

Protect Yourself from the #1 Crime in the U.S.: Identity Theft

Identity theft is a serious and costly crime. People whose identities have been stolen can spend months or years cleaning up the mess thieves have made of their good name and credit record. In the meantime, victims may lose job opportunities, be refused loans, housing or cars, or even get arrested for crimes they didn't commit.

The following tips can help you lower your risk of becoming a victim.

1. Protect your accounts against fraud.

Contact the fraud department of any of the three consumer reporting companies—Equifax[®], ExperianSM and Trans Union[®]—to place a fraud alert on your credit report. The fraud alert automatically lets credit card companies and other creditors know they must contact you before opening any new accounts or making any changes to your existing accounts.

2. Don't get caught by "phishing."

Scam artists "phish" for victims' information by posing as representatives of banks, stores or government agencies. This is done over the phone, through regular mail, and especially via e-mail. Don't respond to a request to verify your account number or password. Don't give out your personal information unless *you* made the contact. Legitimate companies will not request this kind of information in this way.

3. Keep your identity from getting trashed.

Invest in a paper shredder and shred all papers with personal information before you throw them away, including unwanted credit card applications and "convenience checks" that come in the mail, credit card receipts with your account number, outdated financial papers and papers containing your clients' personal information.

4. Control your personal financial information.

Many states have laws requiring banks and other financial institutions to get your permission before sharing your personal financial information with outside companies. You also have the right to limit the sharing of your personal financial information with most of your companies' affiliates. Write to your companies that you want to "opt-out" of sharing your personal financial information with their affiliates.

5. Shield your computer from viruses and spies.

Use passwords with at least eight characters, including a combination of letters, numbers, and symbols. Use firewall and virus protection software and update it regularly. Download free software only from sites you know and trust, and don't install software without knowing what it is. Set browser security to at least "medium." Don't click on links in pop-up windows or in spam e-mail, and don't download any file from an e-mail address you don't know.

6. Click with caution

When shopping online, check out a Web site before entering your credit card number or other personal information. Enter personal information only on secure Web pages with "https" in the address bar and a closed padlock symbol at the bottom of the browser window.

7. Check your bills and bank statements.

Open your credit card bills and bank statements right away. Check for any unauthorized charges or withdrawals and report them immediately. Call if bills don't arrive on time. It may mean that someone has changed contact information to hide fraudulent charges.

8. Stop pre-approved credit offers.

Stop most pre-approved credit card offers by calling toll-free 888-5OPTOUT (888-567-8688) to have your name removed from credit bureau marketing lists.

9. Ask questions.

Ask questions whenever you are asked for personal information that seems inappropriate. Ask how the information will be used and if it will be shared. Ask how it will be protected.

10. Check your credit reports — for free.

One of the best ways to protect yourself from identity theft is to monitor your credit history. You can get one free credit report every year from each of the three national credit bureaus. Order your free annual credit reports by phone, toll-free, at 877-322-8228, or online at www.annualcreditreport.com.

(Sources: The Federal Trade Commission, The Office of Privacy Protection in the California Department of Consumer Affairs)