

Health Canada issues counterfeit COVID-19 vaccine advisory

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Health Canada issued a pre-emptive advisory to Canadians on Dec. 16. This warning, identification number RA-74579, cautioned them not to buy COVID-19 vaccines online or from unauthorized sources, as there is a big chance that they are counterfeit and could pose serious health risks. This followed a global alert from Interpol, the international criminal police organization, to law enforcement agencies around the world, and information received by other government agencies. While Health Canada isn't aware of any cases of Canadians purchasing or using these counterfeit vaccines as of Dec. 18, they are encouraging anyone to report any information on the sale or advertising of these potential counterfeit vaccines to them immediately.

The first vaccine to prevent COVID-19 was authorized by Health Canada to be used in Canada on Dec. 9. That vaccine was the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine, which is 95 per cent effective and requires two doses. It is an mRNA vaccine, meaning it teaches cells how to make a protein that will trigger an immune response, without using the live virus that causes COVID-19. However, it needs to be stored at -70 degrees Celsius, which makes it impossible to use in areas that don't have access to the necessary freezer equipment.

On Dec. 23, they also approved the use of the Moderna vaccine, which also uses mRNA technology. Requiring two doses, this vaccine can be stored at regular freezer temperatures, which makes it suitable to be used in place where they don't have the equipment to store the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine. Health Canada is still conducting trials on vaccines by AstraZeneca and Johnson and Johnson.

Health Canada evaluates the safety, effectiveness and quality of any drug or vaccine before it can be legally sold here, and all vaccines need specific storage conditions to maintain their quality. COVID-19 vaccines, which are free to all Canadians, are dispensed through a tightly controlled supply chain and are only available through clinics offered by local public health authorities, says Geoffrey Legault-Thivierge, media relations officer with the Communications and Public Affairs branch of Health Canada.

He emphasizes that the selling of counterfeit drugs is against the law and poses serious health risks to Canadians, and they take it seriously and work with law enforcement to ensure the safety of all Canadians.

Legault-Thivierge says that once Health Canada identifies or is notified of potential non-compliance with the Food and Drugs Act or its regulations, they will take steps to verify that non-compliance and take action based on the risk to the health of Canadians.

Multiple compliance and enforcement options are available to correct non-compliance or mitigate a risk to Canadians, including, for example, issuing public communications, product recalls, product seizures, and referrals to the Public Prosecution Service of Canada. Selling counterfeit drugs or vaccines is a criminal activity that poses serious risks to the health and safety of Canadians. The department will not hesitate to use all the tools at its disposal to stop these illegal activities and will refer incidents of suspected counterfeit COVID-19 vaccines to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. Health Canada may also refer charges under the Food and Drugs Act to the Public Prosecution Service of Canada for potential prosecution, he says. The courts have the sole discretion to impose penalties.