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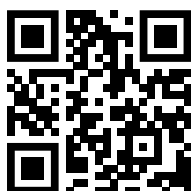
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How Heat Waves Threaten the Pharma Cold Chain

The stakes are high as the percentage of medications requiring cold chain logistics grows

By Brent Wilhelm

Recently, distributors braced for additional complications that extreme heat inevitably brings to delivering medications to the people who need them.

Pharmaceutical cold supply chains—systems that safely transport temperature-sensitive drugs and medical products—are critical to patient safety and care delivery. Temperature-sensitive logistics encompass both “cold chains”—which involve maintaining a constant, specific low temperature for sensitive goods from production to use—and more general “temperature control,” which refers to situations in which temperature thresholds are maintained in transit.

These complex processes require flawless execution in the best of circumstances. When temperatures reach the upper 90s, more pressure is exerted on the existing infrastructure, increasing the risk of temperature excursions—situations during which medications are exposed to temperatures outside the recommended storage range, resulting in costly drug wastage.

The stakes are high as the percentage of medications requiring cold chain logistics grows. As of 2021, 58% of the 50 top-selling drugs in the United States required cold chain storage. Many of these medications are extremely expensive to produce, so any fluctuation in temperature maintenance resulting in wastage means huge financial losses for everyone involved.

For global distributors like Cencora, proactive planning, inventory management and a commitment to advancing cutting-edge innovations while working closely with partners and customers are key steps to ensuring cold chain success during times of extreme weather.

In the past decade, distributors innovated in refrigeration and packaging solutions, supporting the advent of many temperature-sensitive medications and vaccines. This, in turn, opened the door to newer capabilities, such as enhanced temperature control management and expedited shipping processes. Yet distributors do not manage cold chains alone. Success depends on seamless coordination with many other stakeholders, from manufacturers, logistics providers, shipping companies and pharmacies.

It also requires choosing the best packaging for the specific conditions. A sub-optimal packaging selection can compromise the medication and result in further delays, additional costs and potentially serious health complications. To get this right at Cencora, researchers in our Climate Optimization Research and Engineering Labs help evaluate, validate and select the right climate-controlled shipping packaging to meet our clients’



Brent Wilhelm is SVP of supply chain planning and optimization at Cencora

specific needs. Cocoon, a pallet-sized passive solution developed by our CORE Labs, is a prime example. It maintains temperature up to 40% longer while weighing up to 30% less than other standard market offerings.

Medications that require climate-controlled packaging cannot be left unsupervised, so heat waves bring added threats. Smart monitoring technology meets this need by tracking temperature-controlled packaging constantly.

Last year brought more heat waves than any year since 1936, and this summer is shaping up to meet forecasters’ predictions for a long, hot season. It’s clear distributors and stakeholders across the pharmaceutical supply chain will need to continue to work together to ensure the latest medications can reliably make it to the patients who need them. [dsn](#)