

REDUCE YOUR RISK

How can I protect myself from identity theft?

The first step to prevent identity theft is awareness of how and when you use your personal information. By keeping close tabs on your personal information, you can reduce your chances of becoming an identity theft victim. Let's start with credit cards.

- Memorize your Social Security number and passwords. Don't record your password on papers you carry with you.
- Don't use your date of birth as your password.
- Shred pre-approved credit applications and other financial documents before discarding them.
- Order credit reports every year from each of the major credit reporting agencies and thoroughly review them for accuracy.
- Never give personal or financial information over the phone or Internet unless you initiated the contact.
- Don't carry your Social Security card or birth certificate with you.
- Report lost or stolen credit cards immediately.
- Check your monthly credit card and bank statements for unusual activity.
- Use a firewall program on your computer, especially if you leave your computer connected to the Internet 24 hours a day.
- Do not download files sent to you by strangers or click on hyperlinks from people you don't know.

Students applying for or using student loans should also:

- Use caution when using commercial financial aid services over the Internet or telephone. U.S. Department of Education services are free and password-protected. Before deciding to use a for-fee financial aid advice service, visit the [Looking for Student Aid site](#).
- Apply for federal student aid at www.fafsa.ed.gov. After completing the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) electronically, remember to exit the application and close the browser.
- Don't reveal your PIN to anyone, even if that person is helping you fill out the FAFSA. The only time you should use your PIN is on secure ED systems.
- Shred receipts and copies of documents with personal information if they are no longer needed.
- Review your financial aid award documents and keep track of the amount of student aid you applied for and have been awarded.
- Report all lost or stolen student identification immediately.

These are just a few basic steps to take immediately to protect your personal information. Following are some links to other good sources of information to help you reduce your exposure to identity theft.

Identity theft resource center:

Information about scams and consumer alerts, victim resources and other information.

Federal Trade Commission:

Information on protecting yourself against identity theft, forms for reporting identity theft, and other information.

United States Postal Inspectors:

Information about identity theft of any material that is sent through the mail.

United States Department of Justice:

Information on identity theft and prosecution of identity thieves.

Social Security Administration:

Information about earnings reported on your Social Security number and takes reports of lost Social Security numbers.

NW3C (National White Collar Crime Center):

Information and research so that individuals may become proactive in the prevention of economic cyber crime.

Credit Card Alert!

Pre-approved credit card offers probably flood your mailbox every week. Whatever you do, don't simply throw away these offers; an identity thief can easily pick up a stray application and apply for the card in your name. You should shred these applications before you dispose of them. Credit card companies also entice students on campus with promotional items and free gifts. These offers are risky, providing an opening for identity theft. You should review your statements, and your bank and credit card statements, as soon as you receive them. Thieves can charge thousands of dollars to an account in a very short period of time. Your best protection is to pick up all your mail promptly. Leaving mail lying around your dorm or apartment provides another opportunity for your personal information to be taken and abused.

A Special Word About Social Security Numbers

You need to be particularly vigilant about safeguarding your Social Security Number.

Your employer and bank will likely need your SSN for wage and tax reporting purposes. Other businesses may ask you for your SSN to do a credit check, such as when you apply for a loan, rent an apartment, or sign up for utilities. Sometimes, however, they simply want your SSN for general record keeping. You don't have to give a business your SSN just because someone asks for it. If someone asks for your SSN, ask the following questions:

- Why do you need my SSN?
- How will my SSN be used?
- What law requires me to give you my SSN?
- What will happen if I don't give you my SSN?

Sometimes a business may not provide you with the service or benefit you're seeking if you don't provide your SSN. Getting answers to these questions will help you decide whether you want to share your SSN with the business. Remember – the decision is yours.

Courtesy: US Government Inspector General's Office ...

<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oig/misused/reduce.html>