

Fourteen steps to reduce your risk of identity theft

Identity thieves rob more than 500,000 Americans every year. Credit can be damaged, and fixing it can cost you hundreds of dollars and take hundreds of hours of your time. These steps will help you reduce your risk of identity theft.

1. Guard your Social Security number. It is the key to your credit report and banking accounts and is the prime target of criminals.
2. Monitor your credit report. It contains your SSN, present and prior employers, a listing of all account numbers, including those that have been closed, and your overall credit score. After applying for a loan, credit card, rental or anything else that requires a credit report, request that your SSN on the application be truncated or completely obliterated and your original credit report be shredded before your eyes or returned to you once a decision has been made. A lender or rental manager needs to retain only your name and credit score to justify a decision.
3. Shred all old bank and credit statements and "junk mail" credit card offers before trashing them. Use a crosscut shredder. Crosscut shredders cost more than regular shredders but are superior.
4. Remove your name from the marketing lists of the three credit reporting bureaus to reduce the number of pre-approved credit offers you receive.
5. Add your name to the name-deletion lists of the Direct Marketing Association's Mail Preference Service and Telephone Preference Service used by banks and other marketers.
6. Do not carry extra credit cards or other important identity documents except when needed.
7. Place the contents of your wallet on a photocopy machine. Copy both sides of your license and credit cards so you have all the account numbers, expiration dates and phone numbers if your wallet or purse is stolen.
8. Do not mail bill payments and checks from home. They can be stolen from your mailbox and washed clean in chemicals. Take them to the post office.
9. Do not print your Social Security number on your checks.
10. Order your Social Security Earnings and Benefits statement once a year to check for fraud.
11. Examine the charges on your credit card statements before paying them.
12. Cancel unused credit card accounts.
13. Never give your credit card number or personal information over the phone unless you have initiated the call and trust that business.
14. Subscribe to a credit report monitoring service that will notify you whenever someone applies for credit in your name.

