

Protecting Older Adults from Scams and Fraud

By Garrett Vogel and Elaine Wiant

Q I keep hearing about identify theft. I live in a good neighborhood and don't buy things over the Internet. Is this something that I should be concerned about?

A YES! You should be concerned. The Postal Service estimates that there are approximately 1,000,000 cases of Identity Theft annually. If you are the victim it is, at the very least, time consuming and frustrating. And the problem is growing rapidly.

Six simple FREE steps to help prevent identity theft are:

1. Do NOT place outgoing checks (especially credit card payments) in your home's mailbox. Take your mail to a U.S. Postal Service drop-box or, better still, to the post office.
2. Do NOT put your social security number on your checks. Do NOT carry you social security card or Medicare card or any other card showing your social security number in your wallet or purse.
3. DO promptly review your credit card and bank statements for unauthorized use.
4. DO completely destroy (shred if possible) any "pre-approved" or other mail items containing personal information. If you don't have a cross-cut shredder consider buying one -- or sharing one with a friend or neighbor.
5. DO request a FREE annual credit report from each of the three major credit-reporting agencies. Among other things this will let you see if anyone is making suspicious inquiries about you. You may space your inquiries so that you receive information over the course of the year rather than all at once.

The web site to get your credit reports for free is www.annualcreditreport.com. Type carefully as similar sites try to sell you things. Or call 1-877-322-8828.

6. DO keep copies of the information you would need to notify banks, insurance companies, credit card companies, social security, credit reporting companies, Department of Public Safety, etc. in case you loose your wallet or purse.

IF YOU BECOME A VICTIM, immediately notify any one of the three major credit bureaus and place a fraud alert on your file; the other two will automatically be notified, place alerts on your file and all will send you a copy of your credit report free of charge. Contact numbers are:

Experian
888-397-3742

Trans Union
800-888-4213

Equifax
800-685-1111

Immediately file a police report and keep a copy to provide to creditors and others who may need proof of what happened.

Notify the Federal Trade Commission at 877-382-4357 (FTC-HELP) as they maintain a data base for use by law enforcement.

Remember that although identity thieves are predators who are out to get you they can't function if you don't give them the chance. Be vigilant.

Q Recently I received an e-mail telling me that I'd won a lottery in England. I never buy lottery tickets and haven't been to England in years. When I reread the e-mail, it said that I had been "automatically entered" as part of some kind of governmental promotion. They don't seem to be asking for any money from me. Is it safe to investigate this matter further?

A The Texas Attorney General's office tells us that the biggest consumer complaint in Texas is the foreign lottery scam. In 2004 The Federal Trade Commission reported that, with 12,500 complaints, lottery and sweepstakes fraud was the second most reported complaint lodged by consumers 50 years or older. The FTC also states, "Prize and sweepstakes fraud is more prevalent among older consumers and is particularly prevalent among consumers age 70 or older."

This scam can be particularly nasty. It preys on people's natural hope of a windfall (frequently they are hoping to do something for others), takes their money and may steal their identity. Often the victim's name is sold and the victim is victimized again by someone who offers to help them recover their lost money – for a fee, of course!

The scam can work in one or more ways. You may be contacted by mail, telephone, internet or advertising.

Frequently you are encouraged to enter a foreign lottery, often with promises of large, high probability payoffs. The amount to "enter" is frequently relatively small. Beware: even if the offer is legitimate (you have no way of assuring yourself that it is) it is **against Federal law** to make cross-border purchases of foreign lottery tickets.

You may be asked to enter a domestic sweepstakes that requires a fee or to pay a fee to somehow increase your chances of winning. Again, both actions are **against the law**.

Another approach is to say that you've already won. They either assume that you don't remember entering or state that it's part of a "governmental promotion" of some kind directed at business executives, potential tourists, church members, etc.

Regardless of the approach, the objectives of the scam are the same. At a minimum you are going to be asked for an up-front fee for "currency conversion", "taxes", "handling fees" or something similar. Along with this they'll "confirm" your name, address and as

much other information as they can get from you. You'll probably be asked to pay this fee by credit card to expedite receipt of your money (now they have your credit card information). You will probably be eager to buy another ticket and before you receive your first payment you'll be asked for a second (or third, or fourth) fee. At worst you'll be asked for personal and bank account information so that your winnings can be wired to your bank. At that point you have been both defrauded and had your identity stolen.

The best and only defense is to **just say no**. Don't enter, don't give information and don't think that the nice voice on the telephone is your friend.

Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott said, "if you have been told that you have won a big prize in a sweepstakes or lottery you did not enter, especially a foreign lottery, and you are being asked to send money, you do not need to make any phone calls to check up on the offer. I can tell you right now: **it is a scam.**" We agree with General Abbott.

For information or to report these activities contact the:

Federal Trade Commission
877-382-4357 (FTC-HELP)

or

the Attorney General of Texas
(800)252-8011

Contact ThirdAge Services for more information on these and other issues relating to older adults at 214-741-4397 or 214-649-1392 or contact Mr. Vogel at gvogel@thirdageservices.com.

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