DEA issues safety alert on counterfeit meds

The DEA is alerting the public to the dangers of counterfeit medications containing the powerful synthetic opioid fentanyl.

More than 9.5 million of these counterfeit pills were seized so far this year, according to DEA, which is more than the last 2 years combined.

The agency found that these illegal medications are being purchased online or through social media sites and are contributing to a rise in drug overdose deaths.

“DEA Fact Sheet about counterfeit medications

What are common street names for these counterfeit medications? Mexican Blues, Blues, M-Boxes.

What do they look like?
Counterfeit medications are nearly identical to actual prescription medications. The majority of counterfeit medications resemble oxycodone 30 mg pills (M30s), but can also mimic hydrocodone, alprazolam (Xanax), Adderall, and other medications.

There are indications that drug trafficking organizations are specifically targeting kids and teens by creating counterfeit medications in a variety of shapes and bright colors to appeal to that age group. Counterfeit M30 pills can vary in color from white to blue. The best way to avoid counterfeit medication is to take only medications prescribed by a licensed medical professional and dispensed by a registered pharmacist.

How are they used?
Counterfeit medications are especially dangerous because people think they are purchasing legitimate prescription medications. However, these fake pills often contain lethal amounts of illicit drugs. Distributors in the United States are selling counterfeit medications on social media, appealing to a younger audience that uses these apps. Minors and young adults experimenting, as well as regular substance users, believe they are buying authentic oxycodone, Adderall, Xanax, or other medications but are unwittingly purchasing counterfeit medications that contain lethal amounts of drugs, usually fentanyl and methamphetamine. Twenty-six percent of tablets tested in a DEA laboratory contained a lethal dose of fentanyl.

Source: apha.us/DEAFactSheet

How to stay safe

✓ Look for .pharmacy in the website address to make sure the online pharmacy is safe and verified by the National Association of Boards of Pharmacy.
✓ Visit BuySafeRX.pharmacy to learn more about how to stay safe and save money when buying medicine in stores or online.

Source: Alliance for Safe Online Pharmacies

While there are larger policy issues that need to be tackled around this issue, Hertig said pharmacists can take certain actions right now.

“It’s all about education,” he said. These are simple things pharmacists can address like making sure patients know to check the domain (see infographic) and even asking patients where they get their medications if they are not getting everything from a particular pharmacy.

“We also need to do a better job educating ourselves,” Hertig said.

He would like to see an introductory course on this topic incorporated into the pharmacy curriculum, even if it’s just a short presentation.

Loren Bonner, senior editor