



Fake Pharmaceuticals = Real Problems

Concepts & Skills

- Raise awareness about fake pharmaceuticals sold on social media and the growing issue of fentanyl in fake pills
- Examine the health implications of taking pills acquired from anyone other than a licensed provider
- Make informed decisions
- Evaluate the effect of social media on buying behaviors
- Understand risks and debunking the perceived benefits of buying pills online
- Apply critical thinking to online sales of medications
- Read informational text

Dear Educator,

Counterfeit pharmaceuticals are a real and sobering problem. Easy to obtain anonymously online, fake medications can be tempting to teens and tweens, who may not understand the real and serious risks involved. Criminals are selling pills that may contain harmful substances like fentanyl. These pills are killing Americans at an unprecedented rate. Bottom line, taking medication that isn't prescribed to you by a doctor and dispensed by a licensed pharmacy is gambling with your life.

The following activities are designed to empower young people to "think again" before buying and/or taking pills acquired from anyone outside of a licensed provider.

We hope that you will share this program with other educators at your school. And let us know your opinion of the materials by visiting [ymiclassroom.com/feedback-stopfakepharma](https://www.ymiclassroom.com/feedback-stopfakepharma).

We look forward to your comments.

Sincerely,

Dominic Kinsley, PhD
Editor in Chief
Young Minds Inspired



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"Go For Real™," and "You're Smart. Buy Smart.™" are
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Target Audience

Middle and high school students

Program Components

The following materials are available at [ymiclassroom.com/stopfakepharma](https://www.ymiclassroom.com/stopfakepharma).

- This teacher's guide
- Two reproducible student activity sheets
- A handout for Activity 1
- A PowerPoint presentation
- A parent/caregiver letter in English and Spanish

How to Use the Program

Use the PowerPoint presentation as an introduction to these lessons or to supplement the individual activities. It features myths and facts about fake pharmaceuticals to engage students in discussion and help reinforce key messages in this program. School nurses may also want to show the presentation to groups of students or parents and caregivers. Make copies of the activity sheets for students and send home the parent/caregiver letter or email it to families. Encourage students to take their activity sheets home and share the information with their families.

ACTIVITY 1

Fake Pills: Uncovering the Truth

To start, prompt a class discussion by asking: *Do you think medicines bought through social media are different from medicines you get at a pharmacy?*

Explain that medications obtained at a licensed pharmacy require:

1. A patient (that means you) visits a doctor.

2. The doctor asks you questions, performs a physical, reviews your injury, illness, or complaint, and determines the best treatment for you. This may result in a prescription for medication tailored for your needs, which can be filled by a pharmacy.
3. That information is conveyed to a pharmacist, who reviews and fills the prescription in a highly regulated pharmacy, and will confirm that the medication does not interact with anything else that you may already be taking.

Ask: What is the process when pills are bought through social media?

Explain that medications bought and sold anywhere except a licensed pharmacy — like those sold on social media — can be fake.

Read the statements below and ask the students to give you a "thumbs up" if they think the statement is true, or a "thumbs down" if they think it's false. Ask volunteers to share the reason for their response, and share the answers and information below.

1. Taking medication from someone other than your provider can lead to serious health problems.

True: Medications that are sold by licensed pharmacies are required to meet rigorous quality and purity standards. Fake medicines have no oversight and contain unknown ingredients in unknown amounts.¹

¹ [pfizer.com/news/articles/fake_drugs_101_facts_on_illegal_counterfeit_drugs](https://www.pfizer.com/news/articles/fake_drugs_101_facts_on_illegal_counterfeit_drugs)

They can cause allergic reactions, be addictive, and even kill you.

2. People who sell pills on social media are sourcing them from the same labs that sell to pharmacies.

False: Prescription medications are highly regulated by both state and federal agencies and must successfully complete clinical trials and comply with health, safety, and quality standards before they can be made available for human consumption. Fake pills are produced illegally in the U.S. and overseas, primarily in China, Mexico, and India, with no quality control or safety measures. These counterfeit pills are often part of larger organized crime rings, with the revenue used to fund other illegal activities.²

3. You can always tell if a pill is fake by looking at it.

False: It's often impossible to tell by looking whether a pill is real or fake. Fake pills often appear identical to legitimate prescription pills, with nearly the same colors, shapes, and markings. This is why you should take only medications prescribed by a doctor and dispensed by a licensed pharmacy.²

4. If medication is generic, it's fake.

False: Generic means unbranded, not fake. Many types of medications are available in both branded and generic, or unbranded, form. For example, the medication Tylenol® is also available in generic form, as acetaminophen. Both are safe to use and heavily regulated to ensure they contain exactly what the bottle describes. However, criminals can sell fake versions of both branded and generic medications to make a quick buck.

