

SCAMS UPDATE 25 MARCH 2020

There is increasing concern about unscrupulous criminals who are exploiting fears about COVID-19 to prey on members of the public, particularly older and vulnerable people who are isolated from family and friends. National Trading Standards is warning people to remain vigilant following a rise in coronavirus-related scams that seek to benefit from the public's concern and uncertainty over COVID-19.

Members of the public should ignore scam products such as supplements and anti-virus kits that falsely claim to cure or prevent COVID-19. In some cases individuals may be pressurised on their own doorsteps to buy anti-virus kits or persuaded to purchasing products that are advertised on their social media feeds. In addition, some call centres that previously targeted UK consumers with dubious health products are now offering supplements that supposedly prevent COVID-19.

Communities are also being urged to look out for signs of neighbours being targeted by doorstep criminals. While there are genuine groups of volunteers providing help during self-isolation, there have been reports of criminals preying on residents – often older people or people living with long-term health conditions – by cold-calling at their homes and offering to go to the shops for them. The criminals often claim to represent charities to help them appear legitimate before taking the victim's money. There are genuine charities providing support, so consumers should be vigilant and ask for ID from anyone claiming to represent a charity.

COVID-19 SCAMS IDENTIFIED INCLUDE:

DOORSTEP CRIME

- Criminals targeting older people on their doorstep and offering to do their shopping. Thieves take the money and do not return.
- Doorstep cleansing services that offer to clean drives and doorways to kill bacteria and help prevent the spread of the virus.

ONLINE SCAMS

- Email scams that trick people into opening malicious attachments, which put people at risk of identity theft with personal information, passwords, contacts and bank details at risk. Some of these emails have lured people to click on attachments by offering information about people in the local area who are affected by coronavirus.
- Fake online resources – such as false Coronavirus Maps – that deliver information stealing malware, programmes which can infiltrate a variety of sensitive data.

REFUND SCAMS

- Companies offering fake holiday refunds for individuals who have been forced to cancel their trips. People seeking refunds should also be wary of fake websites set up to claim holiday refunds.

COUNTERFEIT GOODS

- Fake sanitisers, face masks and Covid19 swabbing kits sold online and door-to-door. These products can often be dangerous and unsafe. There are reports of some potentially harmful hand sanitiser containing glutaral (or glutaraldehyde), which was banned for human use in 2014.

TELEPHONE SCAMS

- As more people self-isolate at home there is an increasing risk that telephone scams will also rise, including criminals claiming to be your bank, mortgage lender or utility company. **NEVER PROVIDE ANY INFORMATION TO SUCH PHONE CALLS. ASK FOR THE NAME OF THE PERSON AND THEN EITHER LOOK AT YOUR BANK STATEMENT OR SEARCH ON LINE FOR THE PHONE NUMBER – DO NOT ACCEPT A NUMBER THE CALLER GIVES – AND RING BACK.**

DONATION SCAMS

- There have been reports of thieves extorting money from consumers by claiming they are collecting donations for a COVID-19 'vaccine'.

LOAN SHARKS

- Illegal money lenders are expected to prey on people's financial hardship, lending money before charging extortionate interest rates and fees through threats and violence

PREVENTION

- People are being encouraged to protect their neighbours by joining 'Friends Against Scams', which provides a lot of information and free online training to empower people to take a stand against scams. To complete the online modules, visit www.friendsagainstscams.org.uk

- Members of the public are being urged to keep in contact with family members regularly and inform them of the most prolific scams and the possible dangers to them. If someone has been targeted by a scam it can be reported to Action Fraud online at www.actionfraud.police.uk/ or by calling 0300 123 2040. For advice and information on how to check if something might be a scam, visit: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/consumer/scams/check-if-something-might-be-a-scam/