

Identity Theft - How Can You Prevent It Happening to You?

The nightmare of identity theft strikes an estimated 750,000 people every year. How can you keep from being one of them? While there is no guarantee that you won't become a victim, there are some steps you can take to decrease the risk and protect yourself.

According to the Federal Trade Commission, some everyday tips to protecting your personal information include:

- Not giving out your personal information to a stranger over the phone, the Internet, or through the mail. Your Social Security number (SSN), phone number and address, credit card or bank account numbers, and drivers' license number can be used by criminals to assume your identity. Unless you know the person you are communicating with or have invited them to contact you, do not answer any question that makes you uncomfortable. Identity thieves can pose successfully as agents from banks, credit card companies, Internet service providers, utility companies, or government offices. If someone calls claiming to represent a legitimate organization, confirm this by calling the customer service number listed on your statement or bill.
- Finding out how your personal information will be used and if you have the option to keep the details confidential when providing this data to a legitimate organization, for example, when filling out an application. Ask if the organization has a method of securing your information and if they plan to share it with other companies or individuals.
- Always monitoring the balances on your checking, savings, or other financial accounts. Keep an eye out for unexplained charges or withdrawals made without your permission. Carefully reading your monthly bank and credit card statements, then checking the amounts against your check register or other record-keeping method could catch a thief in the act of assuming your identity and spending your hard-earned money.
- Keeping track of your billing cycles. If your credit card statement doesn't arrive at its usual time, this could signal an address change by an identity thief.
- Being cautious handling your mail and even your trash. Place outgoing mail in a post office collection box or at the post office instead of leaving it out on your mailbox. Bring the mail inside promptly every day, and when planning to be out of town, enlist the help of a friend or neighbor to do the same. A thief can sift through your garbage in search of sensitive information. Shred all charge receipts, credit offers and applications, insurance or physician's statements, checks and bank statements, and discarded credit cards.
- Storing your Social Security card someplace other than your purse or wallet. Provide your SSN only when necessary, and ask to substitute another number if your state uses your SSN on your drivers' license.
- Carrying only the credit or debit cards you need. Leave other identifying cards at home.

In addition to the everyday precautions that can minimize your risk, there are some other actions you can take to improve your safety:

- Safeguard the information on your computer by updating your virus protection plan on a regular basis, using a firewall to keep hackers from accessing your files, and deleting any personal information on your computer before you dispose of it using a “wipe” utility program that clears the hard drive. Never download a file from someone you don’t know, and do not open e-mails from an unfamiliar sender; doing so could expose your computer to a virus. Finally, when submitting personal information over the Internet, look for the “lock” icon on the status bar to know that your browser is secure.
- Use passwords for your bank, credit card, and phone accounts. Try to think of a unique number that you can remember other than your birth date, your mother’s maiden name, the last four digits of your SSN, or a series of numbers in order, e.g. 1-2-3-4.
- Find a safe place for your purse or wallet while you’re at work. Ask about the policy your office has for securing your personal information, such as who has access to it, where it is stored, and how it is disposed of when you leave.
- Every year, order a copy of your credit report from the three different credit bureaus, Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion. Check for the accuracy of each and correct any discrepancies. You may be charged for the report, but the savings you receive in peace of mind is well worth the fee.
- Clean up any credit damage as soon as you possibly can. Errors in reporting alone happen often, some estimates are as high as 62% of the information on a credit report may be inaccurate. That doesn’t even begin to cover situations such as identity theft which is a serious problem on the rise in the U.S. You can consult a Credit Damage expert if you suspect that your credit has been accessed or used in any way without your permission. That includes companies running a simple inquiry without you saying they can. For more information on what an expert witness can do for you, go to www.apscreen.com

When it comes to protecting your good name and your hard-earned money, a little caution goes a long way.