

Coronavirus: Prices of masks increase by eight times

LAHORE: The prices of both common and medical grade masks have increased by eight times with the news of two reported cases of coronavirus in Pakistan. Rs 40 per mask are being charged for a common mask and Rs 800 for a medical grade N-95 mask. The demand of the masks was already on the rise after surge in its demand in China and other coronavirus-affected parts of the world. The suppliers are getting daily queries for exports of masks from different parts of the world, especially Thailand, Singapore and Malaysia. However, they are unable to meet the demand as the import of raw material mainly industrial grade cloth imported from China is halted since the outbreak of coronavirus there. The local manufactures are unable to meet the domestic demand with an unprecedented demand for masks locally.

According to a survey conducted by The News on Thursday in Lahore medical supplies markets, it was found that no variety of masks was available. The sellers in medicine markets located outside the Mayo Hospital and Bhati Gate said that masks are not available. They pointed out that previously they were selling masks at Rs 5 per piece and in bulk quantity, the price reduced to Rs 4 to 4.5 per mask. However, now the suppliers are selling them for Rs 20 to 25 per mask.

They argued if they purchase them at even this high quoted rate, the supplies will not be ensured within next couple of days. They claimed that the suppliers increased the price, so accordingly they raised it.

Similarly, the price of N-95, a medical grade mask, was increased to Rs 600 to 800 per mask which was previously sold at Rs 100 per mask. The sellers said the supply of medical grade masks was halted and no supplier agreed to supply it. This situation is giving an opportunity for medical stores to sell medical grade N-95 masks at high rates.

However, some of the medical stores managers and sellers said they were not willing to sell the masks at unprecedented higher prices but they cannot do anything with the prices as the suppliers increased the rates manifolds. They said the government and other authorities will conduct raids on shops instead of manufacturers and suppliers who are increasing the prices by stopping the supplies.

Chairman Standing Committee on Pharmaceutical of Federation of Pakistan Chamber of Commerce and Industry Shahzeb Akarm said the whole industry is surprised that masks are not available. 'We all industry representatives gathered last night and everyone was concerned about the non-availability of the masks', he said, adding that the Pakistan Pharmaceutical Manufacturer Association (PPMA) does not make these masks while the manufactures of the masks and supplies are not PPMA members. However, the PPMA is concerned about it besides the FPCCI which also convened a meeting on the issue. He mentioned that the masks manufacturers are a very smaller component and never came in the notice till the coronavirus outbreak so the people working in the sector are not commonly accessible.

Akarm said cloth and other raw material used in masks manufacturing is imported from China which is itself affected. He hoped that the situation will come under control regarding the masks availability and their prices in 4 to 5 days.

Another former chairman of PPMA said that masks manufacturers and suppliers have gone underground. He said both government and other relevant authorities are tracing them but these manufacturers are unavailable as their phone numbers are off and their godowns are empty.

Muhammad Aqeel Ch, an official of the GZS Group supplier of non-woven products located in Township, said they could not supply masks into markets. "I have been getting calls for masks from everywhere but I am unable to supply them to the market," he said, claiming that the interior ministry and law-enforcement agencies have taken the control of his manufacturing facility. He claimed that masks produced at his workplace will be supplied to the army.