



THE SAVVY CONSUMER COLUMN

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Following tips can help protect you against identity theft

Nashville, TN – As many as 9 million Americans' identities are stolen each year. Identity theft is the unauthorized acquisition and use of a person's identifying information – such as a name, Social Security number or credit card number – to commit fraud or other crimes. Through identity theft, criminals might rent an apartment, obtain a line of credit or establish a telephone account. Victims often discover the crimes when reviewing credit reports or statements. Skilled identity thieves use many methods, including:

- Dumpster diving: They rummage through trash, looking for bills or other documents.
- Skimming: They steal credit/debit card numbers by using a special storage device when processing credit cards.
- Phishing: They pretend to be financial institutions or companies and send spam or pop-up messages to get Internet users to reveal personal information.
- Changing victims' addresses: They divert billing statements to another location by completing a change-of-address form.
- Old-fashioned stealing: They steal wallets, purses and mail – including bank and credit card statements and pre-approved credit offers, replacement checks and tax information.

Identity theft victims can spend large amounts of time and money trying to repair their name and credit record. Tennesseans can take the following steps to avoid becoming victims:

- Do not give information such as account numbers over the phone, through the mail or over the internet.
- Store personal information in a safe place, and shred old credit card receipts, ATM receipts, old account statements and unused credit card offers.
- Pay attention to billing cycles. Inquire with your bank if you do not receive a monthly bill.
- Guard your mail from theft. Do not leave bill payment envelopes in your mailbox with the flag up. Instead, deposit them in a post office collection box or at a local post office.
- Order and review copies of your credit report from the three major credit bureaus every year, to make sure it is accurate.

The Consumer Affairs division is a part of the Department of Commerce and Insurance, which works to protect consumers while ensuring fair competition for industries and professionals who do business in Tennessee.

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