

Buying cold meds? Meth cops may get e-mail



Samira Jafari / AP

Detective Brian Lewis tracks pseudoephedrin product purchases online with MethCheck, a new program that keeps tabs on consumers purchasing cold medication in London, Ky. Pseudoephedrine is a main ingredient in manufacturing methamphetamines.

AP Associated Press

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LONDON, Ky. - Detective Brian Lewis returns to his desk after lunch, scanning e-mails he missed.

One catches his eye: It says a suspected member of a methamphetamine ring bought a box of Sudafed at 1:34 p.m. at a CVS pharmacy.

Minutes later, Lewis is in his truck, circling the parking lot, searching for the woman.

Lewis did not find her that day, but the scenario illustrates the way law enforcement is increasingly relying on computerized tracking systems in their fight against meth, an illegal drug that is often brewed in makeshift labs and has become a particular scourge in Appalachia and the Midwest.

Tracking systems are gradually being installed in pharmacies nationwide in response to a federal law that, since March 2006, has regulated purchases of pseudoephedrine, a key ingredient in the manufacture of meth. Pseudoephedrine is found in many over-the-counter cold and allergy medicines, such as Sudafed.

Limiting purchases

Under federal law, customers must show photo ID to buy pseudoephedrine, and the legal limit for purchases is 9 grams per month — roughly the equivalent of two 15-dose boxes

of 24-hour Claritin D, or three 10-dose boxes of Aleve Cold & Sinus, or six 24-dose boxes of Sudafed.

Tracking systems like the one in use in Kentucky, MethCheck, automatically collect the buyer's name, address and age with a swipe of a driver's license or state-issued ID card.

Then the system notifies detectives via e-mail when a customer has exceeded the purchase limit. It also allows law enforcement to quickly spot suspicious patterns — for example, someone who might be trying to skirt the purchase limits by going from pharmacy to pharmacy and buying a few packages at a time.

An updated version of MethCheck eventually will enable law enforcement to track purchases by neighborhood or street. That could help detectives spot instances in which a meth chemist enlists others in the neighborhood to buy pseudoephedrine for him, Lewis said.

In addition, the system can flag purchases by people already under suspicion among law enforcement authorities.

Kentucky is the first state to use MethCheck; it has been testing it out in Laurel County since mid-2005. MethCheck will be used at some 7,000 pharmacies in 43 states by next year, said to Rick Jones, spokesman for Louisville-based Appriss Inc., which developed MethCheck.

Lewis, who heads the MethCheck initiative at Operation UNITE, a federally funded drug task force in Kentucky, said he has used the system to build cases against dozens of people.

Concern for privacy

Consumer privacy watchdogs are troubled by the technology, worrying that people with colds or allergies could come under suspicion for unwittingly exceeding the purchasing limits by stocking up for themselves or family members. That has happened to at least eight people in Kentucky, according to Lewis.

"People's health information — it's intimate, it's personal, it's something people desperately want to keep private," said Beth Wilson, executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union in Kentucky. "For law enforcement to do an investigation, there must be a reasonable suspicion. I'm not sure just the amount of medication justifies that."

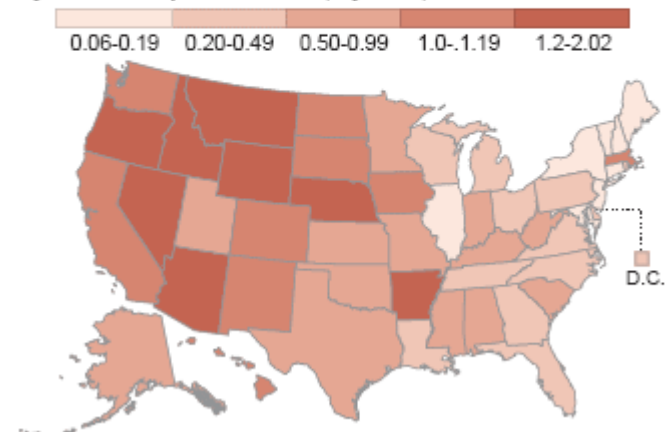
Authorities said evidence from MethCheck only leads to preliminary interviews with police and is not enough to warrant an arrest.

"It's just an investigative tool," said Van Ingram of the Kentucky Office of Drug Control Policy. "During the course of any investigation, you're sometimes going to interview people who aren't guilty of wrongdoing but who are part of the investigative process."

Meth abuse higher in Western states

Between 2002-2005, an estimated 1.4 million Americans age 12 and older—0.6 percent of the total population—admitted to using methamphetamine, a national study found.

Percentage of people aged 12 or older reporting past year methamphetamine use, by state, 2002-2005



SOURCE: Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration

AP

CVS, the nation's largest pharmacy chain, is participating in the voluntary Kentucky program and plans to install MethCheck in most of its 6,200 stores across the country by the fall.

"We wanted to make sure we were in compliance (with federal law) and have a solution that would be the least time-consuming for our customers and easiest for employees," CVS spokesman Mike DeAngelis said.

Arkansas started testing out another program, called Leads on Labs, in North Little Rock pharmacies last year.

The nation's largest retailer, Wal-Mart, said it is working to develop its own tracking system.

In Kentucky, the goal is to have some sort of electronic tracking in all of the state's 1,290 pharmacies by the fall, at a cost estimated at up to \$500,000. Under state law, pharmacies must employ electronic tracking if the state foots the bill.

Drugstore customers "put up a little bit of a fuss," said Amanda Hall, a pharmacy technician at a Kroger supermarket in London. "It's usually the legitimate ones who think they're being picked out of a crowd, but they're not."