

## Internet Safety & Your Personal Information

Depending on what you use your personal computer for, an identity thief may not even need to come into your home to steal your personal information.

If you store your Social Security number, financial records or bank account numbers on your computer, these tips could help keep your computer safe:

- Update virus protection software each week; patches should be installed to protect against file or password compromises. Windows XP can be set to automatically check for patches and download them to your computer.
- Don't open files, click on hyperlinks or download programs from people you don't know. Opening a file could expose your computer to a virus or "spyware" – a program that could capture your password or any other information as you type it into your keyboard.
- Use a firewall program, especially if you have a high-speed Internet connection like cable, DSL or T-1 that leaves your computer connected to the Internet 24 hours a day. A firewall program will stop uninvited access to your computer.
- Be careful when using file-share programs and use a secure browser to guard online transactions. A secure browser will encrypt or scramble the information you send – look for the "lock" icon on the status bar to ensure your information is secure. Use the most up-to-date browser available; you can download some browsers for free online.
- If you own a laptop, don't store financial information on it unless it's absolutely necessary. Use a password with a combination of letters, numbers and symbols, and don't use the automatic login feature that saves your user name and password. This way, if your laptop is stolen, it will be harder for a thief to access your personal information.
- Before you dispose of a computer, delete all your personal information. Use a "wipe" utility program to overwrite the entire hard drive instead of simply deleting files using the keyboard or mouse commands.
- Look for website privacy policies. They should cover accuracy, access, security and control of personal information collected by the website – how the information is used and whether it will be provided to a third party. If you don't see a privacy policy or if you can't understand it, consider using another site.