# Criminal gangs exploit demand with counterfeit DIY weight-loss injections in UK



# The Dark Reality of DIY Weight-Loss Injections: A Target for Criminal Gangs

The proliferation of counterfeit weight-loss injection kits in the UK has alarmed health officials as a growing market emerges for dangerous, unlicensed medications. Last year, hundreds of these so-called DIY kits were intercepted, indicating a significant threat to public health amidst an organised crime crackdown targeting the trafficking of illicit medicines.

The rising popularity of celebrity-endorsed treatments, particularly semaglutide, as seen in drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy, has led to soaring demand. This demand vastly outstrips legitimate supply channels, filling a void that criminal organisations swiftly exploit by peddling counterfeit versions of these medications. Notably, reports have surfaced of individuals suffering severe health consequences after self-administering these unverified substances, underscoring the risks associated with seeking quick fixes through unregulated means.

According to Andy Morling, the head of the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency's (MHRA) Criminal Enforcement Unit, the only way to guarantee the legitimacy of any medication, including weight-loss injections, is to procure them from registered pharmacies and with a valid prescription. He stressed that the sale of pharmaceuticals from unverified outlets poses significant health risks, as these products may be contaminated or contain hazardous ingredients.

In a sobering account, social media influencer Maddy revealed her near-fatal experience after using a DIY weight-loss kit endorsed by another influencer. Her condition deteriorated to the point of hospitalization, serving as a stark reminder of the stakes involved in purchasing medication from unregulated sources. Morling detailed that while counterfeit drugs remain relatively uncommon in the UK, the trafficking of controlled substances and unlicensed medications continues to pose challenges, with the MHRA recently seizing 1,201 weight-loss products.

The illicit trade in weight-loss drugs is compounded by the reality that most counterfeit medicines originate from countries with substantial pharmaceutical production capabilities, such as India. Despite the illegal market's scale, Morling remarked that these weight-loss products constitute a minor fraction of the total 17.5 million doses seized last year, which primarily included controlled drugs such as opioids and anti-anxiety medications.

A particularly concerning trend is the emergence of organised crime networks creating counterfeit versions of popular medications. The World Health Organization (WHO) recently issued warnings about falsified semaglutide products, highlighting cases across multiple countries, including the UK, where individuals mistakenly received potentially life-threatening alternatives. Furthermore, the global counterfeit drug market is believed to be worth billions, facilitated by advanced production techniques and deceptive marketing practices that can mimic legitimate pharmaceutical companies.

Law enforcement has intensified efforts to combat these illicit trades, illustrated by a series of dawn raids that recently led to the arrest of multiple suspects involved in organised trafficking. According to reports, substantial quantities of counterfeit drugs along with cash and luxury items were seized during these operations, showcasing the scale of the problem and its links to broader criminal enterprises.

The MHRA also emphasised that the risk of counterfeit medications extends beyond weight-loss drugs, with other unlicensed pharmaceuticals, including sedatives and hair-loss treatments, being intercepted at the borders. Criminals are drawn to this market for its high-profit margins; products costing mere pennies to manufacture abroad can be sold for much higher prices in the UK.

Despite law enforcement's robust response, the scope of the counterfeit medicine trade proves daunting. The tactics employed by organised groups often mirror those of legitimate pharmaceutical retailers, further obscuring the lines between compliant and illicit sales. As cases of counterfeit drugs spiking in regions around the world come to light, health officials continue to stress the importance of obtaining medications through authorised channels to safeguard public health.

Ultimately, as individuals seek convenient and affordable solutions to weight-loss, the pervasive nature of counterfeit drugs and the potential for health risks illustrate the need for heightened awareness and vigilance regarding the sources from which medicines are acquired. With so much at stake, buying from credible pharmacies is the one sure way to avoid the grave dangers posed by the counterfeit drug trade.

## 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), [[6]](https://pharmaceutical-journal.com/article/news/weight-loss-drugs-make-up-very-small-proportion-of-illegal-medicines-trade-in-uk-says-mhra)
* Paragraph 2 – [[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.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/who-issues-warnings-falsified-diabetes-weight-loss-drugs-2024-06-20/)
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* Paragraph 4 – [[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), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/more-than-250-websites-selling-fake-weight-loss-drugs-reported-by-anti-2024-04-15/)
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* 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), [[4]](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/sellers-fake-ozempic-face-charges-austrian-court-2024-07-09/)
* 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), [[5]](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/more-than-250-websites-selling-fake-weight-loss-drugs-reported-by-anti-2024-04-15/)
* Paragraph 8 – [[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), [[3]](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/fake-ozempic-how-batch-numbers-help-criminal-groups-spread-dangerous-drugs-2024-09-05/)
* Paragraph 9 – [[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.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/who-issues-warnings-falsified-diabetes-weight-loss-drugs-2024-06-20/)

