



# Identity Theft:

## Playing “Keep Away” From Criminals

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## Playing Keep Away From Identity Theft Criminals!



**Q** – Do you have any tips to protect me against identity theft?

**A** - According to the Federal Trade Commission, identity theft was the #1 consumer fraud complaint in 2009. It is estimated that more than 9 million Americans have their identity stolen each year.

Sometimes, identity theft is out of our control. I personally was the victim of the recent Bashas cyber heist. One day recently – out of the blue – I received a new Discover card in the mail. When I called Discover, they stated that my card number was stolen and a couple of purchases were made at an Old Navy in New York. The happy ending is that it didn't cost me money. However, it did cost time. I had to contact all the vendors that use that card for automatic payments and change to the new card. What a pain!

It's painful enough to clean up identity theft when the breach is not your fault – it's even more painful when you do it to yourself. Make sure that you keep your financial information secure. The first step – safeguard your wallet. You don't want to lose your identity if you lose your purse or wallet. Here are some steps you can take to lock up your wallet.

1. Do not carry any cards with your social security number with you – this includes your Medicare card! You may ask, "What do I do – I need my Medicare card when I see the doctor?" This involves a little craft project. First - make a copy of your current card (If you have it done on cardstock it's a bit sturdier). Then, black out all the digits of your social security number except the last four. Finally, laminate it – you can do this using clear packing tape. Voilà! You have a new Medicare card.
2. Only keep a minimum number of credit cards in your wallet. Make copies of those cards to keep in a safe place at home so you can freeze or cancel the cards if you misplace your purse or wallet.
3. Don't keep any one else's personal information – such as your kid's – in your purse, wallet or phone. In my business, we often need social security numbers of client's children to set them up as beneficiaries on their parent's accounts. I am horrified when I ask for this information and my clients pull out their wallet, phone or a notebook from their purse and rattle off their kid's birthdates and social security numbers. Protect your loved one's identity as well as your own. Keep those numbers locked up at home as well!
4. Remove sensitive information from your phone. Also, if your phone is lost – or even temporarily misplaced, call your carrier to suspend service.



Here's some other tips to make your life more secure:

1. Destroy medicine bottle labels before you throw them out. Since medicine bottles don't easily go through your shredder, use a product such as Goo-Gone – or soak them in a little vinegar.
2. Protect your mailbox! If you don't have a locked mailbox, remove your mail as soon as possible after it arrives. Take outgoing mail to a postal service collection box or the post office – particularly if it is of a financial nature. Place a vacation hold on your mail if you'll be out of town for a few days. The postal service has made it easier these days to do this. Just visit [holdmail.usps.com/](http://holdmail.usps.com/) and you can save a trip to the post office.
3. If you don't need additional credit, consider opting out of prepaid solicitations for credit cards. To do this, call 1-888-567-8688 or go to [www.optoutprescreen.com](http://www.optoutprescreen.com). All three credit bureaus participate in this service.

Speaking of the credit bureaus, monitor your credit reports from the three credit agencies. Put yourself on a schedule to request a report from each of the agencies annually. I personally request a report every several months from one of the agencies. For example, you might request a report from Experian on Valentine's day, Equifax on Independence Day and Transunion at Thanksgiving. The reports can be ordered online or by mail. The official website for requesting this information is [www.AnnualCreditReport.com](http://www.AnnualCreditReport.com). If you land on a site that asks for your credit card information to obtain



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If you would like additional information about protecting yourself from identity theft, visit <http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/features/feature-0014-identity-theft>.

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