

Take Steps to Prevent Identity Theft

If you lose your cell phone, it's an inconvenience. If you lose your keys, it's a problem. But if you lose your identity, it can be a disaster.

And, over the past five years, one in eight adults suffered some type of identity loss, according to the Federal Trade Commission. Victims of identity theft may have their credit cards used illegally, or they may have credit information stolen and used to make costly purchases. In 2002, identity theft cost U.S. businesses and consumers about \$50 billion.

Identity thieves act in a variety of ways, from stealing your mail (especially those "pre-approved" credit card offers) to calling a credit bureau and, under the pretense of being a landlord or prospective employer, asking for your credit information. And, of course, computer-smart thieves can get your private information from the Internet.

How can you protect yourself from identity theft? Here are a few tips:

- **Don't share your Social Security number** - Unless it's truly necessary, as when you're filing official papers, don't give out your Social Security number to anyone. Smart crooks can use your number in a variety of ways - and none of them are good for you.
- **Shred those documents** - If you're getting rid of old tax returns, investment statements and bank documents, use a shredder. And, as long as you've got the shredder out, use it on pre-approved credit card offers.
- **Get your credit report annually** - You can call the three main credit bureaus, Equifax (1-800-685-1111), Experian (1-888-397-3742) and Trans Union (1-800-888-4213) to request a copy of your credit report. Check closely for "surprises" or unaccounted activity.
- **Opt out of credit card offers** - To get fewer pre-approved credit card offers, call 1-888-5-OPT-OUT and follow the prompts.

Be alert

Identity theft has been going on ever since someone learned how to forge someone else's signature. Unfortunately, the problem has been exacerbated by our modern age, with its mass mailings, Internet access and impersonal transactions. Still, even with these realities, you shouldn't live in fear of being attacked by identity thieves. First of all, the chances are still good that it will never happen to you. Second, if you follow the suggestions described above, you can further improve your odds. And finally, even if you are victimized, you can almost always straighten matters out, though it will take time and effort.

So, be alert, do what you can and live your life. Your real identity is who you are as a person - and no one can take that away from you.