# Counterfeit Ozempic injections fuel health risks amid rising UK crackdown



# Counterfeit Weight-Loss Injections: The Dark Underbelly of a Rising Trend

In the wake of soaring popularity for weight-loss treatments like Ozempic, authorities in the UK have uncovered a troubling surge in counterfeit medication infiltrating the market. Last year, hundreds of 'DIY' weight-loss injection kits were intercepted, highlighting the escalating threat posed by organised crime syndicates capitalising on the burgeoning demand for these products.

The active ingredient in Ozempic, semaglutide, has garnered significant attention from celebrities and social media influencers alike, subsequently outstripping legal supply channels and prompting desperate individuals to turn to unverified sources. Such kits, often falsely labelled and potentially hazardous, have led to serious health complications. One notable case involved a woman, Maddy, who suffered severe adverse effects after using a product purchased online. Her experience underscored the dire consequences associated with acquiring medications from unregulated sources.

Andy Morling, the head of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) Criminal Enforcement Unit, emphasised the dangers of buying medication from dubious outlets. He stated, "If you buy medicines from unverified sources, there is no guarantee the product is safe or effective, and it may even be contaminated with toxic substances." This warning reflects a broader concern, as counterfeit drugs, while still relatively rare compared to controlled substances, pose significant risks to public health. The numbers speak volumes: last year, the agency seized 17.5 million doses of unlicensed medicines, illustrating the scale of the challenge.

The counterfeit weight-loss products primarily originate from South Asia, with criminals adeptly employing sophisticated trafficking techniques. While the counterfeit trade may have initially focused on branded drugs, it has now shifted towards offering DIY kits containing semaglutide in powdered form. Users are essentially self-administering without professional oversight, a recipe for disaster, as evidenced by cases such as that of Michelle Sword, who collapsed after using a counterfeit jab.

Morling indicated that recent enforcement actions have resulted in significant breakthroughs against these operations, including large-scale raids that led to the arrest of a dozen suspects and the confiscation of hundreds of thousands of doses of illicit medications, alongside cash and luxury items. To the untrained eye, however, illicit online pharmacies often appear legitimate. "Organised groups are now utilising retail fulfilment models, with medicines stored in the UK once they bypass border controls," he explained.

Currently, the global nature of the counterfeit drug issue has prompted international collaborations among regulatory agencies. Such efforts aim to secure supply chains while educating the public on the perils of unlicensed medications. In Australia, for instance, the Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has warned consumers about counterfeit semaglutide vials being smuggled into the country, further confirming the international dimensions of this illicit market.

It’s not only the physical health of consumers at stake but also the economic implications. Criminals profit significantly from the counterfeit medicines trade, as pills acquired cheaply abroad can be sold at inflated prices in the UK, generating staggering margins that are often funnelled into other illegal enterprises. Morling remarked, "The profits from medicines trafficking are arguably greater than conventional narcotics." He also noted that regulatory penalties for such crimes are comparably severe, yet many traffickers remain unaware of the risks.

Efforts to combat this scourge are ongoing, with regulatory bodies urging the public to obtain medications exclusively through licensed pharmacies and with proper prescriptions. Individuals are cautioned to be vigilant when purchasing medications online, looking out for tell-tale signs of illegitimacy, such as unusual web addresses or the promise of immediate delivery.

