

8 SECURITY TIPS IN LIGHT OF THE EQUIFAX DATA BREACH

Earlier this month, Equifax - one of the largest credit reporting agencies in the country - announced that a security breach resulted in the theft of sensitive information for 143 million Americans. Information stolen included social security numbers, birthdates, addresses, and credit card numbers. Even if you

don't believe you are a customer of Equifax there is a strong possibility that they have your information from your bank, credit card company, or any other lender. In light of this massive breach of information, we wanted to provide you with 8 tips to guard yourself against identity theft.

Regardless of the recent data breach, these measures are good practice in general to assure that your credit and finances are secure. However, now more than ever it is important that you remain vigilant against fraud.

1 Carefully review the charges on your bank and credit card statements every month. If you see any charges that you don't recognize inform your bank immediately and they should halt the suspicious payment until they conduct a more thorough investigation.

2 Use credit cards in place of debit cards. If someone steals your credit card number you will have more time to challenge the charges before payment is due, whereas if your debit card number is stolen you will only be alerted to fraudulent charges after payment has already been made, and you will have a harder time recovering your money.

3 If you discover that fraud has actually occurred, you should immediately put an alert in your credit report and send a copy of the ID theft report (<https://www.identitytheft.gov/>) to all credit reporting companies (. Without this you won't have the proper documentation to show you reported the issue and are working with the authorities.

4 Keep a close eye on your credit report. Not only can these reports have simple errors that could impact your ability to get a mortgage or a car loan, but it will also provide you with an opportunity to review all of the accounts that are open in your name to make sure there are not any unauthorized charges. You can check your credit for free at <https://www.annualcreditreport.com/index.action>.

5 Consider putting a freeze on your credit. This will prevent anyone, including you, from opening any new credit using your name or social security number. Although this will add an extra step the next time you need to open credit, it offers the highest level of protection for your credit security. When you need to finance a new car or apply for a mortgage, be sure to give yourself a week to unfreeze your credit beforehand.

6 If you believe you are the victim of identity theft you should also contact the local police and the FTC to file official reports. Copies of these reports should be kept in your files. This not only helps the authorities, but it protects you as well.

7 Regularly change the passwords for your financial accounts, and avoid accessing any of your sensitive accounts on public Wi-Fi where it is easier for criminals to use keystroke monitors to capture your information.

8 Use the Social Security fraud hotline (oig.ssa.gov/report-fraud-waste-or-abuse) if you find that your Social Security number is being used fraudulently. If identity theft goes too far, you will not only have to fight to prove your identity, you will have to apply for a new Social Security number.