

# Don't let counterfeiters profit at the expense of your health

Expert Insight by Laurie Dempsey



**Laurie Dempsey is Director, Intellectual Property Rights and E-Commerce Division, Trade Policy & Programs, U.S. Customs & Border Protection, Office of Trade.**

**Her responsibilities include creating policies and solutions to stop counterfeits from crossing borders. Her department liaises with those on the ground, who check and seize counterfeit goods, but she also focuses on initiatives that inform the public about the dangers of counterfeits. In her article, she talks about how educating consumers and working with them is the best way to keep counterfeits out – and health and safety in.**

---

In recent years, we've seen many government agencies doubling down on counterfeits to protect legit manufacturers and to ensure consumer safety. It's no small task. In the U.S. alone, nearly three trillion dollars in commercial imports are processed annually with over 30 million customs entries on average. The sheer volume makes it easy for counterfeiters to slip through with their illegal products.

[Read a report with Fiscal Year 2020 numbers.](#)

For some people, it may just be irritating to receive a counterfeit product that's poor quality or not what they were expecting. So some may even wonder what the big deal is about counterfeits. It's just a knock-off bag, right? However, not only does counterfeiting fund other illegal activities like human trafficking and drug smuggling, the fake products you buy may also endanger your health.

One of the areas my department at the U.S. Customs & Border Protection (CBP) focuses on is counterfeit products, which can have a negative impact on people's general health and safety, such as medicines, pharmaceuticals, electronic devices, batteries, and even clothing. In 2020, this also included personal protective equipment (PPE) and COVID-19 testing kits.

## The most harmful kind of fake

Counterfeit medical and pharmaceutical products are some of the most insidious counterfeits not only because they don't perform, heal or medicate as promised, but they also endanger users' lives. This trend saw a real peak at the advent of the coronavirus pandemic. Consumers, medical professionals and healthcare providers all scrambled to have enough PPE supplies on hand to protect themselves and the greater public – and counterfeiters exploited this need.

Some of the examples of COVID-19 related counterfeits include face masks. Either the mask doesn't perform or protect as promised, leading consumers to believe it's more effective than it really is. Counterfeit hand sanitizers or wipes containing the incorrect amount of disinfectant is another example. Even more frightening is the emergence of unapproved test kits, which are not up to the Food and Drug Administration standards.

One way to identify these counterfeits is that they are not supplied through the usual business channels, medical supply chains or government agencies. A private consumer should be very wary of direct medical offers – particularly those making big claims for a small price.

## Operation Stolen Promise

Other government agencies are also working to protect consumers from the threat of COVID-related fraud and criminal activity. For instance, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) launched [Operation Stolen Promise](#). This was in response to multiple seizures and consumer feedback revealing that counterfeit PPE and other fake medical-related goods were circulating.

Operation Stolen Promise focuses on tracking down medical-related fraud and counterfeits. On the one hand this is done with HSI's expertise in criminal investigations, on the other

hand it gives everyday consumers the opportunity to get involved. The website helps visitors learn how to recognize and also report potential COVID-19 fraud.

To date, there have been nearly 1,000 COVID-19 related seizures thanks to Operation Stolen Promise. The platform has been so successful because it not only educates consumers, but it also enlists them as partners against crime, e.g. with the “report” feature (an e-mail link). My agency, CBP continues to work alongside HSI to seize shipments of mislabeled, fraudulent, unauthorized or prohibited COVID-19 test kits, treatment kits, homeopathic remedies, and purported anti-viral products and PPE.

I'd like to add that you can also report a fraud to the portal selling the product. Another way is via our [e-Allegations](#) program. This is an online portal through which the trade community and the general public can report suspected trade violations to U.S. Customs and Border Protection. In the last year alone, over 15,000 e-allegations were submitted.

## Protecting yourself when shopping online

How can you avoid purchasing counterfeits? I'd like to highlight a couple hands-on tips to help you identify and avoid purchasing fraudulent goods, especially when ordering online where you don't have the ability to pick up an item and see if it has been shoddily made or just doesn't feel right.

Here are a few rules of thumb to make sure you don't fall into the traps laid by counterfeiters or other frauds:

### Stick to brand site

We recommend you shop on the official online portals of your favorite stores or brands. Purchasing from them means far less chance of encountering counterfeit products or parts.

### Price is a tip-off

When using other online shopping portals, one key tip-off is a price that is just too low. If the price seems too good to be true – particularly with luxury brands – then it probably is.

### Product promises

How is the product depicted? Does it include overblown, exaggerated descriptions, or the opposite: vague and unclear? Is the grammar poor or are there misspellings? Does the photo match the product description? Counterfeiters often use fake or photoshopped images. Another clue is too many euphoric reviews or repeated reviews.

## Everyone can do their part

We all can contribute to the fight against counterfeits. In my work, we do this by educating consumers with simple online advertisements that show the dangers associated with buying fake goods. We also put up billboards in airports to warn travelers that those cheaper products procured abroad often come with dangerous strings attached. We also go into schools and talk with kids about the organized crime behind counterfeits and bring in samples. Brands even send us their products – we show real brands side by side with fakes and help kids to build a sense of what to look out for.

The [UL World Anti-Counterfeiting Week](#) is also a great opportunity to get the word out and to sensitize consumers all around the world, especially with the holiday shopping season almost upon us. That's why I'm on board! You can help too by sharing the posts during the week and on the website. The more people find out about the dangers of counterfeits and how to avoid them, the more people can stay safe.