



Take Action!

An Identity Theft Survivors Guide

Identity theft is a crime with many faces – from the pickpocket who your steals your wallet and uses your credit cards, to the acquaintance who assumes your persona and opens accounts in your name. Unfortunately, rectifying identity theft damage can be like untangling a wet knot. You can do it – but it will require patience and perseverance.

To start, commit yourself to becoming and remaining organized. Since you will probably be communicating with a lot of people, you will need to keep track of who said what, and when. Keep copies of all letters and maintain a verbal correspondence log. File paperwork right away and store everything in a safe and accessible place.

Step One: Creditors and Financial Institutions

If accounts have been used or opened illegally, contact your creditors immediately. Ask them for fraudulent transaction documentation (you may use a uniform affidavit form, available on the Federal Trade Commission's website), as you may need it to file a police report. And while you're on the phone, add "non-guessable" passwords to replacement cards and all existing accounts.

If a collection agency attempts to collect on a fraudulent account, ask for the collectors name and company contact information. In a letter, explain that you are a victim of identity theft and not responsible for the debt. Ask that they confirm in writing that you do

not owe the debt and that the account has been closed.

For checking account fraud, contact your financial institution to place stop payments on any outstanding checks that you did not write. Report the crime to check reporting agencies. It is also a wise idea to cancel your checking and savings accounts and obtain new account numbers and passwords. Monitor all future account statements carefully for evidence of new fraud.



Step Two: Legal and Government Agencies

Report the crime and file a report with either your local police or sheriff's department or the police where the identity theft took place. Request a copy of the report and keep the phone number of your investigator handy. For additional documentation you may also pursue a Federal Trade Commission investigation.

Notify your local postal inspector if someone else has used your address. If your social security number has been fraudulently used, alert the social security administration.

Step Three: Credit Reporting Bureaus

The most arduous task in this process may be ensuring that your credit report lists only true and accurate information. To know what is being reported, you will need to obtain a credit report from each of the three major credit bureaus (if you are married, your spouse should also check his or her report).

Even if the fraudulent information hasn't yet appeared on the reports, be proactive and report the crime to the credit reporting bureau fraud departments now. In a letter to each, with copies of the report with the fraudulent activity clearly highlighted, request that a "fraud alert" be entered on your file for seven years (instead of the average 90-180 days), and that no new credit be granted without your explicit approval.

Write a victim's report – a brief statement describing the details of the crime – and send it to the bureaus to be added to your report. When contacting the credit reporting bureaus' fraud departments, ask if a fraud alert and victim's report to one will automatically apply to the others.

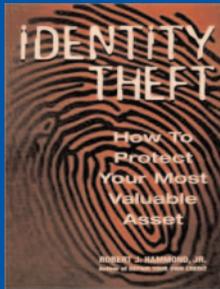
The first reports with the fraud alert are free and will be sent to you automatically. After that, check your credit report every three months to ensure accuracy. To avoid an added inquiry on your file, obtain reports through BALANCE Financial Fitness Program.

Healing the wounds of identity theft will take time and work. Because the process can be long and frustrating, be sure to contact NEAS for support and assistance. Remember: the sooner and more aggressively you deal with the problem, the faster you will see results.

Recommended Reading

Identity Theft: How to Protect Your Most Valuable Asset

by Robert Hammond
224 pages
(Career Press, January 2003)



For more on how to keep your personal information from going public, read Identity Theft: How to Protect Your Most Valuable Asset, by Robert Hammond. With identity theft on a dramatic rise, such a detailed guidebook will be invaluable for millions of Americans.

Hammond not only describes how thieves function, but offers profiles on who they typically are (sadly – often a trusted friend or family member). The information he offers will enable you to be on the lookout for telltale signs and signals – and know exactly what to do when you spot them. He also provides sound advice for how to deal with the considerable emotional fallout from such crimes.

Nicely written, highly practical, and comprehensive, Identity Theft: How to Protect Your Most Valuable Asset is both an interesting read and terrific self-protection tool. And it just may be the impetus to finally check your credit report.

Resources

BALANCE Financial Fitness Program
888-456-2227
www.balancepro.net

Federal Trade Commission
877-438-4338
www.consumer.gov/idtheft

CheckRite: 800-766-2748
Chexsystems: 800-428-9623
CrossCheck: 800-843-0760
Certigy/Equifax: 800-437-5120
SCAN: 800-262-7771
TeleCheck: 800-710-9898
International Check Services:
800-526-5380

U.S. Post Office
(800) 275-8777
www.usps.gov/websites/depart/inspect

Social Security Administration
800-772-1213; www.ssa.gov

Equifax
800-525-6285; www.equifax.com

Experian
888-397-3742; www.experian.com

TransUnion
800-680-7289; www.transunion.com

Top Ten Identity Theft Thwarters

1. Remember your check-up: To spot unauthorized charges, review your credit report annually. Don't overlook the inquiries section – too many inquiries may indicate that someone is trying to open accounts in your name.
2. Practice your autograph: Not signing your debit and credit cards is like walking around with a blank check. Sign new cards immediately.
3. Lighten your wallet: If your wallet or purse is bursting with plastic, pare it down to only those you use. It can save you time and effort if you become a pickpocket's target.
4. Destroy the evidence: Why tempt fate by carelessly discarding personal documents? Shred all receipts and statements after you're through with them.
5. Hold the mail: Have the post office hold all mail if you won't be there to receive it. Pilfering from a letter box is too easy.
6. Just say no: A pre-approved credit letter can be an identity thief's spending spree invitation. Consider removing yourself from the marketing lists by calling 888-5OPT OUT.
7. Double check the check: You've finished and paid for your meal – now remember to get your card and receipt. Make sure they are yours and the purchases are accurate.
8. Read the paper: Your credit and checking account statement, that is. Examine it thoroughly to make sure all credit and debit activity is correct.
9. Become mysterious: Never put your SSN or drivers license number on your checks. Disclose personal data to no one, unless they have a legitimate reason for needing it.
10. Trust nobody: Thieves can obtain an alarming amount of personal information just by listening to your casual conversation. Watch for eavesdroppers and ATM lurkers.