

COVID-19 Fraud Alerts and Government Actions

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In the past couple of days, the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General (HHS-OIG) and the Department of Justice (DOJ) each issued warnings about fraudulent schemes relating to COVID-19. And last Friday, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) **alerted** the public that currently there are no FDA-approved at-home tests for the coronavirus, in response to more and more companies marketing direct-to-consumer tests. While we are all taking precautions to stay safe and #flattenthecurve -- with many under orders to shelter in place -- scammers are preying on fears and insecurities and hawking test kits and vaccines for the virus. These scams are reminders to trust our medical professionals and access them when we feel sick and to think twice when something sounds too good to be true.

Yesterday, HHS-OIG released a **Fraud Alert** warning of fake COVID-19 test kits being offered to Medicare beneficiaries as a way to gather personal information, including Medicare and Medicaid numbers. People are receiving phone calls, online requests, and even in-person visits, and providing the requested information puts them at risk for fraud related to this scheme and future schemes. Stay protected. HHS-OIG reminds us (and we should remind our loved ones) to be suspicious of unsolicited requests for information and unexpected visits and to use trusted healthcare providers for COVID-19 information and testing, not online ads.

On Saturday, the DOJ filed an action to take down a website named "www.coronavirusmedicalkit.com" that claimed to send World Health Organization (WHO) COVID-19 test kits for a shipping cost of \$4.95, paid by entering credit card information on the website. The website has been shut down, and DOJ is still investigating the website and its operators. In its **Press Release**, DOJ stressed the importance of gathering reliable information and included the following list of steps that Americans can take to protect themselves against scammers capitalizing on this pandemic:

- Independently verify the identity of any company, charity, or individual that contacts you regarding COVID-19.
- Check the websites and email addresses offering information, products, or services related to COVID-19. Be aware that scammers often employ addresses that differ only slightly from those belonging to the entities they are impersonating. For example, they might use "cdc.com" or "cdc.org" instead of "cdc.gov."
- Be wary of unsolicited emails offering information, supplies, or treatment for COVID-19 or requesting your personal information for medical purposes. Legitimate health authorities will not contact the general public this way.
- Do not click on links or open email attachments from unknown or unverified sources. Doing so could download a virus onto your computer or device.
- Make sure the anti-malware and anti-virus software on your computer is operating and up to date.
- Ignore offers for a COVID-19 vaccine, cure, or treatment. Remember, if a vaccine becomes available, you won't hear about it for the first time through an email, online ad, or unsolicited sales pitch.
- Check online reviews of any company offering COVID-19 products or supplies. Avoid companies whose customers have complained about not receiving items.
- Research any charities or crowdfunding sites soliciting donations in connection with COVID-19 before giving any donation. Remember, an organization may not be legitimate even if it uses words like "CDC" or "government" in its name or has reputable looking seals or logos on its materials. For online resources on donating wisely, visit the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) website.
- Be wary of any business, charity, or individual requesting payments or donations in cash, by wire transfer, gift card, or through the mail. Don't send money through any of these channels.
- Be cautious of "investment opportunities" tied to COVID-19, especially those based on claims that a small company's products or services can help stop the virus. If you decide to invest, carefully research the investment beforehand. For information on how to avoid investment fraud, visit the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) website.

News agencies are reporting on companies pulling at-home coronavirus tests from the marketplace after receiving warning letters from the FDA. And before issuing its Alert on Friday about at-home testing kits, the FDA had already sent **warning letters** to a number of companies for marketing fraudulent COVID-19

products.

Medical professionals continue to put themselves at risk every day to help treat patients who have been infected with the novel coronavirus. Do your part to help prevent its spread and keep your loved ones and neighbors safe -- both from sickness and from scammers preying on the confusion and fear that COVID-19 creates.

Access the HHS-OIG Fraud Alert [here](#).

Access the DOJ Press Release [here](#).

Access the FDA Alert [here](#).

Authors