

Article – Covid-19: watch out for online scams and unfair practices



As more people are staying at home due to self-isolation and social distancing, online shopping is on the rise. While we try to protect ourselves and our families from the virus, some traders are taking advantage of that anxiety to sell fake cures or products that allegedly prevent infection at very high prices.

False claims can be about anything from masks and caps to drugs and hand sanitiser – erroneously labelled as the only cure for coronavirus or the only protection against the coronavirus – and sold at many times their actual worth. Traders also use other tricks, such as falsely claiming that the products are scarce to push consumers into buying.

What to look out for

There are some giveaways that you can look out for. If you see any of the claims listed below, be on your guard:

- Explicit or implicit claims that a product can prevent or cure Covid-19
- The use of unofficial sources, such as self-declared doctors to back up claims

- The use of names or logo of government authorities, official experts or international institutions that have allegedly endorsed them, but with no hyperlinks or references to official documents
- Claims that the product is: “only available today”, “sells out fast”, etc.
- Sweeping claims such as: “lowest price on the market”, “only product that can cure Covid-19 infection” etc.
- Exorbitant prices due to the alleged healing powers of the products

If you come across unsupported or misleading claims on an online platform, use the platform operators’ reporting tool to inform them of that fact. Be aware that sometimes they can be innocently shared by a friend or family member who has been fooled and thinks they are helping you.

Always look at reliable sources for information about the coronavirus: national governments, health authorities or international organisations such as the [World Health Organization](#).

What the EU is doing

To tackle the issue of online scams surrounding the coronavirus outbreak, the European Commission and consumer protection authorities in the member states have launched a number of joint measures. On 20 March, [these authorities issued a common position on the most reported scams and unfair practices](#) to help online platforms better identify such illegal practices, take them down and prevent the reappearance of similar ones.

On 23 March, Didier Reynders, the commissioner responsible for justice and consumers, [wrote to various platforms, social media, search engines and market places](#) to ask for their their cooperation in taking down scams such as fake cures for the coronavirus from their platforms.

Certain practices are prohibited in the EU, thanks thanks to the [Unfair Commercial Practices Directive](#), including deceiving consumers about the benefits or results expected from a product, claiming it can cure an illness or saying that it is available for a limited time only. Any claim made by a trader that their product can cure an illness needs to be backed up by evidence. Platform operators active in the EU who become aware of illegal activity taking place on their websites are [obliged to intervene](#).

The European Parliament is also committed to protecting Europeans when they are online.

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