Discuss the results of this exercise with students.

Demonstrate the Issue: Next, try to balance a few grains of sugar or salt on the tip of a pencil, and explain that the number of grains that can fit on the tip of a pencil represent a deadly amount of fentanyl. The problem? People take (and/or) buy pills without knowing there's fentanyl in them, in lethal amounts.



Pass out the activity sheet and accompanying handout. Discuss the information in Part 1 about fake pills and fentanyl. For Part 2, discuss the communication exchanges and students' reactions to them.

Answers: Part 1. Risks of Pills Not Prescribed to You:

1. The Unknown — there's no way to know what's in the pill.
2. Addiction — it only takes one pill to become addicted.
3. Sickness/allergic reaction — could be severe.
4. Death — one pill, which could be the first and only pill someone takes, could be lethal.

Perceived Benefits of Pills Not Prescribed to You:

1. Quick — buying fake pills online can be faster than getting and filling a prescription.
2. Anonymous — easy to obtain without anyone knowing.
3. Problem solver — may help solve an issue, like physical, emotional, or mental pain.

ACTIVITY 2 Think Again!

Ask students why they think criminals make fake medications. The answer: *because they can make a lot of money selling them.* Fake products, including medicine, are a global problem. For example, in some parts of the world, criminals sell fake cancer drugs, fake vaccines, and drugs to prevent malaria. The World Health Organization estimates that around 1 million people die each year from fake medications.

These fake medications are often made in unsanitary conditions, with potentially harmful ingredients, and they are not tested for safety. Criminals don't care if people get hurt or even die using their products.

Show students the "Think Again" PSA at youtube.com/watch?v=thjOdBAXtEk. Then, pass out the activity sheet and review the information. For Parts 1 and 2, have students work in small groups to discuss the passage and design a mockup of an ad or social media post to help educate their peers about the dangers of fake pills and fentanyl.

If time allows, play the online game featured on the bottom of the activity sheet together, or encourage students to play it at home with their families.

Extension Activity: Help spread the word! Using a large sheet or bulletin board paper, have students use their ads or social media posts and information they've learned to create a graffiti wall with facts about fake pills and fentanyl, as well as encouraging messages to help young people "think again" before buying or taking fake pills. Display the completed artwork in a school hallway to bring the message to all students.

RESOURCES

- National Crime Prevention Council: ncpc.org/goforreal
- Ymiclassroom.com/stopfakepharma
- Facing Fentanyl: facingfentanylnow.org
- Drug Enforcement Administration: dea.gov/onepill
- NCPC - The Lives Project: livesproject.org/about
- Pfizer: pfizer.com/news/behind-the-science/combatting-rise-online-counterfeit-medicines
- Pharmaceutical Security Institute: psi-inc.org
- NCPC - Fighting Fentanyl: ncpc.org/fighting-fentanyl-2/
- ASOP Global Foundation: asopfoundation.pharmacy

² dea.gov/sites/default/files/2021-05/Counterfeit%20Pills%20fact%20SHEET-5-13-21-FINAL.pdf

Fake Pills: Uncovering the Truth



Think you know all about fake meds? Think again! Because what you don't know can be deadly.

Part 1: Read the information below, and then answer the question related to the graphic.

Counterfeit pills are fake versions of medicines like Oxycontin®, Adderal®, and Xanax®. They are sold illegally, often on social media, rather than the safe way — through a licensed pharmacy with a prescription from a trusted medical professional.

SM Fake pills can harm you, especially ones that contain ingredients like fentanyl. Fentanyl is a very strong synthetic opioid sometimes used to treat severe pain under the strict supervision of a doctor. Criminals often use it as a filler ingredient because it's cheap to make and is highly addictive. The drug binds itself to receptors in the brain that control emotions and pain. After taking the drug, even for a brief time, the brain's sensitivity is weakened and it depends on the drug to feel pleasure. This makes someone a repeat customer to a drug dealer. (Other effects of fentanyl include happiness, drowsiness, nausea, confusion, problems breathing, unconsciousness, and more.)

But fentanyl can be deadly. A very small amount of fentanyl — as little as a few grains that could fit on the tip of a pencil — can be lethal. People who buy pills from social media, from friends, or anywhere other than a licensed pharmacist can't know if the pills are real or contain fentanyl. They may look like the real deal, but think again. Tragically, many people — especially young people — are fooled into death as a result. Because of this, fentanyl overdose is the leading cause of death for teens and young adults.

