

Europol Report: Pharmaceutical Crime in the EU



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News

At the end of January 2025, Europol published a new [report](#) outlining its assessment of the threat posed by pharmaceutical crime in the EU and beyond - an illicit market that is global and growing. The report aims to raise awareness of how criminal networks exploit consumers and industry to generate illegal revenues through the production and sale of counterfeit medicines as well as substandard, falsified, and counterfeit health products.

Forms of crime include the following:

- *Substandard health products* come from legitimate manufacturers but do not meet quality standards.
- *Counterfeit health products* are medicines that deliberately misrepresent their identity, composition, or source. They can include products with incorrect ingredients, the wrong amount of the the correct ingredients, no active ingredients, or fake packaging. The intention behind counterfeit products is to deceive consumers about their origin and efficacy. Counterfeit drugs may look identical to the real product, which is why they are classified as a subset of falsified products.
- *Falsified health products* typically involve unauthorised replication of brand-name medicines.

While all counterfeit drugs can be considered falsified, not all substandard or falsified products are counterfeit. Nevertheless, each category poses a significant risk to public health and generates enormous financial losses for legitimate companies, undermines brand credibility, and also endangers investments in research.

According to the report, criminal actors and networks operating in the EU are involved in either importing, exporting, or manufacturing such illicit products. They target a wide range of products. Diversion from the legitimate supply chain, through illicit acquisition via counterfeit or stolen prescriptions, or through legitimate sales, is a common modus operandi driven by market needs, the value of medicines, and legal supply challenges. Social media and online marketplaces, both on the surface and on the dark web, remain central to the trade in counterfeit pharmaceuticals.

The misuse of prescription and over-the-counter medicines as well as other health products for recreational purposes, psychoactive effects, weight loss, performance enhancement and/or cosmetics also continues to remain a widespread and growing phenomenon. This increasing demand will generate continuous opportunities for organised crime.

Lastly, the report emphasises the need for a multidisciplinary approach to tackling pharmaceutical crime, involving all key stakeholders such as law enforcement, health authorities, patent holders, the manufacturing industry, and digital service providers.

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