

Checking Into Foreign Lotteries and Sweepstakes

Have you received an official-looking letter saying you won a foreign lottery or sweepstakes? Responding to it can be tempting: After all, maybe there's a possibility that you won some money that could turn your dreams into reality!

The letter usually comes with a cashier's check. It says the check is to help cover the taxes and fees associated with claiming your prize money. You just need to deposit the check into your account, and wire part of the money to cover those taxes and fees back to the people who sent it to you. You get to keep the rest of the money you deposited, and the full amount of the prize money you've "won."

There's a catch! Unfortunately, many people think the cashier's check accompanying the letter is real. It's not. It's a trick to get you to deposit the counterfeit check into your account and wire money to someone you don't know before your bank discovers the check is a fake and holds you responsible for the full amount.

If you are someone who trusts these kinds of offers and follows up by wiring money for fictional taxes and fees, you're not only out of luck, but also out of money.

Here's how to protect yourself from counterfeit check scams:

- **Throw away any offer asking you to pay for a prize or a gift.** If it's free or a gift, you shouldn't have to pay for it. Free is free.
- **Don't enter any foreign lotteries**, even for fun. It's illegal to play a foreign lottery through the mail or the telephone, and most foreign lottery and sweepstakes solicitations are phony.
- **Never agree to deposit a check from someone you don't know.** The check will bounce, and you'll owe your bank the money you withdrew. By law, banks must make the funds from deposited checks available within a day or two, but it can take weeks to uncover a counterfeit check. It may seem that the check has cleared and that the money is in your account, but you're responsible for the checks you deposit. If a check turns out to be a fake, you owe the bank the money you withdrew based on that check.
- **Never wire money to someone you don't know.** Wiring money is like sending cash; you can't trace it – and once it's sent, you can't get it back.