As demand for weight-loss treatments continues to rise, so too does the need for greater awareness and regulatory measures. The ongoing war against counterfeit drugs reveals both a public health crisis and a complex web of criminality that transcends borders, requiring vigilance, policy action, and public education to safeguard the health and safety of consumers everywhere.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14686533/fake-fat-jab-kits-cooked-criminal-gangs.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 2 – [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/mhra-warns-of-unsafe-fake-weight-loss-pens), [[3]](https://www.tga.gov.au/news/safety-alerts/counterfeit-semaglutide-vials)
* Paragraph 3 – [[4]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/falsified-ozempic-semaglutide-pens-identified-at-two-wholesalers-in-the-uk), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/fake-ozempic-how-batch-numbers-help-criminal-groups-spread-dangerous-drugs-2024-09-05/)
* Paragraph 4 – [[6]](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/how-asian-pharma-suppliers-cash-ozempic-copies-2024-11-01/), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14686533/fake-fat-jab-kits-cooked-criminal-gangs.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)
* Paragraph 5 – [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/fake-ozempic-how-batch-numbers-help-criminal-groups-spread-dangerous-drugs-2024-09-05/), [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14686533/fake-fat-jab-kits-cooked-criminal-gangs.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/mhra-warns-of-unsafe-fake-weight-loss-pens)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14686533/fake-fat-jab-kits-cooked-criminal-gangs.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490), [[2]](https://www.gov.uk/government/news/mhra-warns-of-unsafe-fake-weight-loss-pens), [[3]](https://www.tga.gov.au/news/safety-alerts/counterfeit-semaglutide-vials)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14686533/fake-fat-jab-kits-cooked-criminal-gangs.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-14686533/fake-fat-jab-kits-cooked-criminal-gangs.html?ns_mchannel=rss&ns_campaign=1490&ito=1490> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/mhra-warns-of-unsafe-fake-weight-loss-pens> - The UK's Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) has issued a warning about counterfeit Ozempic and Saxenda pens found in the UK. These falsified products, often purchased online without a prescription, pose significant health risks, including potential insulin content leading to hypoglycaemic shock. The MHRA advises the public to consult healthcare professionals and obtain prescriptions from legitimate sources to ensure medication safety.
3. <https://www.tga.gov.au/news/safety-alerts/counterfeit-semaglutide-vials> - The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) in Australia has identified counterfeit semaglutide vials, labeled as Ozempic, being illegally imported. Laboratory tests confirmed that these products did not contain semaglutide as labeled, highlighting the dangers of purchasing medications from unverified online sellers. The TGA emphasizes the importance of obtaining semaglutide through legitimate pharmacies with a valid prescription.
4. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/falsified-ozempic-semaglutide-pens-identified-at-two-wholesalers-in-the-uk> - The MHRA has confirmed the presence of falsified Ozempic pens at two UK wholesalers. These counterfeit products, which appeared to have authentic German packaging, were recalled and accounted for, with no evidence of supply to patients. The MHRA continues to collaborate with international regulatory partners to maintain the security of the supply chain and protect patient safety.
5. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/fake-ozempic-how-batch-numbers-help-criminal-groups-spread-dangerous-drugs-2024-09-05/> - Criminal groups are exploiting fake Ozempic batch numbers to distribute counterfeit drugs, posing significant health risks. These counterfeit products have been identified in at least 10 countries, leading to severe health consequences. The World Health Organization and health authorities are addressing this global issue, emphasizing the need for vigilance and proper sourcing of medications.
6. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/how-asian-pharma-suppliers-cash-ozempic-copies-2024-11-01/> - Asian pharmaceutical suppliers, such as Incepta Pharmaceuticals, are exporting semaglutide-based drugs like Fitaro and Orsema, which are cheaper copies of Novo Nordisk's Ozempic. These unapproved versions raise public health concerns, leading regulatory bodies in countries like the US, UK, and Ireland to seize or destroy these drugs due to potential health risks from unverified quality.
7. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/more-than-250-websites-selling-fake-weight-loss-drugs-reported-by-anti-2024-04-15/> - Cybersecurity firm BrandShield reported shutting down over 250 websites selling counterfeit GLP-1 class weight-loss and diabetes drugs, including Novo Nordisk's Ozempic and Wegovy, and Eli Lilly's Mounjaro and Zepbound. The surge in fake versions is linked to the drugs' popularity for weight loss, with harmful effects noted in at least nine countries. BrandShield collaborated with the Pharmaceutical Security Institute to remove thousands of fake drug listings on social media.