

Buying Electrical Goods Online?



The Safe Shopper's Guide

ELECTRICAL

SAFETY
COUNCIL

Every year more than 70 deaths and three hundred and fifty thousand injuries in UK homes are caused by faulty electrics and electrical equipment.

"We bought the toaster and kettle from an on-line shop offering respected brands at discounted prices. But it wasn't long before we realised that we'd bought some dodgy goods. My wife was getting breakfast one morning when she got an electric shock from the toaster. And later, the kettle failed to cut out when it had boiled and the plastic casing started to melt!" P.W. London



© European Communities, 1995-2008

Have you bought a fake or dangerous product over the internet and want to help others avoid problems online? Email enquiries@esc.org.uk for more information.

“Buying on the web’s so easy- why do I need a guide?”

Most website shopping is trouble-free. But it makes sense to be wary of possible risks – especially when buying electrical goods.

You may think you’ve got a bargain but the product could be a cheap copy, of poor quality, or made to look like a well-known brand. Or it may be second-hand, with damage that can make it unsafe. Such electrical products have the potential to harm you, your family and your home.



This guide has been produced by the Electrical Safety Council to inform you about the most common problems with buying electrical products online. Our advice will help keep you and your family safe and make you aware of your rights as a buyer.

One of the downsides of internet shopping is that you can’t see the product you are buying – you have to rely on website photos and descriptions. But if you follow our top ten tips, you’ll protect yourself and your purse when buying electrical goods over the internet.

Important!

Don’t rely on a CE mark alone as a guarantee of safety. A CE mark on a product is simply a declaration by the **manufacturer** that the product meets all the requirements of European law and is safe to use.



Top Ten Tips

- ✓ **Check the voltage** of products is 230V, 50Hz - the UK's usual domestic voltage and fitted with a three-pin UK plug or charger.
- ✓ **Look on the site for the seller's contact details.** Make sure there is a full, 'real' address, not just a PO Box number. Not all websites with a .co.uk address are based in the UK.
- ✓ **Avoid buying second-hand products,** especially ones where the guarantee or warranty has run out. You won't know who has owned it or what condition it is in.
- ✓ **Look for websites that allow you to pay safely** – these will have a padlock at the bottom on the screen when you are filling in payment details.
- ✓ **Do a price check** and, if you have time, visit the high street too. Ask yourself – if it's so cheap, is it safe?
- ✓ **Use online review websites** to find out what people are saying about products and sellers.
- ✓ **Read the product guarantees,** the seller's terms and conditions, returns policy and privacy statement.
- ✓ **Check the site is a member** of an online retail accrediting body, such as ISIS, which means they have signed up to certain service standards.
- ✓ **If you use your credit card** to spend £100 or more on an item, you can hold both the trader and the credit card liable if something goes wrong with the sale.
- ✓ **Keep records** of whatever you order

Don't fall for fake

Increasingly, fake products are sold online, often at 'unbelievable' prices. If in doubt, e-mail the seller with questions and ask for more pictures of the product, so you can do a visual check.

Tell-tale signs it's not the real thing - before you buy, check:

- Is the item much cheaper than you expected? (Although clever counterfeiters can also copy the price!)
- Do the website photos of product and packaging look genuine?
- Does the site offer information about user instructions and guarantees?
- Are the manufacturer's contact details, and/or the product's country of origin, provided on the site?

Second-hand goods

If you must buy second-hand electrical products, try to buy from a business seller you know and trust. You still have some legal protection, as businesses selling second-hand electrical goods must ensure that the product meets legal safety requirements and is correctly labelled – but there are differences from 'buying new'.

Important

Private sellers in online auctions only have to accurately describe what they are selling - they can refuse responsibility for the quality of their goods.

Steer clear of spam

Spam emails often try to lure shoppers to certain websites. If you order from one of these sites, the chances are you'll get fake goods – if you get anything at all.

Problem products

Recall information from the official EU recall system, which lists unsafe products in Europe, shows the electrical goods most often reported as faulty or dangerous are:

- Electrical chargers
- Adaptors, including those used for travel
- Cable extension and products leads
- Hairdryers, tongs and clippers
- Small kitchen appliances like kettles, toasters and irons



"The hair straighteners I bought on-line looked like the real thing and at the price they were offered, I thought I was getting a bargain. But they were fake and kept overheating. I was lucky. I only burnt a bit of my hair. I dread to think what could have happened if one of the kids had used them".

J.D. Lancs

Important!

If you suspect a product is dangerous to use, or if it is a fake copy of a well-known brand, it is illegal. Contact your local trading standards office or Citizens Advice straight away. If you have any suspicions about the product's safety, or if you think it's fake, do not use it. Unsafe electrical products can cause fire, electric shock, burns and other injuries.

What to do when...

