



Counterfeit Check Scams: Throw that Fake Check Away!

Con artists never grow tired of using counterfeit check scams to take your money. Many of the fake checks created today look so real that they even fool bank tellers.

Don't let them fool you! By learning to recognize the signs of a counterfeit check scam, you can avoid becoming another victim of this common rip-off.

How Does the Scam Work?

Although counterfeit check scams come in a variety of forms, they all follow the same blueprint. One of the more common examples is the **foreign lottery scam**. In this scheme, the con artist sends you a letter informing you that you have won the lottery or a sweepstakes in another country. Enclosed with the letter is a legitimate-looking cashier's check—the name of a respected bank appears at the top, and the account and routing numbers may even be real. According to the letter, all you have to do to claim your prize is deposit the check into your bank account and wire the money to an overseas address to pay the taxes and fees on your winnings.

Sounds tempting, doesn't it? But make no mistake about it, this is a scam. That real-looking check is a fake. If you deposit the fake check and wire the money overseas as directed, you will be legally responsible to the bank for the entire amount of the fake check, which could be in the thousands of dollars.

But if the Bank Cashes the Check, it Must be Real, Right?

Wrong! Banks are required by law to make the funds from a check available to you within a short period of time. So, just because you have access to the funds does not mean that the check is real. When the bank finally determines that the check is fake, final responsibility for the loss falls on you. Unfortunately, the chances of tracking down the con artist and holding him accountable are close to zero. When funds are wired overseas, it is nearly impossible to identify or locate the recipient.

Basic Tips to Help You Avoid Falling Victim to a Counterfeit Check Scam:

- Throw away any offer that asks you to pay for a prize or a gift. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is. You can't win a lottery if you did not buy lottery tickets, and you can't win a sweepstakes that you didn't enter.
- Resist the urge to enter foreign lotteries. It's illegal to play a foreign lottery through the mail or the telephone, and most foreign lottery solicitations are phony.
- Do not deposit a check if you do not know who it came from, and never wire money to strangers.
- Depositing a suspicious check and waiting a while to spend the money will not protect you from being scammed. It may take weeks for the bank to figure out that the check is fake.

If you receive a suspicious check in the mail, you can contact the **Illinois Attorney General's Consumer Fraud Hotline** (1-800-386-5438; TTY: 1-800-964-3013) or **Senior Fraud Helpline** (1-800-243-5377; TTY: 1-800-964-3013). Also, you can give the check, envelope, and any letter to your local post office for further investigation.