

Identity Theft: It Can Happen to Anyone, Anywhere, Anytime

Thousands of people will find out that they have become a victim of identity theft each year, and the numbers are growing. Unfortunately, there is really no sure way to protect yourself from becoming a victim. There are steps that you can take to help safeguard your personal information, and watch for early indications that you may have someone using your information. Educate yourself on what measures you can take to help protect your financial and personal information, learn what the signs of identity theft are, and what to do if you think someone has your information.

One thing that everyone should do at least once a year is request an updated copy of their credit report. Not only should this be checked by you for accuracy, but also as an early warning system of possible identity theft. Federal law now states that you can receive a copy of your credit report at no charge one time a year. There are other circumstances in which you are allowed to get a free copy of your credit report, such as being denied credit, turned down for a job or insurance coverage based on information obtained from your credit report, or if you suspect it is incorrect due to previous identity frauds.

Another way to protect your information is to password protect all of your credit cards and bank accounts, so that no information can be gleaned without first supplying the correct password. When you fill out applications that ask for personal information that anyone could have access to, such as your mother's last name before she was married, ask if you can use a password instead, for security purposes. In the event you are allowed to use a password, use something that no one else would be able to think of. You don't want to use your social security number, your date of birth, anniversary dates, phone numbers, or a set or pattern of numbers. A mixture of both numbers and letters works best.

Any company that you have to give personal information to, such as your bank or doctor's office, should be able to tell you what precautions they take in safeguarding your information, ask them. Find out exactly who in the company has access to it, what the policy is regarding sharing your information with affiliates or third parties, and how paperwork is disposed of.

Be very leery of giving out any of your personal information either over the telephone, or while on the internet. Identity thieves have to constantly think up new ways to get you to help them get your information, and they often pose as people you do business with to try to get what they need to steal from you. You have no way of knowing who is calling your house on the other end of the line, no matter who they may say they are.

When disposing of documents or mail that contains your personal information, it is a good idea to use a cross cut shredder to safeguard the information they contain. Retrieve your mail promptly from your home mailbox, so that credit applications and invoices don't fall into the wrong hands. Many identity thieves will steal your mail to try to get information they can use.

You should take steps to protect any information that may be stored on your computer's hard drive. It is a good idea to have a secure firewall, updated antivirus and spy ware all installed on your computer. Run it frequently to spot any potential viruses or programs that can retrieve your information and send it back to someone else. If you do business online, such as bill pay or online banking, make sure the website you use is a secure site that takes measures to protect the information you give them about yourself.

You can also subscribe to credit monitoring services that guarantee to monitor your credit report, and immediately alert you of any suspicious activity, and help you take care of any potential problems. This does cost you a monthly fee, but can save you the time of checking your credit report yourself.

Many of the companies you do business with, especially credit cards and banks will have programs in place to help protect you in case you do find yourself a victim of identity theft. Inquire about them, and if you don't feel that they are up to par, consider taking your business elsewhere.

If you do think that someone has gained access to your personal information and has already begun to use it, you should contact the credit bureau and have them flag your report. This requires any potential creditors to speak with you personally before they can open any new accounts in your name. If you have unauthorized charges that are posting to your existing account, file a fraud claim with the companies, and the credit bureau. You will most likely also need to file a police report, and give a copy to all creditors, so that you are not held financially responsible for the fraudulent charges. Have activity suspended on all of your existing accounts, or open up new ones altogether, so that no more charges can occur.

Identity thieves are constantly coming up with new ways to get your information for their financial gain, you just have to learn to make things harder for them, and what to do if it ever happens to you. You should not live in fear of identity theft, just be aware that it does happen, and can happen to you. Keep your head; know who you are giving your information to, and what they plan to do with it.

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About the Author

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