

Consumer Corner

Ten Tips For Avoiding Identity Theft

(NAPSA)—It's important to protect your identity. In fact, the Federal Trade Commission reports that identity theft costs consumers, businesses and financial institutions more than \$53 billion in one year alone.

But not all identity crimes are the same. There are differences between identity theft, credit card fraud and check fraud—and the actions you should take, should you be victimized.

- **Credit Card & Check Fraud:** This occurs when a criminal steals your cards or checks and uses them without your authorization.

- **Account Takeover:** This occurs when a criminal obtains your personally identifying information such as your Social Security number, to gain access to, manipulate or use your existing bank accounts or credit card account.

- **Identity Theft:** This occurs when a criminal uses all or part of your identity to establish new bank accounts, loans, credit cards or utility accounts.

Fortunately, there are ways to protect yourself from these crimes. Try these 10 tips:

1. Guard your Social Security number. Never print your Social Security number on checks and don't reveal the number to anyone other than creditors or trusted parties such as your employer or health care provider.

2. Never give your personal identifying information or account numbers to anyone over the phone or in response to e-mails unless you initiated the call or the contact and trust the person on the other end. Avoid revealing this information in public places where



New types of “walletless” systems may reduce the risk identity theft.

you can be overheard.

3. Examine all your credit card and checking account statements for unauthorized charges. Call your financial institution immediately upon noticing unauthorized charges or if you notice your card or checks are missing. In some cases, your liability for unauthorized use is determined by how quickly you report the transaction or the loss of a card.

- 4 Don't let merchants and restaurants take your credit or debit card out of your sight. This can result in dishonest merchants or their employees “skimming” your card's magnetic stripe and using it to make Web purchases or counterfeit cards.

5. Never leave information about yourself lying around in your house, hotel room or in rental cars. If you can't carry it with you, use the hotel safe or a locked file cabinet.

6. Purchase a shredder and shred any document with account or personal identifying information that you don't need to retain for tax purposes. This includes

bank statements, receipts, old checks, tax returns and credit card solicitations.

7. Mail theft is a major source of identity and account theft. Purchase a locking mailbox and always mail your payments at a secure mailbox or post office.

8. Use online banking to reduce the number of paper checks you mail and the number of paper statements you receive. Choose passwords that are hard to guess but easy for you to remember. Don't write your online banking password down. Change your passwords from time to time.

9. Request a free copy of your credit report annually and check it for accuracy. Look for any loans or credit card accounts that you did not open. Consider subscribing to a credit-monitoring service that will notify you if anyone applies for credit in your name.

10. Use payment systems that reduce the number of people who physically handle your account numbers, checks and personal identifying information. A paper check has both an account number and personal identifying information. It is a risky document that passes through the hands of as many as eight people during the clearing process. If you write just five checks per week, that creates up to 40 opportunities for someone to steal your information. Instead of checks, it is less risky to use a debit card or a secure payment system such as Pay By Touch, which allows access to your checking account only through biometric authorization.

For more information, visit www.paybytouch.com.