



## **FAKING IT: When counterfeit electrical items go wrong** **Sylvia Rook, Trading Standards Expert**

### **Q: WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF BUYING CHEAP ELECTRICAL GOODS ONLINE?**

It is easy to be seduced by 'bargains' on internet auction sites or market places, convincing ourselves the item is cheaper because the trader 'doesn't have any overheads'.

If you saw a brand name mobile or tablet charger advertised on an online marketplace for £5, it would appear to be a tempting deal. But how do you know that it is genuine, and does it matter? Most fake goods might look the part but might fall apart after a while- but fake electrical goods can be a whole different story!

The problem with buying fake electrical items is that you don't know what you are going to get. There are records of people being electrocuted and seriously burnt by fake phone chargers. In 2012 a lady was electrocuted and killed when she answered a call on her phone which was plugged in to a fake charger. There are numerous cases of fires being caused by fake electrical items overheating whilst plugged in.

And it's not just chargers that can be faked. There have been reports of a rise in the number of fake hair straighteners that are on sale online. The genuine items sell for over £100, but you can pick up a fake for around £30. However, these can also be electrically unsafe, posing the risk of electrocuting the user, or the plastic may melt, causing serious burns. Can you imagine what that would be like if you were using it when it happened?

If you buy counterfeit electrical goods, at best the item may not work, but at worst you could be injured or even killed, so it is not worth taking the risk.

### **Q: WHAT IS THE LAW RELATING TO FAKE GOODS?**

It is an offence to sell counterfeits, so the person selling them could be prosecuted by Trading Standards, although that is difficult if the trader is based outside the EU (e.g. if you have bought the item from an international trader in China). It is also an offence to sell goods which are unsafe.

You aren't doing anything illegal in buying fake goods, but you are putting yourself at risk

### **Q: WHAT CHECKS SHOULD YOU MAKE TO AVOID BUYING COUNTERFEIT GOODS?**

- Check the background to the trader thoroughly. Where are they based? Is there a full name and address on the website?
- Put the name of the company into an internet search engine and see if there are any complaints or adverse reports recorded.
- Be very wary about buying electrical items from traders outside the UK. Don't assume that a trader using a .co.uk website is based in the UK, as they may not be.
- Don't buy an item that is for sale at far below the normal selling price, unless you are certain it is from a reputable source.
- Some premium brands will only permit sales from reputable sources. For example you are unlikely to be able to buy genuine cheap Apple or GHD products from a marketplace store. If you are not sure if a seller is licenced, ask the manufacturer. You can also look on <https://www.brand-i.org/> which is a shopping directory of websites that only sell genuine items.
- Always pay on credit card for items over £100 to give you extra protection.
- Look at the item carefully when it arrives.
  - Does the packing and labelling look correct and is it of the quality you would expect?
  - Are the instructions in English, and is the item fitted with a UK 3 pin plug?
  - Is the voltage of the product 230V, 50 Hz (UK domestic voltage)?
  - Is the item CE marked?

**If you are not sure, do not plug the item in, as you could be putting yourself at risk.**

- Contact Trading Standards for advice if you have any concerns.
- If the seller is based in the EU, you have 14 days within which you can return the item for any reason and get your money back.
- If an item is faulty or mis-described then you have the right to your money back (including all postage costs), although this may be difficult if the trader is based outside the EU.

**So as a reminder: don't buy cheap electrical products online. If it looks too good to be true, it probably is, and it is a false saving that could potentially cost you your life.**