



Consumer Tip October 2016: How to Prevent Identity Theft



Statistics show more than 15 million U.S. residents per year have been victims of identity theft since 2010. That's why it is more important than ever to take extra precautions to protect your personal information and reduce your risk of identity theft. In the increasingly online world we live in, consumers need to be vigilant both online and offline to not become part of the rising statistic. Below are tips to help safeguard your information.

Online Protection

Use Anti-Virus Software

Install anti-virus, anti-spyware software and a firewall on all computers. Set your preference to update these protections often. If you have a wireless network at home or work, make sure it's secured.

Don't Reuse Passwords

As tempting as it may be, don't reuse passwords. This will help minimize the effects of unauthorized access to your accounts. Also, use optional security questions whenever they're offered for an extra layer of protection.

Make Purchases on Trusted Sites

When deals seem too good to be true, they usually are. You can easily become a victim of identity theft when you make purchases on websites that aren't secure. Stick with trusted, well-known online retailers or smaller sites that use reputable payment processors. Look for the padlock icon on the bottom of your browser to verify the page is safe.

Beware of Phishing and Spam

Don't open files, click on links or download programs sent by strangers as it could expose your system to a computer virus or spyware that captures your personal information. It's best to not open emails from friends that contain only a link as these are often viruses. Beware of phishing schemes in which you think you're signing into your bank account, when it's a ploy to get your important information. Always sign in by going to your bank's website.

Use Caution With Public Computers

Make sure to never save private information on a public computer. Always log out completely from your accounts, and never save login information on these computers.

Check Your Credit Report Annually

Each of the major credit bureaus—Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion—provides consumers with a free copy of their credit report each year. Your credit report is your window into your

identity security, and it's advised to check it once annually to ensure nothing is amiss.

Offline Protection

Lock Up Important Documents

Keep financial documents and records in a safe place at home, and lock your wallet or purse in a safe place at work. If you carry a purse or computer at a restaurant, keep it close to you. Keep financial information on your laptop only when necessary, and don't use an automatic login feature. The same goes for your phone—make sure it's password protected.

Limit What You Carry

Take only the identification and credit/debit cards you need when you go out. Leave your Social Security card at home unless you absolutely need it, and then immediately return it to a secure location. Carefully protect all user IDs, password information, etc. by never carrying this information in your wallet.

Ask Before Sharing

Before you share information at your workplace, your child's school or a doctor's office, feel free to ask why it is needed and how it will be safeguarded. Never give out personal information to anyone you don't know, either in person or on the phone, unless you initiated the contact.

Shred and Wipe

Shred receipts, credit offers and applications, insurance forms, physician statements, checks, bank statements, expired charge cards and similar documents once they're no longer needed. Also, destroy labels on prescription bottles before you throw them out. When you dispose of a computer or phone, erase the hard drive and memory first.

Secure Your Mailbox

If your mailbox doesn't have a lock, immediately remove mail when it arrives. If you order new checks or a new credit/debit card, don't have it mailed to your home unless you have a mailbox with a lock. If you're sending mail, drop it at a post office or locked outgoing mailbox. If you won't be in town for several days, request a vacation hold on your mail.

In the event that you become an identity theft victim, it's key to act quickly. Contact all credit providers immediately, file a police report, and contact one of the credit agencies to explain the situation and ask for a fraud alert on all of your credit accounts.

This information is provided with the understanding that the association is not engaged in rendering specific legal, accounting, or other professional services. If specific expert assistance is required, the services of a competent, professional person should be sought.