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## Warning on Scarcity of Drugs and Medical Devices

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### Why in News

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Recently, the **Department of Pharmaceuticals** has warned of a nationwide **shortage of medicines and medical devices**.

- It has urged the **Ministry of Home Affairs** to take **immediate steps to help** the drug makers resume production under the current **lockdown**.
- The **National Pharmaceutical Pricing Authority** (NPPA) had also written to all State Chief Secretaries on the problems faced by the pharma firms.

## A bitter pill

The Indian pharma industry is hit hard by the restrictions imposed during the lockdown

- Pharma and medical device producers are operating at just 20 to 30% of their capacity

- Reverse migration and the inability of local workers to turn up has reduced their labour force

- Lack of adequate transport and logistics services (such as couriers)

- Mistreatment by police and local officials

- Lack of clarity on permits for factory operations

- Ancillary industries such as packaging and raw material suppliers are shut

- As close to 50% of the pharmaceutical output is exported by India, the domestic market is more vulnerable to such production shocks



### Key Points

- The Department of Pharmaceuticals under the **Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers** is **entrusted with ensuring the seamless production and distribution** of critical life-saving medicines in the wake of the lockdown to contain the **Covid-19 pandemic**.
- **On an average**, drug and medical device makers are functioning at only **20%-30% of their full capacity** during the lockdown.
- **Production units** engaged in making **essential commodities**, including medicines, vaccines, masks and their ancillaries have been **exempted from the restrictions** imposed as per the national lockdown.
- If the production will not reach the **pre-lockdown level** soon, it would lead to shortages of medicines and medical devices in the coming weeks.
- Both in the **public and private** sector, the **seamless functioning** of pharma manufacturing and distribution units is **crucial** in dealing with the crisis.
- A **helpline** has been created for **pharma producers' operational complaints**, which are also being referred to State Drug Controllers for suitable intervention.

## Challenges

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- **Export** of Indian pharmaceuticals offer a **better price in global markets** which can lead to **disproportionate shortages in the domestic market**.
- **Restrictions on mobility and production** in several states.
- **Unavailability of labour, transport and courier** services.
  - Reverse migration (from cities to sub-urban/rural areas) of labour and local workers.
  - Lack of public transport options and the fear of police action.
  - Drivers have left their trucks on highways fearing stoppage of vehicles on State, district and city borders and lack of food and diesel on the route.
- **Closure of ancillary industries** which are not being considered essential by few local administrations.

They supply packaging material, excipients (required for tablets and capsules manufacturing), utility consumables like briquettes/gases (required to run boilers) and spare parts.

## Suggestions

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- **Suitable measures** are needed to **reduce the export** and **focus more on domestic needs**.
- State and district administrations need to be **sensitised** so that they can proactively fulfil the needs of pharma units to function fully.
- **Allowance** to the pharma industry to **ferry back their contractual workers** from their native places and **make courier services fully functional** in metro, Tier 1 and Tier 2 cities.
- **Drivers with commercial licences** should be **allowed to move** with or without a vehicle by treating it as a 'pass' during the lockdown.
- The **apprehensions of the drivers need to be addressed** and they also need to be **motivated and incentivised**.

**Source: TH**