

Identity Theft - More Tips on How it Can Be Avoided

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Recent security breaches at several credit card companies continue to worry Americans, as stolen financial information can lead to identity theft. Identity theft occurs when someone obtains your Social Security number and/or other vital information and uses it to pose as you. By doing so, they can take advantage of your good credit history to open new credit card accounts or obtain loans. They get to spend the money, but you get to pay the bills. It often takes a victim a year or more to even detect that he or she has been a victim of ID theft; clearing up the mess caused by an identity theft scam can take years and can harm your personal credit report indefinitely.

We have covered a few identity theft tips in previous articles, but here are some more things the conscientious consumer can do to minimize the chances of being the latest victim of an ID theft scammer:

When engaged in online banking activity, avoid using short or obvious passwords. Names of children, family pets, favorite sports teams and the like are obvious choices and are easily guessed by thieves. Many scammers now use "dictionary attacks" to obtain passwords, which will try every word in the dictionary until the password is cracked. If you use a common name or word, you are vulnerable. If you must use words from the English language for passwords, use long ones. "TheNewYorkYankeesTotallyRock" is a better password than "Yankees." If you can, use a mixture of letters and numbers. Longer is better.

Buy a shredder. Keep important documents, of course, but shred the documents you no longer need or unwanted credit card applications that come in the mail. Thieves can and do search through garbage to obtain such things. If you don't need it, shred it.

Do not provide financial or personal information to anyone who calls you. The party on the phone may say that they are from your bank, but your bank isn't going to call you to ask for your credit card or Social Security number. If in doubt, hang up and call the institution directly. It's better to be safe than sorry.

Print as little information as possible on your checks. Don't preprint your phone number, driver's license number or Social Security number. You're making that information available to anyone who sees your checks. Print your name and address only; you can provide any other information yourself if necessary.

Don't carry your Social Security card with you. Put it in a safe place. Many people are never asked to show the card during their lifetimes, so only bad can result from carrying it around with you. Be safe. Leave the card at home. While you're at it, remove any other credit or debit cards from your wallet that you rarely use. Keep them at home and take them with you only if you need them. The fewer cards you carry the less damage that can be done if you lose them.

Anyone concerned about identity theft should make it as difficult for thieves to obtain his or her personal information as possible. A few simple steps can go a long way towards avoiding what could be a drawn-out and expensive problem.

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