

How to Protect Yourself Against Identity Theft

In this digital age, it's easier than ever for would-be thieves to steal and profit from your personal information. Credit card numbers can be stolen from online shopping sites, bank account information can be lifted from unsecured pay-by phone or online services—and all it takes is an overhead phone conversation on a cell phone for Social Security numbers and other personal information to be acquired.

“Identity theft is a huge challenge for consumers, financial institutions and retailers,” says Suzanne Collier, chief operating officer for Resource One Credit Union. “But there are ways to protect yourself.” If you use paper checks to pay your bills, Ms. Collier recommends keeping printed information to a minimum. “The next time you place an order, only have your initials put on the check,” she says. “This way, if your checks are stolen, the crook will not know how to sign your checks—but you bank will. Also, never have your Social Security number, driver’s license or home telephone number printed on checks. Thieves can get more from stealing your checks than from stealing your television set.”

Keep a copy of all your important documents locked in a safe place, such as a safe-deposit box or personal safe at home, she advises. This includes the contents of your wallet, passport, birth certificate, marriage license and other key documents. It’s much easier to replace these items if you know what you had on hand and the account and phone numbers to call if you have to cancel cards or accounts.

When conducting business online, Ms. Collier recommends using only secure Internet sites—those which display a padlock symbol in the bottom right corner of the Web browser. And beware of “phishing”. “Phishing is an online identity scam”, she says. A false e-mail message is sent to you, asking for personal information. Often, these messages appear to be from banks, retailers or government agencies, and people are tricked into divulging personal information. They may even refer you to a Web site that looks official. However, you should never fill out personal information online without first checking the validity of these forms. Call your banks, and check with the retailer that allegedly issued the form. Remember that it is unlikely that a government agency will contact you by e-mail.

Another way to protect your identity from being stolen is by securing your mail. “Unfortunately, many thieves raid mailboxes to collect your personal information,” Ms. Collier says. “Here they can get credit card applications, bank statements and much more. If you can’t get to your open mailbox before 7pm, consider buying a lock box. The postal carrier can simply slide the mail inside a slot and you can retrieve it later with your key.”

Finally, she recommends investing in a paper shredder. “Simply throwing out credit card statements, financial documents and other materials of a personal nature is an easy way to give would-be thieves your information,” she says. “All they have to do is dig through your trash and collect what they need.”

Shred all documents completely before disposing of them, she adds. “Make sure anything you toss in the garbage doesn’t contain a maiden name, account number, Social Security number, or any other financial information that would help out a thief.