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Beauty products sold online: The ugly truth

Items such as diet pills could be untested and pose health risks: HSA

BY ELIZABETH SOH

TEMPTED by cheap and convenient beauty fixes found online? You might want to think twice before turning to the Internet for that quick solution.

Items readily available in cyberspace – such as slimming pills and breast enhancement cookies – may not have been tested and cleared for sale in Singapore.

In some cases, they may pose health risks, said the Health Sciences Authority (HSA).

In a statement to The Straits Times, an HSA spokesman strongly cautioned members of the public not to risk their health for the sake of convenience, lower prices or greater privacy by purchasing health products from sources like postings on forums and Internet websites.

“Products from dubious sources can be dangerous as they may contain potentially harmful potent substances that could lead to serious adverse events,” she said.

For example, some breast enhancement cookies have been found to contain a plant oestrogen that could overstimulate breast tissue and cause cancer – raising concerns about young people here who turn to blogshops for cheap and convenient beauty fixes.

Online shops sell products, usually from Hong Kong, Japan and China, that claim to make you over from head to toe – but few buyers are aware of the possible adverse reactions.

They range from iris-enlarging contact lenses which have been known to cause serious eye infections, to stomach slimming patches which have scarred users. Prices range from \$13 for the contact lenses to about \$60 for slimming pills or breast enhancement cookies.

Young people who purchase such beauty products say they are aware of the risks but continue to buy online because of competitive pricing and also because many of the products are not sold here.

“I really want to lose weight, and I read about Flashover diet pills in a beauty forum and everyone was raving about it, so I just had to buy it,” said polytechnic student Chan Xinyi, 17. “It’s not available here so of course I buy it online.”

Design student Guang Min, 19, who regularly orders a detox slimming tea from China from blogshops, shares a similar view.

“I would rather buy beauty products that I heard about online and that have been reviewed than in shops here – it’s also more convenient, and cheaper.”

Dr Lynda Wee, adjunct associate professor in retail at the Nanyang Business School, says these young people are driven to purchase such products by a new ideal of beauty perpetuated largely by pop stars from Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong.

“Fundamentally, there is a culture

change in the way young people perceive beauty,” said Dr Wee. “They are very influenced by Japanese and Korean pop stars, who place a big emphasis on being skinny and having large eyes, and actively seek out a way to achieve that look.”

Most then turn to blogs and forums, which recommend such products.

“The Internet is a borderless marketplace, everything and anything is available,” said Dr Wee.

Last November, a 16-year-old girl was nabbed by the HSA for selling slimming pills online, making her the youngest person here caught for an online offence. She had bought the pills online for \$220 and attempted to resell them for \$130 after they caused her to develop a throat irritation.

As of November last year, 39 people had been arrested for selling prescription or counterfeit drugs online. In 2008, 34 people were arrested.

At least one teenager will not be buying beauty products online any more.

Private school student Janis Goh, 19, bought stomach slimming “patches” from a blogshop in November last year, in the hope of achieving a flatter tummy. Instead, she now has a permanent rectangular-shaped scar on her belly after using the patches for a month.

“Nobody believes it is going to happen to you, but it will,” said Ms Goh. “It really is better to be safe than sorry.”

Under the Poisons Act, anyone convicted of selling prescription drugs or counterfeit drugs online can be jailed for up to two years and fined \$10,000.

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BEWARE THESE QUICK-FIX SOLUTIONS

▶ Eyes: Circle Lenses

These iris enlarging contacts which can be up to 16mm make the pupils appear bigger. They are banned from being sold without a prescription in Singapore.

▶ Breasts: F-cup cookies

These bust enlargement cookies come in a range of flavours and contain a plant oestrogen that could adversely affect girls going through puberty by overstimulating breast tissue.

▶ Tummy: Anosa Slimming Patch

These patches promise to reduce fat in the target area of the tummy. Users describe a “burning” feeling and one even complained of scarring after using them.

▶ Legs: Leg Panic SOS

These pills claim to slim and tone down large thighs and legs.

▶ Overall weight loss: Flashover Diet

These pills claim to be so strong that they are “for fat people only”.

Any suspicious sale of illegal medicines and health products can be reported to HSA at 6866 3485

Items featured have not been cleared for sale in Singapore.

TEXT: ELIZABETH SOH PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

HSA tips on online beauty products

■ **“Scientific evidence” claims**
Many websites may claim that their products were developed based on “scientific studies” and “evidence”. Such details are usually not verifiable, and may not be accurate.

■ **“100%” claims**
Online dealers who claim that their products are “100% effective” or “100% safe” are exaggerating. No product can be guaranteed to be free of risk.

■ **“Guaranteed quick results”**
Be wary of comments and feedback found in online chatrooms and forums on the “effectiveness” of products. They should always be viewed with some scepticism regardless of how convincing they may sound.