

Keeping your Social Security Number Safe

It's likely that for most of your life, you have been told to be careful with your social security number. That's great advice but it's virtually impossible to do. Your doctor wants it. Your bank requires it. It seems that every time you set up a new account or service, you are asked to provide your social security number. Data breaches have been big news lately. In fact, a report from NPR, as heard on All Things Considered, estimated that 60-80% of social security numbers have been stolen by hackers. Statistically, it's likely that you have had your number stolen. Not every stolen number becomes a victim of identity theft, but the possibility is there.

So, what can you do? If it is likely your number has already been stolen, what can be done?

It's important to keep in mind that the burden falls on you, the consumer to vigilantly monitor if you are a victim of identity theft. The Social Security Administration will not change your number or give you a new one just because it has been stolen. You have to prove that it is being used illegally. The burden of proof falls on the victim.

So how do you prove or monitor for illegal activity involving your social security number? Here are three tips for keeping your number secure.

Number one; don't give out your number.

I know what you're thinking,

"But Tim didn't you just say it's likely already been stolen!"

Yes, there is a good possibility that it has been stolen, but it's not a guarantee. You can try to limit the number of institutions that have your social security number. You will have to provide it to the Internal Revenue Service or another government agency. Your job needs it for the same reasons. Yet there are many opportunities for you to refuse to give your number out. While your bank may need it, your dry cleaner doesn't. Guard it very carefully.

Number two; Monitor your credit report often. The major credit companies, Equifax, Experian and Transunion will provide you with a report annually. You can also set up more frequent monitoring with companies like Credit Karma or LifeLock. There are fees and costs associated with those services, but it seems a small price to pay when compared to the potential financial impact.

Finally, number three; take advantage of any free monitoring. As data breaches become more and more common, many companies will offer to cover the cost of your monitoring. This may be provided by a credit card company, your job or even another membership organization. It's possible you have access to free monitoring already and don't even know it. Investigate your existing relationships with credit card companies, banks and membership organizations.

In the end, you will be the first and likely last line of defense for your social security number. While the government is unlikely to give you a new number, they only issued two hundred and fifty replacement numbers last year, there are vigilant steps that you can take to protect your identity. Let's recap:

1. Don't give out your number
2. Monitor your credit report often
3. Explore free monitoring

And let me toss in two more final pieces of advice. These come directly from AARP:

4. Freeze 'em Out. If you place a security freeze on your file at the big three credit rating agencies, ID thieves who have your number can't get loans in your name, because lenders can't do the required credit check. To place a freeze, you need to contact each of the three major credit bureaus: Equifax (equifax.com; 800-349-9960), Experian (experian.com; 888-397-3742) and TransUnion (transunion.com; 888-909-8872). Freezes can be "thawed" as needed, such as when you are switching insurance providers.
5. Report Quickly. If your number is used for identity theft, contact the Federal Trade Commission at 877-438-4338 or at identitytheft.gov. File a police report and notify credit-reporting bureaus and banks. Report Medicare fraud to 800-447-8477, and if you suspect crooks are going for your tax refund, call the IRS at 800-908-4490. For lost or stolen Social Security cards, call the agency at 800-772-1213, or go to socialsecurity.gov/ssnumber.

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