

5 Tips to Protect Yourself from Credit and Identity Theft

Today's fast paced world of electronic convenience has made identity theft an ever-increasing problem. You probably know someone who this has happened to – it may have happened to you. It can be a nightmare – and an expensive and time consuming one at that. There are simple actions you can take that can help to protect your identity and your credit rating:

1. When you order checks, don't use your full first or middle names; use your initials with your full last name instead. Who's going to guess that "B" stands for "Barbara" or "Bertram" when attempting to forge your signature?
2. Instead of using your home phone number on your checks, put your work number. In addition, if you have a PO Box, use it for your address and never, ever publish your Social Security number on your checks.
3. Make photocopies of every piece of identification that you carry with you daily – and be sure to copy both sides. Keep the copies in a safe and handy place. If your wallet is ever stolen, all the information you'll need – auto license and registration, credit card account numbers, and customer service hot lines, will be available to you in one place.
4. If your credit cards are stolen, file a police report in the jurisdiction where it was stolen immediately. You'll want enough back-up proof as possible for your credit card issuers that you were diligent.
5. If your credit cards are stolen, call all national credit reporting organizations immediately to place a fraud alert on your name and Social Security number. The alert lets any company that checks your credit know that your information was stolen and that they are to contact you by phone to authorize any new credit. Their numbers are: Equifax, 800-685-1111, Experian, 888-397-3742, and Trans Union, 800-888-4213. In case your Social Security card or number is stolen, it may be best for you to notify the Social Security Administration at 800-269-0271, too.

While no amount of caution can be totally fool-proof, being aware of the potential identity theft possibilities and of how to protect ourselves –even if we fall victim - are simple steps to give us added defense.