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MEDICINE

Some Diabetics Taking Big Risks While Trying To Save Money On Supplies



Ruben Nazario and his wife, Bienvenida, of Hartford, who were both laid off from their jobs a few years ago, are among many uninsured diabetics. They said they are grateful for the assistance of the Charter Oak Health Center, which often picks up or supplements the cost of Bienvenida's insulin. Bienvenida is now a part-time tutor for the East Hartford Board of Education. (PATRICK RAYCRAFT / HARTFORD COURANT)

By JANICE PODSADA

As the recession continues its bloodletting, many out-of-work and uninsured **diabetics** are finding it increasingly difficult to buy needed medical supplies. To save money, some are testing their blood sugar fewer times a day and dosing less often, putting their health at risk. Others are turning to classified ad websites, such as craigslist, for cut-rate prices on glucose test strips and other diabetes-related supplies, including insulin pumps, and pre-measured insulin pens, which are both prescription items.

But buying medical supplies from such unknown sellers is a gamble. The offerings might be expired, tainted or even counterfeit, the Food and Drug Administration said in a statement. "Whoever is selling some of these items is selling a ticket to die," said Mayra Grimaldo-Cagganello, coordinator

of health education services at Charter Oak Health Center in Hartford.

Insulin pumps are prescription medical devices whose use must be carefully monitored by a doctor or nurse, Grimaldo-Cagganello said. But a recent ad on craigslist listed an insulin pump for sale for \$1,000. New, they can cost on average about \$6,000, with some priced at more than \$10,000. The ad read: "Nurse needed to train, or you can go online for detail training. Just need insulin from doctor. ... You will [lose] lots of weight, no more injections, price negotiable."

Another insulin pump ad said the device came with some insulin cartridges, but no instructions. "Someone using an insulin pump without supervision may be facing death or

huge complications," said Grimaldo-Cagganello, who counsels people with diabetes.

Prescription drugs and medical devices aren't allowed to be bought or sold on craigslist. Users are responsible for complying with the rules. Any substance that requires a prescription isn't allowed on **eBay**, and injectable substances are never allowed even if they're available over the counter, according to eBay's online sales rules. Glucose test strips are among the most frequently advertised items on craigslist and eBay. Their sale is legal. As an over-the-counter item, test strips, which are used with a glucose monitor, don't have to be sold by a licensed dealer, according to the FDA. They are critical to managing diabetes, said Howard Steinberg, chief executive of LifeMed Media Inc., a Westport multimedia company that markets to diabetics. "The data they give tells you how to dose."

But at a cost of about \$1 each, test strips are expensive, especially for people who must test their blood sugar level a dozen or more times a day, said Steinberg, who was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes when he was 10 years old. "I have OK insurance. It pays for about six strips a day," said Steinberg, who tests his insulin level more than a dozen times daily. The sale of glucose test strips is almost a \$10 billion industry, Steinberg said. Brand name strips often sell for \$100 or more for a box of 100. A box of 50 Abbott Freestyle test strips costs about \$65 at Walgreens. An unopened box of the same brand and quantity was selling recently for \$15 on craigslist.

Although the price may be enticing, "you don't know what you're getting," Steinberg said. "For people who are desperate and they get unexpired goods, it's the best they can do."

Test strips have expiration dates — their shelf life is limited, and extremes of temperature and humidity can affect their performance. But that hasn't stopped several websites from advertising that they will pay cash, "up to \$16 a box," for any "unexpired, unopened" test strips. It's not clear where these items are then sold. Attempts to contact several buyers by telephone and e-mail went unanswered.

"The reason all this is happening is because of the economy. To get food on the table, people are selling the medications. It's terrible, terrible, terrible," Grimaldo-Cagganello said. The availability of test strips in bulk from individual sellers on craigslist and "buy-back sites" raised the suspicions of a health care worker who asked not to be identified. "I wonder how many employees of pharmacies, hospitals, home care and medical supply companies are 'lifting' a box a day or a case at a time and selling them," the worker said. "How else would someone have over 100 boxes to sell?"

With so much money at stake, it's not hard to imagine the buy-back sites might alter the expiration date, the health care worker added. "I would worry where have the strips been stored. They could be contaminated or counterfeit. If you're getting false readings, people could be adjusting their insulin incorrectly, which could be potentially lethal," said Laurie Pipke, diabetes educator at **St. Francis Hospital and Medical Center** in Hartford.

Occasionally, an ad for pre-filled insulin pens, a prescription item, will turn up on craigslist. Sellers typically give the product's brand name without specifying that the item contains insulin. A recent ad read, "Novolog box of 5 flexpens fast acting — \$40." The pre-measured pens are

available by prescription only, making their transfer to another person illegal under FDA rules.

"That's insulin!" said Patricia O' Connell, a diabetes educator at the Joslin Diabetes Center in New Britain, upon viewing the ad. "They recently found some hijacked insulin. If it's sitting in a hot truck, it can [lose its potency]." A shot of insulin, if you don't have diabetes, could kill you, Grimaldo-Cagganello said.

Insulin is also a coveted drug among some bodybuilders, who use it illegally to bulk up. Several online bodybuilding websites discuss its value in packing on **muscle**. But such use can present serious health risks, including elevated blood pressure, coma and even death, medical experts warn.

Medical supplies purchased secondhand usually don't come with warranties or instructions. In some cases, the products may have been stolen or recalled, but "you wouldn't know it if you're buying it through the classifieds. The sky is the limit," said Leigh Bak, diabetes clinical nurse specialist at the Hospital of St. Raphael in New Haven. "If you were to purchase spoiled insulin that was not stored properly, you'd not just get a high sugar, you could get a situation that's life-threatening," Bak said. "This is going to change the way I interview my patients," Bak said. "I always ask what other prescription medications do you take. Now I need to ask where do you obtain your supplies, your insulin."

If you're having trouble paying for medical supplies or prescriptions, some nonprofit organizations, drug manufacturers and pharmacy programs might be able to help.

>> Partnership for Prescription Assistance (pparx.org; 888-477-2669)

>> Coverageforall.org (Foundation for Health Coverage Education)

>> lpump.org (for insulin pump users)

>> Copays.org (Patient Advocate Foundation's co-pay relief program)

>> Needymeds.org

>> Pfizerhelpfulanswers.com

>> Abbottdiabetescare.com

>> Lillycares.com

>> Pharmacychecker.com

>> Slashdrugcosts.org

>> Togetherrxaccess.com

>> Local health care departments: www.ct.gov/dph, click on "Local Health Departments"