

# What Is Identity Theft?

Identity theft is a federal crime.

It occurs when someone uses your personal information without your knowledge or permission for financial or other types of gain. It is one of the fastest growing crimes in America, the Bureau of Justice Statistics estimates that identity theft victimized close to 17 million people in 2012 alone. It has topped the U.S. Federal Trade Commission's ranking of consumer complaints for 15 years. Prime targets include children, college students, military members, veterans, and seniors, but it can happen to anyone at any time.

Typical identity theft involves a thief stealing your personal information to pose as you in some way. A newer and growing variety is called synthetic identity theft. In synthetic identity theft, your personal information is combined with fake data to create a brand new, bogus identity. A thief may combine your Social Security number with a different name or other fake credentials. Synthetic identity theft can be harder to detect, which can lead to more damage.

While no one is safe from identity theft, there are steps you can take to lower your risks. Thieves can dumpster dive, swipe your mail or email, steal your purse or wallet, install spyware on your computers, and even 'shoulder surf' to obtain your personal information. With technology now days they can also befriend you on social media. Keep in mind that your personal information is only as secure as the least secure way it is stored or disclosed.

## How Can Identity Theft Affect Me?

Identity theft can damage your finances, credit rating, and reputation, and complicate many areas of your life. Identity thieves might:

- Drain your banking account.
- Make purchases with your credit cards.
- Open new accounts in your name like utilities or new an apartment.
- Get an authenticated ID and or government documents issued with your name and their photos.
- Receive medical care under your insurance or name.
- Take out loans in your name or additional lines of credit.
- Create a false criminal record for you by using your information when being investigated or arrested by the police.

All of these will result in the individual eventually letting these accounts go with non-payment, ending up in collections, and ultimately a lawsuit. Establishments will finally refuse services or new lines of credit.

Another growing problem is tax-related identity theft. The thief using your Social Security number, might get a job and having earnings reported as your income, or an identity thief might file a false tax return and collect a refund that is owed to you.

Identity theft can create havoc on your credit or a headache in your life, so it is very important to know how to protect yourself, detect warning signs or early warning signs, and correct problems as soon as they arise if your identity is stolen.

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## You Can Help Protect Yourself from Fraud

### How to Protect Your Information

1. *Read your credit reports.* You have a right to a free credit report every 12 months from each of the three credit reporting agencies. Order all three reports at once, or order one report every four months. To order, go to [annualcreditreport.com](http://annualcreditreport.com) or call (877) 322-8228.
2. *Review your monthly statements.* Look for irregularities or unusual purchases that could indicate fraudulent activity.
3. *Shred sensitive documents.* After reviewing, shred all documents that contain personal, financial and medical information before you throw them away.
4. *Be careful of what you disclose.* Never respond to e-mail, text or phone messages that ask for personal information. HCFCU and other legitimate companies will never ask for sensitive information in that manner.
5. *Change your passwords.* Create passwords that mix letters, number and special characters. Don't use the same password for more than one account and change them regularly.
6. *Use encrypted websites.* If you shop or bank online, only use websites that protect your financial information with encryption. An encrypted website will have "https" at the beginning of the web address; "s" is for secure.

### If Your Identity is Stolen

Place a fraud alert on your credit files. A fraud alert lets creditors know to contact you before opening new accounts. Contact any one of the three credit reporting agencies below, and the agency will automatically file your fraud alert with the other two reporting agencies.

Experian®  
(888) 397-3742  
[www.experian.com](http://www.experian.com)

Equifax®  
(800) 525-6285  
[www.equifax.com](http://www.equifax.com)

TransUnion®  
(800) 680-7289  
[www.transunion.com](http://www.transunion.com)

1. *Request your credit reports.* Request your credit reports and review them carefully. Look for accounts you have not opened or for inquiries from companies that you did not initiate. Also look for any inaccurate personally identifiable information, such as your home address. If you see something on your report that you do not understand, call the credit reporting agency at the number on your report for an explanation.
2. *Monitor your credit reports and accounts.* Even if you do not detect any unauthorized activity on your credit reports or credit union accounts, you should closely monitor both for the next 12 to 24 months.  
Renew your fraud alert. An initial fraud alert filed with the credit reporting agencies is only valid for 90 days, after which time it must be renewed in order to keep it active. Each time you renew your initial fraud alert, you can request a copy of your credit report.
3. *Promptly report any suspicious or unauthorized activity.* If you detect suspicious or unauthorized activity on your credit report, on your credit union accounts or with regard to any other financial business of yours, contact us immediately at (713) 755-5160.

For more information on identity theft and how to protect yourself, visit the [Federal Trade Commission's website](#) or the [Identity Theft Resource Center](#).

Take the ID Theft Risk Quiz on the next page to see what items you can focus on securing.