

## Protecting Yourself from Identity Theft

*From an article by Ohio Casualty Group*

The crime of identity theft (also called identity fraud) occurs when a thief steals personal information about an individual and uses this information to impersonate the victim. The identity thief will typically spend as much money as possible, as quickly as possible. The information stolen may include the victim's name, address, phone number, social security number, driver's license number, credit card or ATM numbers, banking or financial account information, or any combination thereof.

Often, victims have no idea that identity theft has taken place until they hear from a creditor seeking payment for bills that were never incurred by them, or a collection agency demanding payment on past due accounts that they do not recognize. Identity thieves are not limited to stealing a purse or a wallet. These criminals can gain personal information about their victims by a variety of means, such as:

- Accessing a credit report fraudulently by posing as a loan officer or creditor
- "Dumpster diving" in trash for discarded credit card applications, or other documents which include personal information
- Stealing mail to obtain pre-approved credit card offers, investment reports, insurance statements, bank statements, benefit documents, or tax information
- Stealing names and social security numbers from personnel or customer files in the workplace
- Via the Internet, by finding unsecured records of purchases or applications made on line

Thieves may acquire credit account information and make purchases using an existing account number, or they may open new accounts in the victim's name. When this happens, the thief typically changes the billing address on the account with the credit provider, so victims may not learn of the fraud for some time, because the account statements are being mailed to an address set up by the imposter.

Generally, victims of identity theft are only liable for the first \$50 of any amounts charged to their credit card accounts. However, although victims may not be required to pay all the bills an identity thief incurs, they are typically left with a damaged financial reputation. They may have difficulty opening new credit accounts, obtaining loans, or even getting a job, and the process of reinstating their financial reputation may take months or years. This can be a very costly process in terms of time spent and expenses incurred by victims to repair their credit histories.

### ***Reduce the Risk of Becoming a Victim of Identity Theft***

Listed below are a number of suggestions to reduce your risk of becoming a victim of identity theft. While this list is not exhaustive, it is a good starting point to help safeguard your personal information:

1. Order a copy of your credit report from each of the three credit reporting agencies and review it for accuracy. Do this at least once a year. Report any problems or inaccuracies for correction. [Note: The credit reporting agencies charge a fee for providing these reports, unless you have been denied credit, employment, insurance or have experienced an adverse action (such as lowering of your credit card limits) within 60 days of your request for the report.] To order credit reports, contact the credit reporting agencies: Equifax 800-685-1111 [www.equifax.com](http://www.equifax.com); Experian 888-397-3742 [www.experian.com](http://www.experian.com); TransUnion 800-888-4213 [www.transunion.com](http://www.transunion.com)

2. Never give out your Social Security Number, credit card numbers or personal information over the phone, by mail, or over the Internet unless you have a trusted relationship with the company, and you initiated the contact.
3. Don't carry your Social Security card in your wallet. Avoid carrying cards in your wallet or purse that display your Social Security Number (such as health insurance cards).
4. Don't allow your Social Security Number or phone number to be pre-printed on your checks. Avoid writing your credit card number on your checks.
5. Keep the number of credit cards you use to a minimum.
6. Guard ATM receipts and deposit slips as closely as you do your checks. These documents contain valuable information for an identity thief. Don't throw these receipts away in a public trash container or a shopping bag.
7. Create passwords and PINs that are difficult to guess. Don't use all or part of your SSN as a password.
8. Consider buying a cross-cut shredder to destroy personal financial documents, pre-approved credit card offers, and other documents which contain personal information, rather than throwing these documents away in your garbage. Many times, an identity thief can find all the information they need on documents you throw away in your household trash.
9. Always review your bills and account statements closely. Report any questionable charges or inaccuracies to the merchant or creditor immediately.
10. Don't send outgoing checks, bill payments or tax documents from the mailbox in front of your home. Send all such items using a U.S. mailbox or receptacle inside the Post Office. Personal financial information is often stolen from mailboxes – on checks or credit account statements.
11. Install a firewall on your home computer to prevent hackers from obtaining personal or financial data from your hard drive. This is especially important if you connect to the Internet.
12. Install virus protection software to prevent a virus from causing your computer to send out files that could contain sensitive information.
13. Password protect files that contain important personal or financial data.

### ***If You Become a Victim of Identity Theft***

If you become a victim of identity theft, there are several steps you should take promptly in order to minimize your losses. It is very important to document all contacts you make with law enforcement authorities and financial institutions. Keep track of the time you spend, as well as any expenses incurred in repairing your credit.

1. Immediately call the fraud units of the three credit reporting agencies to report the theft and ask that your account be flagged.

Credit Reporting Agency Contact Information:

Equifax Fraud Assistance 800-525-6285

Experian 888-397-3742; choose Option 5 for fraud assistance

TransUnion Fraud Assistance 800-680-7289

2. Report the crime to the police or other law enforcement agency with jurisdiction in your area. Obtain identifying information for your fraud investigator. Creditors and other authorities may require this information in the process of verifying your theft.
3. Contact all creditors with whom your identity was used fraudulently, or may be used fraudulently in the future. Obtain new account numbers and monitor existing accounts for any evidence of new fraudulent activity.
4. If you have purchased identity theft expense insurance coverage, contact your insurance company to report your situation.
5. Contact the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), which is the federal clearinghouse for complaints by victims of identity theft. The FTC may refer victim complaints to other appropriate governmental agencies and/or private organizations for further action.
6. If a civil judgment has been entered in your name for actions taken by an imposter, contact the court and report that you have been a victim of identity theft. If prosecuted for criminal charges, contact your State Department of Justice and the FBI to investigate how your name can be cleared.

There are a number of resources available which provide suggestions on how to respond to identity theft, including (but not limited to):

The Privacy Rights Clearinghouse  
619-298-3396  
[www.privacyrights.org](http://www.privacyrights.org)

Federal Trade Commission Identity Theft Clearinghouse  
877-438-4338  
[www.consumer.gov/idtheft](http://www.consumer.gov/idtheft)

U.S. Department of Justice  
[www.usdoj.gov/fraud.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/fraud.htm)

Internal Revenue Service  
[www.treas.gov/irs/ci/](http://www.treas.gov/irs/ci/)

Identity Theft Survival Kit  
800-725-0807  
[www.identitytheft.org](http://www.identitytheft.org)

### ***Insurance Coverage for Identity Theft***

In response to the growing problem of identity theft, the member companies of Ohio Casualty Group have introduced Identity Fraud Expense Coverage. This optional coverage can be endorsed to any homeowners policy, and provides a level of protection and peace of mind for insureds. The endorsement is designed to assist in covering expenses involved in repairing credit after falling victim to the crime of identity fraud.

For more information about Identity Fraud Expense coverage, please contact ***Dyste Williams at 952-593-5025.***

The above information is advisory in nature. No liability is assumed by reason of the information in this document.