The product arrives, but something seems wrong:

- Check the packaging and delivery notes look genuine. Does it contain instructions and a guarantee?
- Check for any damage and listen for any loose fittings.
- Check the item has a UK plug. Make sure it is in good condition with the right size pins and properly attached to the cord.

STOP using the product immediately, turn it off and unplug it from the socket if any of the following occurs:

- It isn't working properly, or won't work all the time.
- It speeds up or down without warning.
- The outer casing seems too hot to the touch.
- You can see smoke coming from it, or smell burning.

"My son had broken the charger for his games console, so I went on-line to get a cheap replacement. All was well until he left the machine on during dinner. We heard an explosion and found the charger in flames! I'm just grateful the house didn't go up in smoke and my son wasn't electrocuted." M.A. Leeds



Returning faulty items

If you believe an item is faulty, you should first contact the seller. Put your complaint in writing and keep copies of any correspondence.

If you feel their response is unsatisfactory, there are a number of things you can do.

- If you are making a claim for a refund, repair or replacement, you can take advice from the Citizens Advice consumer service.
- Some auction websites or third party bodies (e.g. PayPal, NoChex etc) can help – see their terms and conditions.
- Contact your local council and ask to speak to their trading standards department.
- If the product cost more than £100 and you paid by credit card, contact the credit card company. They may refund you and take up your complaint with the seller.
- Contact the manufacturer directly and speak to their customer services team – but remember, you will still need to go through the seller for a refund.
- If the seller is a member of a trade association, or an online accreditation body such as ISIS, you can ask them to look into your complaint.
- A last resort is to take the seller to court, which may cost you money. If you win, your court costs will be paid. If you lose, you pay the seller's legal bill as well as your own.

(Contact details for many of the organisations can be found overleaf.)

The confident consumer – know your rights

Buying from UK companies

Online buyers have protection in law against unfair trading through the Sale of Goods Act 1979 and the Distance Selling Regulations 2000.

Key points are:

- The seller must provide clear and accurate information about the goods or services they are selling.
- The seller must provide written confirmation of the sale.
- Goods must arrive within 30 days, unless otherwise agreed.
- You have a 'cooling off' period of seven days – which starts the day after you receive your goods – during which you can cancel your order.
- If an item arrives faulty or broken, you have the right to a repair, replacement or full refund. The seller should pay the cost of returning the item.
- If you buy a second-hand product from a business you are still legally protected – they must ensure goods meet legal safety standards and are correctly labelled. But because of wear and tear the law does not hold the trader to the same standard of quality as those selling a new product. Private sellers online, however, can refuse responsibility for the quality of their goods.

Important!
One in 16 online companies which have a UK domain name are not based in the UK

Buying from companies outside the UK

If you buy an electrical product from a company based inside the EU, European law will protect you but it may take time to sort out your complaint. Contact the UK European Consumer Centre at www.ukecc.net for more details, or contact Citizens Advice.

If you buy from a company outside the EU and you have a problem, it is unlikely that UK or EU law can protect you.

Also:

- Electrical goods may not meet EU safety and quality standards.
- The product you get may work on a different voltage rating from that in the UK.
- As well as delivery charges you will have to pay Customs and Excise duties before the goods are delivered to your home.
- If you need to return a product, you will probably have to pay the postage. You will also need to complete a Customs and Excise form to get a refund on duty taxes.

More help and useful organisations

Your Rights and the Law

Citizens Advice

www.adviceguide.org.uk

Consumer helpline 08454 04 05 06



Trading Standards

You find your local Trading Standards service by visiting www.tradingstandards.gov.uk or by contacting your local council.

Online shopping using EU websites

UK European Consumer Centre

www.ukecc.net 08456 04 05 03

Online shopping worldwide

Econsumer.gov

Complaints about overseas internet businesses can be registered on this database – but read carefully how they might use your details.

www.econsumer.gov



Website Checks

Nominet

Register of all .uk domain names www.nominet.org.uk

Internet Shopping is Safe (ISIS)

<http://isisaccreditation.imrg.org/>

Shop Safe

<http://uk.theshoppingassistant.com>

Seller and product reviews

www.reviewcentre.com

www.dooyoo.co.uk

www.ciao.co.uk



Product recall notices

www.tradingstandards.gov.uk/advice (UK)

http://ec.europa.eu/consumers/dyna/rapex/rapex_archives_en.cfm
(Europe)



The Electrical Safety Council (ESC) is a charity committed to reducing deaths and injuries caused by electricity.

www.esc.org.uk

Endorsed by



ELECTRICAL

SAFETY
COUNCIL

The Electrical Safety Council

Unit 331, Great Guildford Business Square, 30 Great Guildford Street, London SE1 0HS

Helpline: 020 3463 5100 Fax: 020 3463 5139

Email: enquiries@esc.org.uk Web: www.esc.org.uk

Registered Charity (England and Wales) No. 257376 (Scotland) No. SC039990

The Electrical Safety Council (ESC) is a charity committed to reducing deaths and injuries caused by electricity.