



# YOUR FINANCIAL FUTURE

Your Guide to Life Planning

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## Three Tips to Help Keep Identity Thieves Away

The more business we do and information we share online, the more identity theft becomes a growing threat to our financial security. There are ways you can help protect your good name and credit. You've got to be vigilant and willing to put in a little effort on a regular basis. But as anyone who has ever been the victim of identity theft will tell you, it's worth it.

Here are some tips to help keep you and your family safe.

### Tip 1: Monitor Your Accounts

This goes for everything you have financially -- credit cards, banks, brokerages, credit unions -- as well as email and social networking accounts. You should also monitor your phone bills (both cell and landline), as thieves can "piggyback" on your plans.

But above all, be sure to check your monthly financial statements carefully. If you notice something strange -- even if it is just for a small amount -- call the issuing financial institution immediately and report it.

Sometimes identity thieves test or "fish" stolen account numbers by running a small charge or debit -- often of a dollar or less -- to make sure the account number is legitimate. Most accountholders don't notice the transaction or don't think it's worthwhile to alert their financial institution. That is, until a few weeks or months later when thieves wrack up big credit card purchases or drain a bank account. Bottom line: If you see something "fishy," no matter how small, report it right away.

Vigilance is the word for your email and social media accounts. The more information you share with the world -- say, by posting your birth date to your Facebook profile -- the easier you are making it for thieves to find that information. Check your privacy controls, and keep checking. Facebook for one is notorious for changing its policies with little or no notice. Also check the information your children are sharing online. They are less likely to be aware of privacy concerns and the consequences of sharing sensitive information.

Finally, you should Google yourself periodically to see what type of information about you or your family is publicly available. You may be in for a surprise.

### Tip 2: Buy a Shredder -- and Use It

You don't have to shred every piece of mail you receive, but anything with account numbers or other personal data should be shredded. You should also be sure to shred certain pieces of junk mail -- especially those unsolicited pre-approved credit card offers that seem to show up in your mailbox on a weekly basis. An enterprising thief can rifle through your garbage and simply fill out the application in your name.

You can further reduce or even eliminate these nuisance offers by opting out of the lists aggregated by credit bureaus, who then sell your name to lenders. Go to [www.optoutprescreen.com](http://www.optoutprescreen.com) or call 888-567-8688 to get your name off these lists.

### Tip 3: Check Your Credit Reports

The Fair Credit Reporting Act gives all American consumers the right to access their credit reports from the big three credit bureaus (Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion) for free once a year. Many unscrupulous firms will offer access to these reports for a fee or on a subscription basis. You shouldn't pay anything for this access. To get the reports, go directly to the source: [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com).

You can also place a security freeze that will prevent anyone from viewing your credit report who is

not affiliated with a company that you already have a financial relationship with or certain government and exempt agencies. You have to visit each credit bureau individually to do so. Note: Security freezes are not free. Each agency charges a fee for this service, unless you are already the victim of an identity theft.

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