

Steps Consumers Can Take To Prevent ID Theft

Here are several things you can tell consumers to do to protect themselves from identity theft:

1. Protect your Social Security number, credit card numbers, account passwords and other personal information.

Never divulge this kind of information unless you initiate the contact with a person or a company you know and trust.

2. Limit the information you carry.

Don't carry around more checks, credit cards or other bank items than you really expect to need. Don't carry your Social Security number in your wallet or have it preprinted on your checks. Pick passwords and Personal Identification Numbers (PINs) that will be tough for someone else to figure out — don't use your birth date or home address, for example. Don't keep this information on or near your checkbook, ATM card or debit card.

3. Protect your mail.

Promptly remove mail from your mailbox after it has been delivered. If you're going to be away on vacation or some other travel, have your mail held at your local post office or ask someone you know and trust to collect your mail. Deposit sensitive outgoing mail in one of the Postal Service's blue collection boxes, hand it to a mail carrier or take it to a local post office instead of leaving it in your doorway or home mailbox.

4. Keep information secure in your home.

Safely store extra checks and credit cards, documents that list your Social Security number, and similar valuable items. Be extra careful if you have housemates or if you let workers into your home. "Dumpster divers" pick through garbage looking for your financial information, so tear it into small pieces or use a paper shredder before disposal.

5. Pay attention to your account statements and credit card bills.

Contact the financial institution immediately if there's a discrepancy in your records or if you notice something suspicious, such as a missing payment or an unauthorized withdrawal. Also contact the institution if a bank statement or credit card bill doesn't arrive on time. That could be a sign someone has stolen account information and changed your mailing address in order to run up big bills in your name from another location.

6. Review your credit report once a year.

Your credit report (prepared by a credit bureau) will include identifying information (such as your name, address, Social Security Number and date of birth) as well as details about credit cards and loans in your name and how bills are being paid. Make sure the report is accurate; this includes monitoring it for unauthorized bank accounts, credit cards and purchases.