Complete the graphic below. Once done, consider this: Is it worth taking a pill that you bought online or got from a friend? Write your thoughts on the back of this sheet.

Risks of Pills Not Prescribed to You

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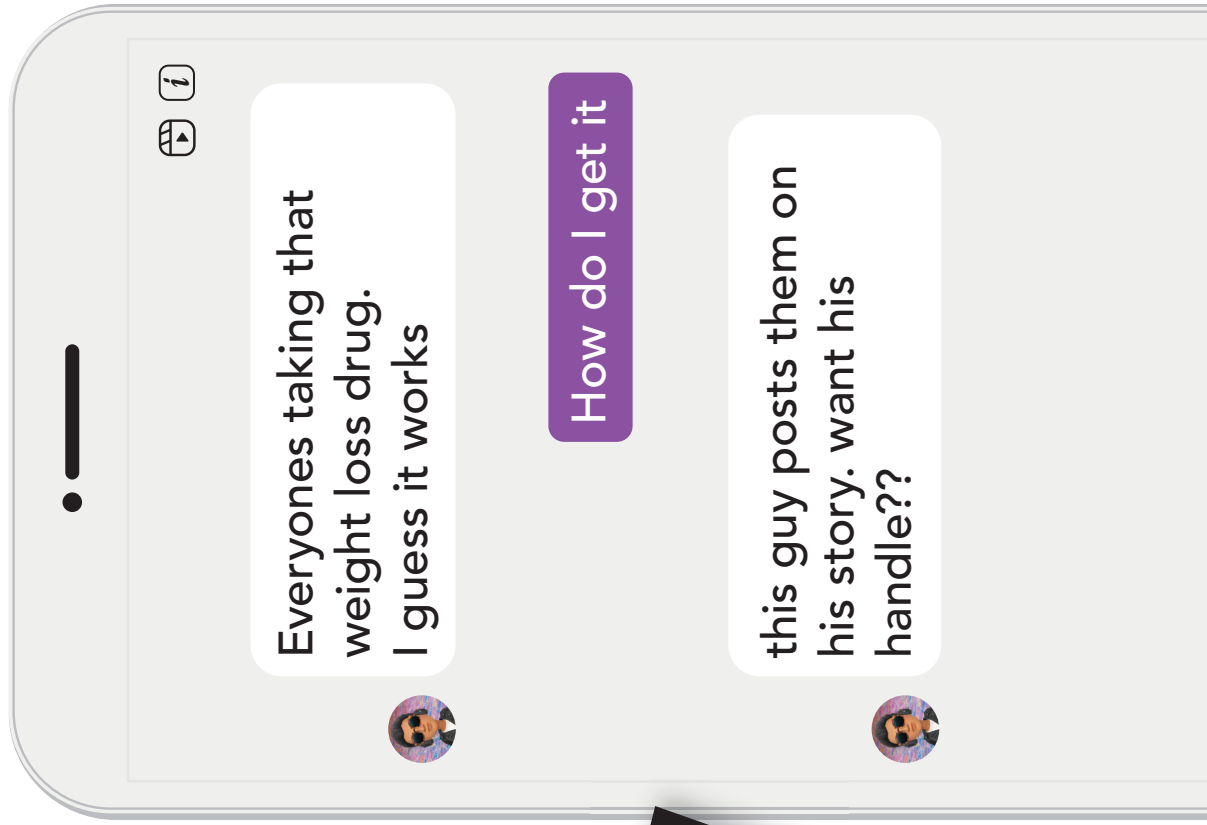
Perceived Benefits of Pills Not Prescribed to You

-
-
-
-
-


Learn more about fighting fentanyl at livesproject.org. And test your knowledge about counterfeit products with the online game at mcgruff.org/games/think-again/.

Part 2: Review the handout demonstrating exchanges between drug dealers and potential buyers. Analyze each exchange and discuss what went right or wrong.

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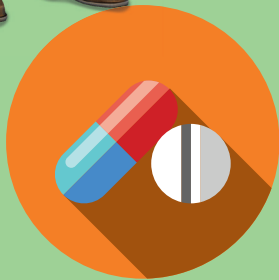
Fake Pharmaceuticals = Real Problems



Think Again!



Pills that aren't prescribed to you can be dangerous, and social media is making pills more accessible than ever before. Many of the pills sold on social media are fake. And the criminals who sell these fake pills are using the money they make to fund other illegal activities. Here are the facts:



Criminals across the globe make \$200 billion dollars a year from selling fake medicines.



