Your medication

Think about keeping a diary of side effects. If your medicine does not seem to be working as normal or if you notice new (or absent) side effects, you must report these to your doctor.

By checking your medicines on a regular basis, you can reduce the risk of taking a fake medicine.



# What do I do if I suspect my medicine is not genuine?

If you think the medicine you have purchased is fake:

- ★ you should contact your doctor or pharmacist immediately
- ★ you should also contact the company you bought it from, explaining the reasons for your concerns
- ★ make a note of the product, and where and when you sourced it – you may have to hand over the suspected medicine to your local health authority.

## **Where can I learn more about fake medicines and shopping for medicines safely?**

The EAASM is a Europe-wide patient safety initiative. A key part of the Alliance's activities involves raising public awareness of fake and substandard medicines. The EAASM has a comprehensive website [www.eaasm.eu](http://www.eaasm.eu) that provides information about fake medicines and has weekly news updates about fake medicines around the world.

You can also find information about medicines that have been recalled in your country by contacting your national medicines regulator. A list of national regulators is available at: [www.eaasm.eu/Useful\\_links/List\\_of\\_national\\_regulators](http://www.eaasm.eu/Useful_links/List_of_national_regulators).



