Protecting Yourself Against Identity Theft

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Identity theft isn’t a big problem — until it happens to you! Increased use of the Internet and the number of scams seeking personal information make protecting your identity more important than ever. The consequences of identity theft are serious. It can cause damage to your credit and reputation that could take years to erase.

What is identity theft?
Identity theft happens when someone uses a piece of your personal information, like your name, Social Security number or credit card number to commit fraud against you.

How can I protect myself?
There are several things you can do to protect yourself against identity theft:

• Know the person you’re dealing with. Check with the Better Business Bureau or local consumer groups before buying something from someone you don’t know.

• Protect your privacy. Don’t give out personal information to just anyone. Don’t be afraid to question someone who is asking for personal information. Find out who they are and exactly why they need the information before giving it out. If you feel unsure, refuse.

• Don’t cave in to high pressure sales tactics. Take time to do research and check out a company before making any purchases.

• Get a complete description of what you are buying. Ask about shipping and handling fees and return policies.

• Pay with a credit card if you can. Most cards offer some protection for the items you buy with them.

• Don’t carry every piece of personal information you have. You usually don’t need to carry your Social Security card, extra credit cards, your passport or birth certificate. Carry only what you need at any one time.

• Remove your name from mailing lists by calling 1-888-567-8688 for the National Opt-Out Center for direct mailing and telemarketing. Register for the “no call” list at the Missouri attorney general’s office at http://ago.mo.gov/ or call the attorney general at 1-800-392-8222. You can also contact companies directly and ask them to take you off their mailing lists.

• If buying online, be sure you are on a secure website. Check for a padlock in the lower corner of your screen or a URL that starts with “https.”

• Be on the lookout for scams. If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!

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• Check your credit report at least once a year to be sure that all the information is correct. Investigate any suspicious activity immediately. Once you prove you are an identity theft victim, credit reporting agencies have to stop reporting fraudulent account information. You can also report accounts that have been affected by fraud directly to creditors you owe.

• Report lost or stolen checks right away.

• If you receive a suspicious phone call or email asking for your bank account information, notify your bank and report it to the Missouri attorney general at 1-800-392-8222.

• Don’t share your PIN (personal identification number) for your ATM card with other people.

• Shred personal information, bank statements and financial offers before throwing them away.

• If you don’t receive bills you normally would get, contact the company to find out why.

• Investigate irregular or questionable items on any bill.

What to do if you’re a victim of identity theft
If you have been the victim of identity fraud, do the following:

• Contact the three main credit reporting bureaus and ask that a fraud alert be placed on your account. This will stop a lender from issuing credit to anyone with your information until you give approval.

• Close accounts that you feel might be affected. Many companies have fraud representatives with whom you can speak to or ask for a manager.

• Put passwords on your account. Choose a combination of numbers and letters that would be difficult to guess, not something like your mother’s maiden name.

• File a report with the local police department and keep a copy of the report for your records.

• File a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission (http://ftc.gov/).

• Call the ID Theft Clearinghouse at 1-877-438-4338 (or online at ftc.gov/bcp/edu/microsites/idtheft/) and ask about the ID Theft affidavit, visit the Missouri attorney general’s office website or call the Consumer Protection Hotline at 800-392-8222.

References:
