



## Congestion Conundrum

Looking for cold medicine? So are meth users. That's why it may be harder for you to get the relief you need. BY AMY GREEN

Cold and flu sufferers this season may find some of their favorite medicines missing from grocery store shelves and other familiar spots.

That's because across the country state lawmakers are responding to a growing methamphetamine epidemic by restricting the sale of Sudafed, Actifed, and other over-the-counter cold medicines that contain pseudoephedrine as an active ingredient. These medicines and other easy-to-find items such as brake fluid are used to make the addictive stimulant in home-grown labs.

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laws, most in the past two years, restricting the sale of cold medicines by moving them behind pharmacy counters and limiting how much consumers can buy. In Oregon, consumers must get a prescription to buy cold medicines with the key ingredient. Congress, too, is considering a bill that would move the medicines behind pharmacy counters and restrict the amount consumers can purchase.

"This year and last year that issue has been the biggest drug issue that state legislatures have been dealing with," says Blake Harrison, policy specialist for the National

Conference of State Legislatures. "There's been more legislation in the last two years than ever before. It's been addressed in most legislatures in some form or another."

Meth, once administered to World War II soldiers to keep them fighting, is a highly addictive stimulant that gives users a sense of invincibility. In the United States, much of it is distributed from labs in Mexico and Southern California where it is manufactured in bulk, though it has flourished in rural America because it is readily made in home-grown labs using easy-to-find ingredients and recipes available on the Internet.

Now meth is encroaching on urban cities. Its illicit use has become so rampant that law enforcement can't keep up, nor can foster care and healthcare workers attempting to care for addicts and their neglected

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children. On users, the drug's effects are dramatic. Long-term abuse robs the body of calcium, causing teeth to fall out and a user's appearance to age decades seemingly overnight. Meth not only destroys lives, it destroys homes, too. When it is mixed, it leaves behind a toxic residue that can make a home's occupants sick, and its ingredients are so flammable they often explode, injuring, killing, or maiming users.

Tennessee, which ranked second last year in the number of meth labs seized, is among the latest states to approve a law that makes it harder to get many cold and flu relief medicines. Approved last spring, the law allows only pharmacists to sell medicines with pseudoephedrine or ephedrine (also used to make meth) and it requires consumers to show a photo ID and provide information for a log. The medicines were moved behind the counter, and consumers are limited to only three packets or nine grams over 30 days. Gel caps and liquids are exempt from the law, but they could be included later if it is shown they can be used to make meth.

A month after the law was signed, the number of meth labs seized dropped 39 percent, says Mark Gwyn, director of the Tennessee Bureau of Investigation.

"The proliferation of it across the state was almost at epidemic proportions, and we really felt like the only way law enforcement could gain control and put its arms around this problem was to limit the availability of ephedrine and pseudoephedrine," he says.

The law and several others emulate an

Oklahoma law that was the first to move medicines with pseudoephedrine behind pharmacy counters. The Oklahoma law, approved last year, was never meant to target meth addiction but the homegrown labs that allow it to flourish, says Representative John Nance, the bill's sponsor. Since the law was approved, the number of meth labs seized has dropped dramatically. In Oklahoma City, where Nance has been a reserve deputy sheriff for 30 years, the number of labs seized dropped from 20 a month to one or two just 30 days after the law was signed, he says.

"It's very little inconvenience for what it's done in Oklahoma," Nance says. "We have really relieved our law enforcement."

Target and Walgreen Co., the nation's largest drugstore chain, have already moved the medicines with pseudoephedrine behind pharmacy counters in stores nationwide. And Pfizer, the maker of Sudafed and Actifed, has developed Sudafed PE, which replaces pseudoephedrine with an alternative ingredient. The company is supporting discussions for federal legislation, spokeswoman Erica Johnson says, as varying state laws are problematic and confusing for marketing and distribution.

Johnson believes more medicines like Sudafed PE will be introduced because manufacturers "have no choice but to introduce other products that contain a different active ingredient than pseudoephedrine." But she doubts they ever will fully replace medicines with pseudoephedrine because the ingredient is very effective in treating cold and flu symptoms.



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Some feel the new laws are unfair to law-abiding citizens. "I really do think they make it inconvenient for people who are sick," says Kathy McClanahan, 56, of suburban Nashville, as she pushes her cart through a Kroger grocery store, where the medicines have been pulled from the shelves.

But Niki Payne relishes the new laws. Payne, 43, is director of Serenity House, a long-term Christian program in rural Jackson County, near Nashville, for women recovering from drug addiction. Payne identifies with them. She used meth, cocaine, heroin, and other drugs on and off for 28 years until, homeless and having lost nearly everything, she realized that if she didn't stop, she would die. She founded Serenity House two years ago and now helps other women fight addiction.

She frets that many users have responded to Tennessee's law by going to other states for cold medicines, and she wonders whether manufacturers will eventually learn how to make meth without pseudoephedrine. But she praises the law for addressing a basic contributor to the epidemic — the meth labs that give users easy access to the drug.

"It allows them access to the drug day and night," she laments of the labs. "A lot of people, if you can't get what you use, then you're not going to get high as often. But when you manufacture meth, it's in your house; it's always around." ©

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