



# MONEYWISE

VALUING PEOPLE. VALUING MONEY.

VOLUME 12 • ISSUE 8

## THIS MONTH'S TOPIC: STEPS TO GUARD AGAINST IDENTITY THEFT

Identity theft is the most reported type of fraud complaint the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) and other enforcement agencies receive. It happens when a thief steals your personal information to impersonate you for the thief's gain. With identity theft occurring so frequently, you should take steps to reduce your risk.

### HOW IT HAPPENS

Identity theft can happen in person or online. Examples of physical theft include stealing personal records from home or business trash, stealing mail, or taking information from a purse or wallet. Examples of online identity theft include skimming, phishing, data breaches, malware, or intercepting information over unsecured Wi-Fi. Skimming occurs when a thief attaches a device to a gas pump or ATM terminal that captures your information when you swipe your card. Phishing happens when someone sends an email that appears to come from a legitimate company in an attempt to trick you into sharing sensitive information. Some identity thieves obtain personal information through a data security breach or malware, which is malicious software that damages a computer or makes it vulnerable. Identity thieves also may try to intercept banking, shopping, or other information shared over unsecured Wi-Fi.



### PROTECT YOURSELF

There are several steps you can take to reduce your risk of identity theft.

1. Shred documents that are no longer needed and take steps to keep your personal information private. Store your Social Security and Medicare cards in a safe or fireproof box. Keep your purse or wallet close to you. Use credit or debit cards by inserting the chip rather than swiping the card, since the chip offers more security features. For online business, use secure Wi-Fi on a device that has security software installed. If you are shopping or banking online, look for "https" in the web address or a "lock" icon. Use strong passwords that are unique, long, and unusual. Don't give out personal information over the phone or email. Be wary of opening email attachments. Think carefully before posting on social media, so that you don't give away clues to your security questions.



## THERE ARE SEVERAL STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TO REDUCE YOUR RISK OF IDENTITY THEFT.



2. Monitor account statements regularly for unusual activity. Review statements carefully each month to make sure you recognize the transactions. Consider signing up for text or email alerts to notify you of unusual account activity. Also, review insurance statements, such as explanation of benefits, to ensure you recognize the services listed.
3. Check your credit reports. Monitor your own credit for free by checking your credit report at [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com) or by phone at 877-322-8228. The three major credit bureaus – Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion – each offer access to at least one free credit report annually. Look for any incorrect information and be alert for any accounts that you didn't authorize. You can dispute any incorrect details with the credit bureau.

Be aware that companies that sell "identity theft protection services" are most likely monitoring your accounts in the same ways you can for free. Learn more at <http://bit.ly/IDtheftProtectionInfo>.

### VICTIM RESOURCES

If you suspect identity theft, visit [identitytheft.gov](http://identitytheft.gov) for victim resources. The website guides you through three steps to getting a recovery plan. Also, you can report it to the Kentucky Identity Theft Hotline at 800-804-7556 or visit <http://bit.ly/IDtheftKyAG>.

Identity theft victims can file a report with the local police department and contact the companies where the fraud happened. Consider placing a one-year fraud alert, an extended fraud alert, or credit freeze on your credit report. However, these only prevent new accounts from being opened in your name, so continue to monitor credit reports and account statements to catch any problems with current accounts.

### REFERENCES

Federal Trade Commission. (2020). All Identity Theft Reports. (2020). <https://public.tableau.com/profile/federal.trade.commission#!/vizhome/FraudandIDTheftMaps/IDTheftbyState>

Federal Trade Commission. (2021.) Avoiding Identity Theft. <https://www.consumer.gov/articles/1015-avoiding-identity-theft#!what-it-is>

Written by: Kelly May | Edited by: Nichole Huff and Alyssa Simms | Designed by: Kelli Thompson | Images by: 123RF.com

Nichole Huff, Ph.D., CFLE | Assistant Extension Professor Family Finance and Resource Management | [nichole.huff@uky.edu](mailto:nichole.huff@uky.edu)



Become a fan of **MONEYWISE** on Facebook! [Facebook.com/MoneyWise](https://www.facebook.com/MoneyWise)