

Counterfeit medicine a 'growing threat': EU study

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Counterfeit medicine is a "growing threat" in Europe, causing serious illness or even death and costing the pharmaceutical industry billions every year, according to a study published Wednesday.

Criminal networks are producing an "increasingly diverse range of

medicines", including drugs to treat serious illnesses such as cancer, the European Union's police agency Europol and its Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO) said in a report.

Although [luxury items](#) such as clothes and jewellery are among the most commonly detected [counterfeit goods](#), professional gangs in Europe are producing an increasing range of goods, including food, pesticides and car parts.

"Organised crime groups who produce and sell these goods have no respect for the quality of products which very often pose health and safety risks," said Europol head Catherine De Bolle.

Pharmaceuticals made in unhygienic clandestine laboratories by unqualified workers can contain the wrong active ingredient, no active ingredient at all, or high levels of toxic substances, the report found.

Gangs also import illegal medicines from countries outside the EU, such as China, where most counterfeit items originate, before repackaging them for sale in Europe.

Counterfeiters then deliver the drugs to customers who order them through "unauthorised and unregulated" [online pharmacies](#) or social media pages, which "capitalise on the increasing self-medication trend and [consumer demand](#) for cheap medicines".

The boom in online marketplaces allows criminals to send drugs to customers via parcel, running "a generally low risk of law enforcement detection", while new rail connections between the EU and China provide a faster, cheaper mode of transport than by sea or plane.

Counterfeit medicines cost the EU pharmaceutical sector more than 10 billion euros (\$11.3 bn) each year, the report estimates.

In October, authorities arrested more than 800 people worldwide in an operation dubbed "Pangea XI".

They seized a haul of "potentially dangerous" goods worth 12.4 million euros (\$14 million) that included out-of-date heart surgery instruments smuggled into North Macedonia and fake contraceptive pills hidden inside DVD packages in Poland.

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