

Protect Your Financial ID

It only takes a few seconds to become a victim of financial fraud. But it often takes months to recover.

Armed with discarded credit card receipts, checks, or deposit slips, today's crooks are making unauthorized transactions from victims' accounts, and even opening new--fraudulent--credit card and checking accounts.

There are steps you can take to prevent your identity from theft.

- * Examine all your financial statements. Promptly reconcile your monthly account statements. Save check stubs and credit, debit, and ATM (automated teller machine) receipts. Report any discrepancies to the appropriate company. Obtain a free annual credit report by going to www.annualcreditreport.com.

- * Limit the paper trail. Store credit and share draft receipts in a safe place. Or better yet shred them when you no longer need them. Destroy blank checks from closed-out accounts and expired or unused credit cards.

- * Guard your purse or wallet. Thieves often target unoccupied vehicles, unlocked office drawers, and health club locker rooms.

- * Protect your personal identification number (PIN). Never keep your ATM PIN in the same place as your card.

- * Beware of phone scams. Never give personal or financial information to an unknown caller.

- * Check your mail. If you haven't received mail for a few days, you may be the victim of mail diversion fraud. This scam involves a crook forging an individual's signature on a change-of-address form to divert your mail and obtain financial information. If you suspect your address has been changed without your permission, contact the post office.

- * Track financial statements. Find out when financial statements and plastic cards are due to arrive. If they're late, contact your credit union or appropriate issuer.

- * Protect yourself online. Technology allows online vendors to assure customers reasonable security from online theft. If you doubt the security of the vendor, order the items over the telephone.

- * Visit the United Federal Credit Union identity theft Web site (www.unitedfcu.com/Identity_Theft_305.html) for more information on protecting your identity.