



## 7 Tips to Stay Safe While Online Holiday Shopping

By *GreenPath Financial Wellness*

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December is National Identity Theft Prevention and Awareness Month – especially important this year as we head into a holiday season unlike any other.

As we abide by stay-at-home orders, many of us spend hours in front of the computer each day for work and school.

Online retail associations expect online holiday sales to surge by 25% - amounting to between \$182 billion and \$196 billion. Add this to a 15% increase in online sales from 2018 to 2019.

Online retailers want us to shop earlier than ever this year, with supply chains stressed by the pandemic. With the increase in online holiday shopping, how can you stay safe and protect your identity?

Identity theft occurs when someone uses personal information without your permission – like your name, Social Security number or credit card number – to commit fraud or other crimes.

The Federal Trade Commission estimates that millions of

Americans have their identities stolen each year. While it can be a challenge to guarantee you won't become a victim of identity theft, you can minimize your risk.

### **1. Use trusted websites when online shopping**

An excellent first step to reduce risk is to shop online using websites that are well known and employ security features. Pay attention to the actual URL you are shopping from to be sure the site is valid, as the chance to be directed to a less-than-reputable website through “click-bait” ads is higher during the holidays. Some experts suggest to directly type the online retailer's URL into your web browser. When shopping on your phone, consider downloading the specific apps from each retailer. Additional security features are built into retailer apps, and you can also ensure you are purchasing directly from the source.

### **2. Look for “security indicators”**

To check that a website is secure, look for “https” at the beginning of a site's address. When you see the “s” at the end of “http,” then the site is encrypted, and your data will be secure.

Another security indicator to watch out for is an icon that looks like a lock. The lock icon appears either next to the URL or in the bottom corner of your web browser. Use an online browser that warns you before purchasing – or even visiting – a non-secure site.

### **3. Use secured networks**

Most of us are staying at home now more than ever, so restricting online shopping to your home computer is easier this year than in past holiday seasons. It's a good idea to run regular virus checks and updates on your device. Pay attention to network connections when shopping from other devices if you do find yourself on the go.

### **4. Use a credit card with a holiday spending plan**

Set a simple holiday gift-giving spending plan, and then stick to it. Credit cards do offer a level of fraud protection that you may not get using debit cards. In addition, credit card providers will likely notice identity theft activity before you do.

To reduce stress about taking on holiday debt, consider using a cash-loaded disposable gift card. Gift cards are not connected to your personal information. Plus, it can also help you stick to your budget.

## 5. Don't store payment information

Storing credit card information on a retailer's website may save time, but it's risky in the long run. Stored information could compromise your identity if there is a widespread data breach.

This can also help you stick to your spending plan. People are less likely to make impulse buys when payment data is not stored, and you have to get up from the computer to get payment information. Entering payment information by hand helps make you more aware of what you're spending.

## 6. Select complex passwords

Take the time to use complex passwords when purchasing from retail websites. This tip holds

true for your passwords on credit card, bank, and other accounts. Avoid using readily available information like your mother's maiden name, your birth date, a single word, and the last four digits of your Social Security number or phone number. Combinations of letters, numbers, and special characters make the strongest passwords. Store passwords using a password manager, or store away from your computer in a written document that is securely stored in your home.

## 7. Monitor statements and credit reports

To detect identity theft, monitor your accounts and statements each month, and check your credit report regularly. Early detection of identity theft can make a big difference. Keep an eye out for any suspicious activity by routinely monitoring your financial accounts and billing statements, looking closely for charges you did not make.

Credit reports contain information about you, including what accounts you have and how you pay your

bills. If an identity thief is opening credit accounts in your name, these accounts are likely to show up on your credit report. Look for inquiries from companies you haven't contacted, accounts you didn't open, and debts that you can't explain. Check that information like your Social Security number, address(es), name or initials, and employers are correct. Check your credit report periodically free of charge at [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com).

## Explore Further Resources

To maintain your financial health not only during the holiday season but throughout the year, GreenPath Financial Wellness offers [additional resources on protecting your identity](#).

## The Path to Financial Wellness Starts Here.

No matter what your goals may be, our partners at GreenPath can help you to take control of your day-to-day financial choices to create more opportunities for achieving your dreams.



Create a Budget



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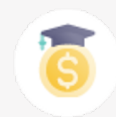
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