

Chinese take risks on black market drugs as COVID surges

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Image of the ultrastructural morphology exhibited by the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV). Credit: CDC

Desperate families searching for critical COVID-19 medication in China, faced with bare pharmacy shelves and an explosion of cases, are being driven into murky online marketplaces rife with price gouging and fraud.

Beijing last month abruptly tore down its hallmark zero-COVID virus containment policy, lifting widespread restrictions that had triggered nationwide protests and stifled the economy. The move unleashed a torrent of infections across the country.

The current COVID wave has seen drug stores stripped of supplies, as people snap up cold and fever treatments. Many have been forced to turn to sketchy online sellers with little guarantee of getting what they have paid for.

China's people have long endured scandals involving tainted medicine, fabricated [clinical trials](#) and lax regulation in the medical industry—prompting many to be sceptical of domestically-produced pharmaceuticals.

Desperately searching for treatment for sick family members, Qiu, 22, told AFP she spent thousands on COVID medicines that never arrived, after contacting someone online who was claiming to represent Hong Kong-based Ghitai Pharmaceutical.

The person said they had access to stocks of Paxlovid—a Beijing-approved COVID treatment developed by US drug giant Pfizer—and could mail some from the semi-autonomous city into mainland China.

After being directed to a sleek "official" website, Qiu then forked out 12,000 yuan (\$1,740) for six boxes of Paxlovid, according to payment

records seen by AFP.

The pills, however, never came and the representative cut off contact, leaving her "hurt, helpless and extremely angry".

"It's disgusting behaviour," Qiu said. "Every second counts when you're trying to save somebody's life."

Prices soar

In a statement to AFP, Ghitai said it was aware of a fake version of its website that claimed to provide COVID medication, adding that instances of fraud had been reported to police.

"Ghitai has never offered medicines... for COVID-19, and entreats consumers to exercise caution to avoid fraud and financial losses," the company said.

Authorities in China have said they have begun shipping Paxlovid to some hospitals and community clinics, but the drug remains extremely difficult for many to obtain.

Multiple clinics in several cities—including Beijing and mega-city Shanghai—told AFP they were not currently offering the treatment and did not know when they could do so.

Limited stocks on e-commerce platforms have also rapidly sold out, leaving scalpers to cash in.

One seller contacted by AFP this week said they were charging 18,000 yuan (\$2,610) for a single box—around nine times the official price.

They claimed the medicine would be shipped from the southern city of

Shenzhen, but said buyers would "have to wait" for delivery.

The seller did not say how they had sourced the pills, and stopped responding after an AFP journalist identified themselves.

'Despair and helplessness'

China's public security ministry on Monday ordered a crackdown on "illegal and [criminal activity](#) involving the production and sale of counterfeit epidemic-related medicines and related items".

Despite those risks, the [black market](#) remains a common last resort for people like Xiao, whose elderly grandfather fell ill in December.

The business administrator, 25, was "utterly bewildered" when an online tout demanded 18,000 yuan for Paxlovid.

She could not afford it, and her desperation turned to "despair and helplessness" when her grandfather died days later.

"I just don't get how some people were able to get hold of the medicine," she said. "People like us can't even buy one box. How do they have so many?"

With authorised medications virtually out of reach, some are taking a chance on illegally imported generic alternatives.

Overseas drugs typically come at a fraction of the cost, but importers can face [legal action](#) for bringing in unregulated medications.

Indian variants of Paxlovid are cheaper, but still command hefty sums.

In an online chat this week, an AFP reporter encountered a person

claiming to be an Indian pharmacist who was offering anti-COVID generics for as much as 1,500 yuan (\$217) per box to dozens of prospective Chinese buyers.

They included a variant of Paxlovid sold under the brand name Paxista, and two generics for pharmaceutical giant Merck's treatment called Movfor and Molaz.

Beijing gave conditional emergency approval last week to Merck's antiviral—sold internationally as Lagevrio—for use on vulnerable adults with COVID.

A Shenzhen-based intermediary for the pharmacist said they saw "no moral quandary" in setting high prices for the potentially life-saving medication, adding that they were more concerned about legal problems.

In the chat room, doubts about the reliability of the generics plagued several users.

Said one woman: "I just don't know who to believe."

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