

Beximco to sell first generic version of Merck Covid-19 pill

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Dhaka : The country's own drugmaker Beximco Pharma will soon begin selling the world's first generic version of Merck's Covid-19 pill, molnupiravir, which has been touted as a potential game-changer in the fight against the pandemic.

Beximco Pharma-ceuticals will first sell generic molnupiravir in Bangladesh before considering exports based on global regulatory approvals, it said on November 9. The generic version has received emergency use authorisation from Bangladesh's drug regulators.

Generic drugs like Beximco's are less expensive versions of brand-name pharmaceuticals and help expand access to treatments in poorer countries.

Molnupiravir, developed by Merck and Ridgeback Biotherapeutics, received its first regulatory approval globally in the UK earlier. It is under regulatory review in the United States and Europe.

"We believe (generic molnupiravir) could play an important role in combating the pandemic, especially in low- and middle-income countries where access to vaccines has been limited," Beximco Managing Director Nazmul Hassan said in a statement.

The medicine will have a maximum retail price of BDT 70 (82 cents) per capsule, or BDT 2,800 (USD 33) for a full course, a Beximco representative said, adding it was trying to lower prices.

The US government is buying 1.7 million courses of molnupiravir at USD 700 per course. Many Asian countries have agreements to buy the drug at cheaper prices. A number of companies are racing to develop drugs to combat the pandemic beyond vaccines, but only a few are developing easily ingestible oral pills. Molnupiravir has been closely watched since data last month showed it could halve the chances of dying or being hospitalised for those most at risk of developing severe Covid-19. Experts hailed the results as a potential breakthrough. Meanwhile, Pfizer said earlier that its experimental pill cut by 89 per cent the chance of hospitalisation or death for adults at risk of severe Covid-19. The news boosted Pfizer's share price while pummelling Merck's. The Beximco representative said the company does not have an agreement with Merck but can sell generic molnupiravir under a World Trade Organisation waiver of intellectual property rules for Covid-19 drugs in developing countries. Beximco cannot export to most Western countries as the waiver only allows it to sell generics to less-economically developed countries that do not have a patent protection.