

Guard Yourself From Identity Theft

When it comes to vulnerability, nothing is worse than someone trying to steal your identity. Someone who gets their hands on your credit card number and personal information can charge up thousands of dollars in goods and services—and all in your name! If you want to protect yourself from credit thieves, you should start by protecting your personal information.

It seems like everywhere you go, clerks are asking for information—your social security number, your phone number and address, your date of birth, your mother's maiden name, etc. And in most cases, you probably offer this information freely. Yet, this is all it would take for an unscrupulous person to open a credit account in your name or to access your existing account(s) and charge you into financial oblivion.

Here are some strategies to make sure that the only one who uses your credit cards is you:

- Don't give out your Social Security number unnecessarily. (Only brokerages, banks and employers are required by law to take your Social Security number.) In case you're robbed, never carry your Social Security card in your wallet.
- Be mindful of dumpster divers. Destroy documents that have your information on them before tossing them in the trash. Shred or tear up any pre-approved credit offers you get in the mail, even if you don't respond to the offers.
- Demand that your credit company stop selling your personal information to credit card marketers. Stop unwittingly giving your information away yourself, which happens every time you fill out sweepstakes entries and marketing surveys.
- Contact the three big credit bureaus (information accessible on-line) and ask them to put a fraud alert on your file. This means a credit company will be required to telephone you before opening up any new accounts.