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Email, SMS vaccine scams on the way: cyber experts

Tom Burton *Government editor*



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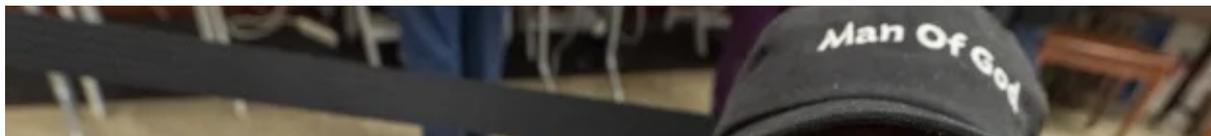


Cyber experts and authorities are warning of an inundation of vaccine scams, as Australia prepares to distribute COVID-19 vaccines from February 22.

The roll-out of the vaccine in the US and Britain has inspired many vaccine-related scams, with a 300 per cent jump in vaccine-related website domains in the lead-up to the first jabs being distributed.

More than 5000 new domains were registered, according to the CEO of cyber research firm, Security in Depth, Michael Connory.

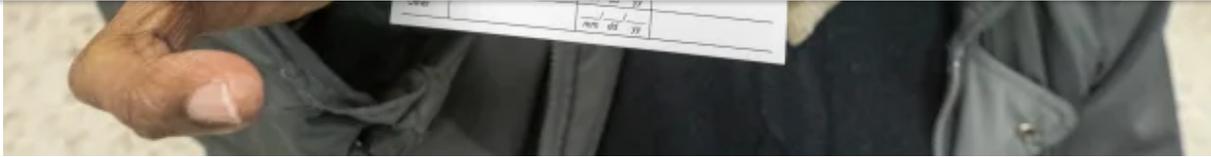
“We’ve been seeing in the US, but specifically in the UK, the large number – and it’s a huge number – of vaccine-related cyber attacks, primarily through phishing, with individuals and criminal organisations looking at obtaining credentials for individuals,” Mr Connory said.



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Vaccine scammers have been offering fake COVID-19 vaccine cards in the US. **AP**

Cyber criminals have also set up fake British National Health Service websites that send emails asking for confirmation of vaccination appointments as a way of stealing people's identities, he said.

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“So you put in your username, you set up a password, you set up a time and date so to speak. And you need to also communicate or provide some documentation on who you are to be able to streamline the process now.”

“We saw a million of these emails go out in the UK about six weeks ago. It was picked up very quickly as there was over 1000 complaints within a 24 hour period,” he said.

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to about 10 to 15 per cent.”

“In the US people were texted asking them to pay \$US150 (\$190) to jump the queue and get early access to the backside and we believe that that will happen here as well.”

Supply chain impersonators

It is predicted that some of the scam attacks would come from foreign actors emulating company suppliers, such as drug companies or health insurers.

“The type of scam which isn’t happening in the markets, but we might see here, is if you’re in the vaccine supply chain,” said Gavin Levinsohn, head of growth at Eftsure, a company that specialises in helping businesses avoid compromise via emails that seek to falsely obtain a payment as a supplier.

“So the drug companies could be impersonated to their customers, pharmacies could be impersonated to the public, and obviously the Department of Health can be impersonated.

“It’s the whole thing of supply chain impersonation.”



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“It is essential that law enforcement is as prepared as possible for what will be an onslaught of all types of criminal activity linked to the COVID-19 vaccine, which is why Interpol has issued this global warning.”

The Australian Competition and Consumer Commission’s [Scamwatch](#) has received at least 5866 scam reports mentioning the coronavirus, with more than \$7,500,000 in reported losses since the outbreak of COVID-19, according to a spokesman.

The ACCC confirmed it had been seeing reports of vaccine scams. “In 2021 we have received 16 Scamwatch reports concerning COVID-19 vaccines,” the spokesman said.

“Six relate to alleged investment scams, relating to opportunities to invest in a vaccine, four relate to alleged scams involving offers to participate in surveys about vaccinations for COVID-19, and three relate to concerns around publication of anti-vaccination material.”

The ACCC Scamwatch messaging focuses on scammers exploiting people’s desire to get the vaccine early.

Vulnerable customers

Cyber security software vendor Norton said vaccine scammers were playing on vulnerable people’s need to get the vaccine.

“Many people desperately want to believe they can get their COVID-19 vaccines

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for vaccines and offers to directly ship a vaccine, all typically for a fee.

In one extreme case, a man in London was reported to have knocked on the door of a 92-year-old woman and [administered her with a fake vaccine](#) before taking a \$285 payment that he told her would be reimbursed by the NHS.

In the US online scammers sold fake vaccine appointments and knock-off vaccine cards. The cards document the date that vaccinated people received their doses, the manufacturer of their vaccine and its batch number.

Vaccine surveys have also been widely seen on the internet with Hotmail accounts being targeted, according to people with these accounts, once popular in the early days of the internet.

In late January, a man in Washington state was reported to be arrested after advertising fake COVID-19 vaccines online for as much as \$US1300 and even injected people with an unknown substance.

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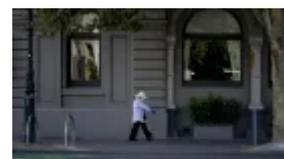
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