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Shortage of life saving albumin leaves liver patients anxious

The city is moving towards a shortage of the life-saving drug human serum albumin — vital in the treatment of liver diseases — with chemists saying several pharmaceutical firms have stopped supplying it due to an increased cost after it was brought under the Drug Price Control Order (DPCO) last year.

While distributors and chemists across Mumbai claimed to be out of stock, albumin shortage has also hit several private and government hospitals. According to T P Lahane, dean, JJ Hospital, "Albumin is required in less quantity so the situation is not critical yet. But a shortage of albumin is there after the price was regulated."

A spokesperson for Reliance Life Sciences — one of the three albumin suppliers in the market — said via email, "Reliance Life Sciences is not the only manufacturer of albumin. Till recently, there were six suppliers, of which three suppliers have not been participating in the Indian market for reasons unknown to us. There is a constraint in availability of albumin in India."

The shortage has resulted in much anxiety for patients like Powai resident Ritu

Mukherjee's father. "My father has a liver ailment and needs albumin but in the last month, it has disappeared from stores. All major distributors and government hospitals refuse to help, citing limited stocks for in-house patients," Mukherjee said.

She added that even private hospitals like Kokilaben Hospital where he is undergoing treatment have a shortage.

Albumin, an essential protein produced by the liver, is often not produced in patients with liver ailments. "Liver patients often develop kidney issues, so we have to give artificial doses of albumin to avoid complications. It is a life saving drug, yet there has been an unavailability for the last few weeks," said Dr Abha Nagral, a liver specialist with Jaslok Hospital.

According to sources in the pharma sector, the DPCO pricing has apparently made it financially unfeasible for albumin importers. Reliance Life Sciences, which said it was comfortable with the current price of albumin, added the Indian government's support has been sought to increase production capacity and supply by clearing the import of plasma raw material.