According to the CDC, between 2000-2019, approximately 400,000 people died of overdose. Between 2020 and 2023 alone, 308,358 people died of overdose, with 68% of those deaths related to fentanyl.



The money criminals make from selling fake pharmaceuticals often goes to fund international organized crime and illegal activities like gang violence, purchasing illegal weapons, child labor, and drug and human trafficking.

Part 1: How can we stop these criminals and take a bite out of counterfeit crime? One way is to raise awareness about the issue. Brainstorm with your group and write some ideas in the space below to let people know that anyone who looks to buy pills on social media runs the risk of serious injury, addiction, and even death. Use the back of this sheet if needed.

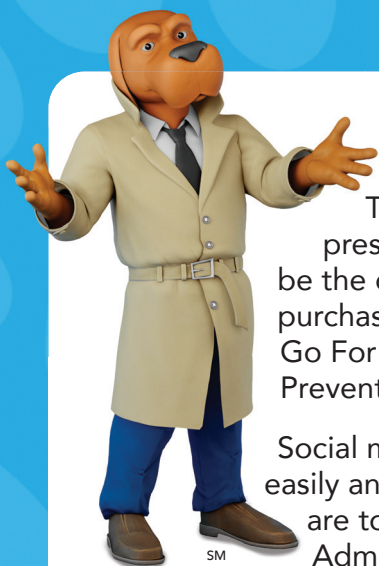
Part 2: McGruff® says don't give crime a chance. You've got this. You're smart. Buy smart. Always go to a doctor for medical advice and prescriptions, and only purchase medication from a licensed pharmacist. That's the only way to be sure your medicine is safe.

Now, to help others avoid being tricked, imagine that you're a social media influencer. Work with your group to design a mock-up of an ad or social media post to spread this message and encourage people to "think again" before taking pills obtained on social media.



Can you identify fake products? Test your skills and Take a Bite Out of Crime® with this free online game at: mcgruff.org/games/think-again/.

Brought to you by



Dear Parent or Caregiver,

Talking to your child about drugs isn't easy. Not everyone who takes a pill without a prescription is struggling with substance abuse, depressed, or in pain — yet one pill can be the difference between life and death. Today, your child learned about the real risks of purchasing fake pills — including those containing fentanyl — through a program from the Go For Real™ Campaign (United States Patent and Trademark Office and National Crime Prevention Council) and the education specialists at Young Minds Inspired.

Social media provides young people with access to medications that can be purchased easily and anonymously online. Many of the pills are fake and may contain chemicals that are toxic and highly addictive, such as fentanyl. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, 7 out of 10 fake pills they confiscated contained lethal doses of fentanyl.* Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid that is cheap, addictive, and deadly.



Fentanyl Is Potent!

Fentanyl is 50 times more potent than heroin and 100 times more potent than morphine. Just two milligrams of fentanyl, which is equal to 10-15 grains of table salt, is considered a lethal dose.

Having ongoing conversations about the dangers of taking medicines obtained or purchased anywhere other than a licensed pharmacy and prescribed by a medical professional is an important part of helping to keep your child safe.

To help you start the conversation:

- Ask your child what they've learned about fake pharmaceuticals and the issues of getting them on social media.
- Watch the "Think Again" video together (youtube.com/watch?v=thjOdBAxtEk), and talk about the issues of counterfeit goods.
- Read together some of the stories from The Lives Project (livesproject.org).
- Listen to your child's concerns and talk about this issue.
- Encourage your child to reach out to you or another trusted adult if they need help.
- Review steps they should take if they suspect a friend might be taking fake pills or if a friend has an overdose.

Through your conversations, encourage your child to "think again" when they come across something that may be dangerous, whether online or in real life, and to come to you for help.

Resources

For additional information, check out the following resources:

- National Crime Prevention Council: ncpc.org/goforreal
- Ymiclassroom.com/stopfakepharma
- Facing Fentanyl: facingfentanylnow.org
- Drug Enforcement Administration: dea.gov/onepill
- NCPC - Fighting Fentanyl: ncpc.org/fighting-fentanyl-2/
- NCPC - The Lives Project: livesproject.org/about
- Pfizer: pfizer.com/news/behind-the-science/combating-rise-online-counterfeit-medicines
- Pharmaceutical Security Institute: psi-inc.org
- ASOP Global Foundation: asopfoundation.pharmacy

* dea.gov/onepill