



24 March 2011

Health Products Regulation Group
Health Sciences Authority
11 Biopolis Way #11-03 Helios
Singapore 138667
Website: www.hsa.gov.sg
Fax: 6478 9069

Dear Healthcare Professional

SERIOUS ADVERSE DRUG REACTIONS RELATED TO THE CONSUMPTION OF ADULTERATED “BLACK PILLS”

The Health Sciences Authority (HSA) would like to alert healthcare professionals to the peddling of “black pills” in certain parts of Singapore. HSA has received several local reports of adverse drug reactions (ADR) associated with the consumption of these pills. These “black pills” are supplied in unlabelled bottles and peddled to the elderly. They are touted for the treatment of a wide range of medical conditions such as arthritic and rheumatic pain, high cholesterol and hypertension.

2 HSA’s analysis of samples of these black pills revealed the consistent presence of 2 undeclared western medicinal ingredients, namely dexamethasone and chlorpheniramine. Based on the available information gathered during the investigation, HSA is concerned that the pills could have been sold to a significant number of elderly consumers who are not aware of the harmful effects of these pills. Healthcare professionals are reminded to enquire about the use of complementary medicines when taking the medication history of their patients and to report any adverse drug reactions suspected to be related to them.

About the ADR reports and adulterants detected

3 Over the recent span of 8 weeks, HSA was alerted to the issue by 2 members of the public and 2 astute doctors who pursued the cause of their patient’s symptoms. The issue was first reported to HSA by 2 members of the public who were concerned that their family members were taking these pills which appeared to work quickly and effectively. Subsequently, HSA also received ADR reports from 2 doctors about 2 patients in their 50’s who presented with signs and symptoms of Cushing’s syndrome such as moon-face, oedema, weight gain, hyperglycaemia, dyslipidaemia and hypertension after taking these adulterated black pills for a period of 2 to 3 months.

4 Upon analysis, each pill was found to contain between 0.2-0.3 mg of dexamethasone and 0.4-0.9 mg of chlorpheniramine. The 2 patients who had suffered adverse effects after taking these pills had consumed 6 pills a day, which corresponds to a therapeutic dose of about 2 mg of dexamethasone a day. The pills were sold in clear bottles without any labeling such as the product/brand name, active ingredients or dosage instructions. One of the patients bought the black pills from a friend and the other from a fishmonger in Jurong market. (Please refer to picture of product below). So far, the peddling of these unlabelled black pills have been reported in Jurong and Waterloo Street.

HSA's actions and advisory

5 HSA is currently conducting investigations on these cases. In the meantime, a Press Release has been issued to warn members of the public against the purchase and consumption of these pills. In view of the potent steroid detected in the pills, members of the public have been advised to seek medical attention if they have been consuming the pills.

6 Healthcare professionals are strongly encouraged to ask their patients about the use of complementary medicines while taking their medical history. Should you encounter adverse reactions suspected to be related to unlabelled bottles of "black pills" as described above, please report these cases to the Vigilance Branch of HSA at Tel: 6866 3538 / 3539, fax: 6478 9069, email: HSA_productsafety@hsa.gov.sg or report online at http://www.hsa.gov.sg/ae_online

Thank you.

Yours sincerely



MS CHAN CHENG LENG
DIVISION DIRECTOR (VIGILANCE, COMPLIANCE & ENFORCEMENT)
HEALTH PRODUCTS REGULATION GROUP
HEALTH SCIENCES AUTHORITY

cc Director of Medical Services, Ministry of Health
Chief Executive Officer, Health Sciences Authority

Picture of unlabelled "black pills"

