

Meth Fight Moves To Drug Stores

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The fight against methamphetamine may be moving from the streets to the corner drug store.

A dozen Republican and Democratic senators want to put nonprescription cold medicines that contain pseudoephedrine, the main ingredient used to make meth, behind the counter. Consumers would have to talk to a pharmacy worker and show photo ID before purchasing Sudafed, Tylenol flu medicine or other popular remedies.

Local law enforcement officials applaud the proposed legislation, but drug industry groups are lining up against it. They argue it would create unacceptable barriers for regular customers with a headache, fever or runny nose.

"It will limit access for the legitimate consumers to cough and cold products," said Mary Ann Wagner, vice president for pharmacy regulatory affairs at the National Association of Chain Drug Stores. "They're going to have to wait in line with everybody else, take the pharmacist away from their prescription customers to police the sales of the pseudoephedrine products."

Supporters dispute that.

"Consumers can buy two or three packages of this at once at the same place they've been buying all their drugs, so the point is to cut off the meth cooks while allowing consumers to have access," said Sen. Jim Talent, R-Mo., who was announcing the legislation Wednesday with Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and others.

Their bill, modeled on an Oklahoma law that took effect last April, says that medicines with pseudoephedrine must be dispensed by a licensed pharmacist or pharmacy technician, and purchasers must show ID with their date of birth and sign for the product. Buyers are limited to 9 grams — or 366 30-milligram pills — in a 30-day period.

The government can make exceptions in areas where pharmacies are not easily accessible.

Local law enforcement officials have seen methamphetamine production skyrocket in recent years, often cooked in small quantities in kitchens or trailers. The Drug Enforcement Administration reported that more than 7,000 meth labs were dismantled nationwide in 2003.

Oklahoma officials say their law has had dramatic results, driving down meth lab seizures more than 80 percent. But pharmaceutical industry officials say the explanation isn't so clear and contend that demand reduction should be addressed.

Feinstein introduced legislation during the last congressional session to limit purchases of pseudoephedrine products, but it was opposed by the drug industry and never got a vote in the Senate. The new bill already has 12 co-sponsors, and Feinstein said the DEA has indicated support.

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