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## Bibliography

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2. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/who-issues-warnings-falsified-diabetes-weight-loss-drugs-2024-06-20/> - In June 2024, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued warnings about counterfeit drugs claiming to contain semaglutide, the active ingredient in Novo Nordisk's diabetes medication Ozempic and weight-loss treatment Wegovy. The surge in demand for these GLP-1 drugs has led to a growing market for fake versions. WHO identified three falsified batches of semaglutide in Brazil, the UK, and the US between October and December 2023. The WHO advised patients to purchase medications through proper channels to avoid health risks from counterfeit drugs. Novo Nordisk and Eli Lilly have filed lawsuits against entities selling fake versions of their drugs. ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/who-issues-warnings-falsified-diabetes-weight-loss-drugs-2024-06-20/?utm_source=openai))
3. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/fake-ozempic-how-batch-numbers-help-criminal-groups-spread-dangerous-drugs-2024-09-05/> - In September 2024, Reuters reported that criminal groups are using fake Ozempic batch numbers to distribute dangerous drugs, posing significant health risks. In December 2023, a man from San Antonio purchased what he believed was Ozempic in Mexico, only to discover it was fake insulin, which can be dangerous if taken incorrectly. Counterfeit drugs have been found in at least 10 countries, leading to severe health consequences. Criminals obtain batch numbers through various means and replicate packaging to create convincing fakes. The WHO and health authorities are grappling with this global problem. Some countries have banned specific batch numbers, but others have not, fearing exacerbated shortages of legitimate drugs. The counterfeit drug market is extensive, potentially worth billions, and identifying those responsible is challenging. ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/fake-ozempic-how-batch-numbers-help-criminal-groups-spread-dangerous-drugs-2024-09-05/?utm_source=openai))
4. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/sellers-fake-ozempic-face-charges-austrian-court-2024-07-09/> - In July 2024, Reuters reported that Austrian prosecutors planned to file criminal charges against two men for selling counterfeit Ozempic injection pens, resulting in bodily harm to three women. The accused sold 225 fake pens for 205 euros each to a Salzburg plastic surgeon. The defendants allegedly sold insulin instead of semaglutide, Ozempic’s active ingredient, causing temporary symptoms in the affected women. The crooks capitalized on the high demand for Ozempic due to its weight-loss effects. The World Health Organization and European Medicines Agency have issued warnings about falsified weight-loss drugs. The first hearing is set for September 16, and the defendants face up to three years in prison. ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/sellers-fake-ozempic-face-charges-austrian-court-2024-07-09/?utm_source=openai))
5. <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/more-than-250-websites-selling-fake-weight-loss-drugs-reported-by-anti-2024-04-15/> - In April 2024, Reuters reported that cybersecurity firm BrandShield had reported shutting down over 250 websites selling counterfeit GLP-1 class weight-loss and diabetes drugs like Novo Nordisk's Ozempic and Wegovy, and Eli Lilly's Mounjaro and Zepbound. The drugs, originally intended for type 2 diabetes, have gained popularity for their weight-loss benefits, leading to a surge in fake versions. Harmful effects of fake GLP-1 drugs have been noted in at least nine countries. BrandShield collaborated with the Pharmaceutical Security Institute (PSI) and removed 3,968 fake drug listings on social media, primarily on Facebook. The firm also took down over 6,900 illegal drug listings worldwide across different online platforms. ([reuters.com](https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/more-than-250-websites-selling-fake-weight-loss-drugs-reported-by-anti-2024-04-15/?utm_source=openai))
6. <https://pharmaceutical-journal.com/article/news/weight-loss-drugs-make-up-very-small-proportion-of-illegal-medicines-trade-in-uk-says-mhra> - In November 2024, The Pharmaceutical Journal reported that the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) stated that weight loss drugs, such as semaglutide, make up a 'very small part' of medicines being illegally trafficked into the UK. Andy Morling, deputy director of criminal enforcement at the MHRA, mentioned that the agency has made '900 or so seizures' of trafficked weight loss injections. He also noted that the majority of illegally traded medicines are unlicensed generic medicines, with most drugs trafficked to the UK coming from India. ([pharmaceutical-journal.com](https://pharmaceutical-journal.com/article/news/weight-loss-drugs-make-up-very-small-proportion-of-illegal-medicines-trade-in-uk-says-mhra?utm_source=openai))