

# Fake electronics

We explain how to spot counterfeit phone chargers, batteries, music players and more



**D**odgy Duracells, illegitimate iPods, knock-off Nokias... the more famous the brand, the bigger the target it has become for counterfeiters.

The abundance of cheap labour and know-how in Asia has enabled manufacturers to sell us hi-tech products at lower and lower prices. But it has also made it easier for fraudsters to produce convincing copies.

During a Which? investigation, Trading Standards revealed to us some common types of fake products (see 'Popular targets for fraudsters', below).

While many fake electronic products do not work as well as the real thing – if they work at all – they also carry far more

significant risks. Official goods sold in the UK must conform to a range of safety standards, whereas fakes do not carry any guarantees of safety.

## Internet threat

In 2007-08, more than three and a half million fake electronic goods were seized en route to the EU. While this suggests the authorities are having some success in stemming the flow of illicit copies from Asia, it also indicates the scale of the problem.

In the UK, the internet is rapidly becoming the favourite way for counterfeiters to rip off consumers.

Last year, a French court ordered eBay to pay around €40m (£31.6m) in

**The internet is a popular destination for fake goods – these sites say that they're tackling the problem**

damages to luxury goods group LVMH, for allowing online auctions of fake copies of its products.

eBay and Amazon Marketplace say that they take the problem seriously and work with manufacturers to identify fakes and remove them from their websites. eBay claims to have removed 4.1 million such listings worldwide in 2008.

Where possible, protect yourself by using PayPal for any transactions on

## POPULAR TARGETS FOR FRAUDSTERS



### Duracell batteries

Trading Standards told us that in some parts of London up to a third of Duracell batteries sold in corner shops are fake. Not only is the performance worse than the genuine article, but there is also a risk of toxic chemicals leaking out.

Bootleggers go from shop to shop selling fake batteries, like the ones pictured above, to shopkeepers at a bargain price. The easiest way to tell a fake battery from the real deal is to check the outer skin – on fakes this can be peeled off easily.



### Phone chargers

It's handy to have more than one charger, so the prospect of picking one up for a few pounds is tempting. Although they look convincing (see picture above), some fakes are little more than shells with no connection between the plug and the jack you connect to your phone.

Worryingly, Trading Standards recently seized chargers that don't step down the power from the mains at all, or have other faults that can put you at risk of potentially lethal exposure to mains electricity.



### Apple iPods

Apple iPods, like the genuine Nano pictured above, are a favourite target. Some copies are laughably crude, but there have been good attempts.

Trading Standards acquired a batch of iPod Nanos that were so close to the originals it was extremely difficult to tell them apart – the screen, menus, packaging and finish were all very accurate. The only difference was that, instead of a few gigabytes of memory, the iPods had just 300 megabytes – enough for about five albums.



### Hair straighteners

It's hard to think of a product with more potential to do you harm than one that is plugged directly into the mains, gets extremely hot and that you hold next to your head.

Genuine straighteners are thermostat-controlled to stop them overheating. Trading Standards showed us fakes (see picture above) that got hotter and hotter until they were turned off. The electrical insulation didn't conform to the relevant safety standards, so there was a danger of an electric shock.

# uncovered

## Memory

This can be a real giveaway. Real iPods like these store 1000s of songs – fakes may hold far fewer.

## Screen

Colour screens like these have been reproduced with some accuracy.

## Menu

Counterfeit iPods can look convincing, but they often fall down on functionality.

## Finish

Although it's hard to replicate the high-quality finish of a genuine iPod, some attempts have come close.

eBay so you can get your money back if goods you buy are not as advertised. Amazon says it will provide a replacement or refund for any product that later turns out to be fake.

Trading Standards is more concerned about less well-known auction sites and rogue websites set up purely to shift counterfeit goods.

Although distance selling regulations mean that you have seven working days to return goods you have bought online if you don't like them, this won't help if the website is a sham.

If you find a bargain on an unfamiliar website, check that it has a postal address

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or phone number. Try ringing the number – if nobody answers, think twice before using the site.

It's also worth searching for an unfamiliar auction site's name on Google – dodgy sites may have left a trail of complaints on web forums.

Pricing is, of course, a good clue as to whether a product is genuine. Last December, Customs officers seized a cache of fake Nintendo DS consoles, which were good enough to pass a quick inspection. However, the £40 price tag was a real giveaway – for a sought-after Christmas gift that retails for about £100, it was simply too good to be true.

## 5 WAYS TO SPOT A FAKE



**1** With mobile phone or laptop chargers, consider how heavy they are. The components have to deal with mains electricity, so you wouldn't expect the unit to feel like it's made of balsa wood.

**2** Don't be swayed by the packaging – it is very easy for counterfeiters to create cardboard and paper wrappings.

**3** Look carefully at logos. Does the spacing of the letters look wrong, or is the print smudged? Some manufacturers use holographic stickers to identify genuine products – if they're there, do they look right?

**4** Consider the quality of the workmanship. Discoloured, badly finished or brittle plastic, a poor-quality screen, clumsy switches and buttons are all signs of a fake.

**5** Check the official website for a guide to spotting fakes or a list of approved stockists. Some fakes aren't based on a genuine product or come in a colour that has never officially been produced. If you buy an electronic product that you suspect is fake, don't use it. Contact Trading Standards – helping it secure convictions for fraudsters will combat the problem.

