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Phony Rx drugs resurface as a problem along border

By Michael Marizco
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Fake prescription drugs are a problem again along the Sonora border, the Food and Drug Administration warns.

This time, bottles of counterfeit Lipitor, Viagra and something marketed as "generic" Evista have been discovered in Nogales and Agua Prieta, Sonora, pharmacies, the FDA stated in a public warning.

Suspensions rose after consumers who purchased these drugs reported no improvement in their health, said FDA spokeswoman Suzanne Trevino.

The counterfeit Lipitor is a health risk in the sense that a consumer's cholesterol is not reduced with the fake medicine.

Several people duped into buying the counterfeit who believed they were reducing their cholesterol actually were not, she said. The same went for Evista, used to treat and prevent osteoporosis in women, she said. Osteoporosis could progress with the fake medicine.

Fake Viagra wouldn't be effective, she said.

Counterfeit Lipitor and Viagra were purchased all along the border, including Nogales; Los Algodones, near Yuma; and Tijuana, Trevino said.

Telling the difference is relatively simple:

The fake bottles were labeled only in English; normally, Mexican prescription drugs are labeled in Spanish, the FDA warning stated. The counterfeit Lipitor came in round, white bottles, but real Lipitor comes in blister packs.

The stuff marketed as "generic Evista" had been bought in Agua Prieta and came with the name "Raloxifeno."

The label had red triangles across the top and bottom.

This year, Mexico began paying more attention to regulating its prescription-drug-sales market. In that time, 19 pharmacies were suspended and more than 105 tons of medicine were seized or recalled, Trevino said.

Use common sense and don't go into pharmacies you don't trust, Trevino advised.

"If you're buying drugs over the Internet or (from) a foreign country, you need to be aware that it may not have the same standards as drugs that are available in this country," she said.

Prescription-drug calamities have struck across the border before.

American consumers are "the lifeblood of the pharmacies" in Nogales, Sonora, said city spokesman Bob Feinman.

Chaos ensued in the city last May when Mexican police started enforcing laws against buying prescription drugs without a prescription and ended up arresting a 66-year-old Phoenix man buying medicine for his wife, then releasing him after nearly two months.

The ensuing public-relations fiasco caused a drop in business as worried Southern Arizona customers stayed away from Nogales.

Then last July, the FDA released another warning about another cholesterol-reducing drug. Each time the warnings come out, business is affected at the pharmacies as Americans shy away.

This time, several pharmacies and the Chamber of Commerce started a Web site to help educate American consumers on how to buy prescription drugs in Mexico safely.

"You have to use common sense when you enter the pharmacy. Look at the condition of the business - is the area well-kept? (Do) the personnel have credentials to dispense medicine? That's what you need to look for," said Rosendo Flores, owner of Farmacia Nogales, three blocks west of the port of entry.

"And don't get hooked with a hustler on the street," he said.

For information on buying medication in Mexico, go online to www.safenogalesrx.com

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