

## Hong Kong Customs again seizes disinfectant alcohol with toxic methanol (with photos)

Hong Kong Customs searched four pharmacies in Fanling, Sheung Shui and Yuen Long on Monday (March 2) and seized a total of 110 bottles of disinfectant alcohol with suspected false descriptions of composition and contained toxic methanol. Customs further searched a trading company in Kwun Tong today (March 4). During the operations, a director, three pharmacy salespersons and a person-in-charge of the trading company were arrested for violation of the Trade Descriptions Ordinance (TDO) and the Consumer Goods Safety Ordinance (CGSO). The sale of suspected illegal products in the market was stopped in time by a series of operations. This is the second case of its kind in 10 days following Customs' seizure of 174 bottles of disinfectant alcohol with suspected false descriptions of composition and toxic methanol content on February 21. Customs appeals to members of the public to stop using the disinfectant alcohol concerned. Traders should also take off these products off their shelves.

Customs earlier received information alleging the sale of disinfectant alcohol with suspected false descriptions of composition at a pharmacy in Fanling. Customs officers were then deployed for immediate action to test-purchase a type of antibacterial disinfectant in plastic bottles labelled as containing "75% ethanol" and complying with the relevant national standard at a pharmacy in Fanling. The product was put on sale in transparent plastic bottles labelled as 500 millilitres and was sold at \$75 per bottle. Samples were sent to the Government Laboratory to establish its composition and safety.

Customs received the test results on March 2 which revealed that the antibacterial disinfectant concerned consists of 69 per cent of ethanol and 8.2 per cent of methanol. The test also revealed that the net volume of the bottle of antibacterial disinfectant was only 478 ml.

The composition and volume of the disinfectant alcohol were different from the product descriptions according to the test results. It also failed to comply with the relevant national standard as stated, as it contained toxic methanol. The product was therefore suspected to be in contravention of the TDO and CGSO.

Noting the test results, Customs conducted immediate enforcement action and searched the pharmacy in connection with the case on the same day. In addition, three pharmacies in Fanling, Sheung Shui and Yuen Long were also found selling the same type of disinfectant alcohol during inspections, with the selling price ranging from \$55 to \$68. A total of 110 bottles of disinfectant alcohol suspected of violating relevant ordinances were seized, and four men including a director and three pharmacy salespersons aged between 31 and 52 were arrested in the operation. Customs officers also

inspected a total of 314 retail spots in various districts and no such product was found for sale.

After a follow-up investigation, Customs today arrested a 39-year-old person-in-charge of the trading company in Kwun Tong who supplied the disinfectant alcohol concerned for sale to the pharmacies in connection with the cases. The five arrested persons were released on bail pending further investigation.

Customs searched an office of a pharmacy group and its 20 branches in various districts across the territory on February 21 and seized 174 bottles of disinfectant alcohol with suspected false descriptions on composition and with toxic methanol content. A director and six pharmacy salespersons were arrested. Including this case, Customs has inspected over 570 spots and seized 284 bottles of disinfectant alcohol products violating relevant ordinances, with arrests of 12 persons in two operations.

Investigations of the two cases are ongoing.

Methanol is a type of toxic organic solvent and cannot be used for general cleaning and disinfection. It can be absorbed into the body through the skin and cause poisoning, hepatic damage, blindness or even death. Customs reminds members of the public to observe the following safety tips when purchasing disinfectant alcohol:

- Pay attention to the product descriptions shown on labels, including the manufacturing date and validity period;
- Avoid choosing disinfectant alcohol with unknown sources and information; and
- Purchase recognised brands from reputable shops.

The following should also be observed when using disinfectant alcohol:

- Do not get close to heat or fire sources;
- Do not smoke;
- Do not use under high temperature conditions; and
- Cover the container immediately after use.

This undertaking is part of the "Guardian" operation, which has been running for 36 days as of yesterday (March 3) since its launch on January 27. More than 2 700 officers have been mobilised to conduct over 18 000 inspections at retail spots in various districts to ensure that common protective items sold in the market comply with the TD0 and the CGS0.

The "Guardian" operation will continue and Customs will carry on stepping up enforcement actions to combat activities in violation of the relevant ordinances. The department will continue to make prompt public updates if irregularities are detected.

Customs reminds traders again not to take advantage of the current situation and not to sell products using unfair trade practices. They must

also not sell products with false origins or false trademarks, nor must they sell unsafe consumer goods. Immediate law enforcement actions will be taken against the contravention of relevant ordinances and prosecutions will be made with sufficient evidence.

Under the TD0, any person who supplies goods with a false trade description in the course of trade or business, or is in possession of any goods for sale with a false trade description, or sells or possesses for sale any goods with a forged trademark, commits an offence. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$500,000 and imprisonment for five years.

Under the CGS0, it is an offence to import, manufacture or supply consumer goods unless the goods comply with the general safety requirements for consumer goods. The maximum penalty upon conviction is a fine of \$100,000 and imprisonment for one year on first conviction, and \$500,000 and imprisonment for two years on a subsequent conviction.

Members of the public may report any suspected violation of the TD0 or the CGS0 to Customs' 24-hour hotline 2545 6182 or its dedicated crime-reporting email account ([crimereport@customs.gov.hk](mailto:crimereport@customs.gov.hk)). Customs will look into every complaint received and take any necessary follow-up action.

