

Counterfeits & Human Health

Interview between Underwriters Laboratories' Monica Mena & U.S. Customs and Border Protection's Laurie Dempsey



Fighting counterfeiters on several fronts

Laurie Dempsey explains how counterfeiters have been taking advantage of the pandemic to spread fraudulent goods

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Laurie Dempsey
U.S. Customs and Border Protection
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Monica Mena: Hello everyone, my name is Monica Mena and I'm Director of Education & Outreach for Underwriters Laboratories, a 127-year-old non-profit whose mission is to make the world a safer place. As part of our anti-counterfeiting campaign, BeSafeBuyReal, I'm joined today by Laurie Dempsey. Hi Laurie!

Laurie Dempsey: Hi Monical

Monica Mena: Thanks for finding the time in your, I'm sure, very busy schedule to talk to us today. The BeSafeBuyReal awareness campaign is focusing on the topic of Human Health this spring and I'd love to get your view on this based on your work for U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP). So can you start by telling us about your position within CBP and how that fits into the agency at large.

Laurie Dempsey: Thank you Monica! And thank you for giving me this chance to talk to you today. I am the Director for IPR and E-Commerce division at the Office of Trade within CBP. CBP is the main federal agency responsible for securing America's borders. We have an extensive mission set with everything from counter-terrorism to facilitating lawful travel and trade, and protecting the revenue. One key area of focus when it comes to international trade is protecting against harm to the US economy, and protecting American consumers' health and safety. So this makes enforcing laws on intellectual

property one of CBP's key priorities, or put more simply: making sure we keep counterfeit goods out of our country.

Monica Mena: Great. So the number one health issue right now on people's minds is the pandemic. People are scared or unsure, and the counterfeiters are really exploiting that right now. So what products have you seen counterfeited the most? And can you give us some current numbers?

Laurie Dempsey: You make a really good point Monica. We understood from the beginning of the pandemic that bad actors would exploit consumer demand for things like personal protective equipment, or PPE, pharmaceuticals and household cleaners, to sell unauthorized or counterfeit versions of these items to Americans. So early on in the pandemic, we started to see COVID test kits that were not approved by the FDA, increasing numbers of counterfeit face masks and some things we'd never seen before, like something called a shut-out lanyard which was this bogus product that falsely claimed to ward off COVID-19 but actually contained harmful chemicals that could leach into people's skin and cause breathing problems or worse. So in terms of statistics – and just to give you an idea for comparison with regards to counterfeit masks – in 2019, we seized 1300 counterfeit face masks. In 2020, we seized over 12 million.

So, between January 1st 2020 and March 31st 2021, I'll give you some statistics about some things that we've seized. Over 34 million counterfeit face masks; close to 180 thousand FDA-unapproved COVID-19 test kits; close to 39 thousand FDA-unapproved chloroquine tablets; nearly 37 thousand of those EPA-prohibited anti-virus shut-out lanyards that I mentioned before; and approximately 300 thousand units of counterfeit or unapproved hand sanitizer.

Counterfeits seized at U.S. border January 2020 – March 2021

- over **34 million** face masks
- close to **180,000** COVID-19 test kits
- close to **39,000** chloroquine tablets
- nearly **37,000** anti-virus shut-out lanyards
- approx. **300,000** units of hand sanitizers

Check
[CBP.gov](https://www.cbp.gov)
for the latest
stats

Monica Mena: That is incredible. And now I'm hearing a little bit more about fraudulent or counterfeit COVID-19 vaccines. Can you tell me a little bit about those?

Laurie Dempsey: Sure, you know, criminals will almost certainly exploit COVID-19 to sell fraudulent vaccines. But what we're doing is to work with our partners in Homeland Security Investigations to make sure that the counterfeit and unapproved vaccines, PPE and other medical supplies are kept out of the US supply chains. So I really want to make that point that it's very important for people to get the COVID vaccine directly from an authorized medical provider who only uses legitimate supply chains to source their vaccines.

Monica Mena: Thank you. That's very important for everybody to know. So you mentioned face masks and test kits. These are things that consumers are likely to buy themselves. Can you give us a little bit of background on where they're coming from?

Laurie Dempsey: Sure, you know our biggest challenge has really been with the third-party online sellers. Many of the sellers are new, and don't understand, or don't care, about the rules of international commerce, which can lead to non-compliance. And then when you add that online shoppers don't know sometimes that their goods are coming from overseas, since e-commerce platforms don't provide much information about where the goods are produced, this can increase the risks for consumers, as well.

Monica Mena: So what are some of the potential risks of using counterfeit face masks for instance?

Laurie Dempsey: I think the key point I want to make here is, especially for the N95 respirators, if they're counterfeit, they may not be effective at filtering airborne particles or preventing liquid from contaminating the user's face.

Monica Mena: OK, that's definitely risky. So what about the test kits? What can you tell me about those?

Laurie Dempsey: It's kind of the same idea, this false sense of security. These unapproved test kits may not be accurate. And so, it may give a result that is a false positive or a false negative and, unknowingly, expose others to the virus.

Monica Mena: OK. You mentioned the third-party sellers. You know, obviously, everyone wants to avoid buying these counterfeit products. So other than the third-party sellers, how are they being sold, and can they be found in a drugstore?

Laurie Dempsey: As I mentioned before, our challenge has really been with the online sales. The brick-and-mortar stores already have established supply chains. And they know who they're doing business with. So, there's a much greater comfort level with that. And I would also say that we've been working with pharmaceutical manufacturers to make sure that the legitimate vaccines enter the US through legitimate supply chains.

Monica Mena: OK. So what if there are people out there, and they still need to purchase these products online, for whatever reason. What should they look out for so they can make sure they're not buying a counterfeit online.

Laurie Dempsey: I would say purchase from reputable, established retailers that have an online presence. And when they're shopping online, people should read the seller reviews and look for a working US phone number and a US address that can be used to contact the seller. And then, finally, I would say that if the price seems too good to be true, it probably is.

Monica Mena: Thank you so much Laurie, this has been very enlightening and helpful, and please keep up the great work.

Laurie Dempsey: Thank you Monica. I would like to close by saying that CBP is doing everything we can, but we can't seize our way out of the counterfeit problem. We really need consumers to help in being vigilant about where they shop.

Monica Mena: Good point! So to everyone out there, please remember to be safe, be vigilant and buy real. Thank you!

Learn more about how to avoid buying counterfeit goods at

BeSafeBuyReal.ul.org