

Scam Alert! Protecting Yourself and Your Finances

The number of stories about fraudsters taking advantage of unsuspecting victims seems to grow by the day. Of course, it's easy to think, "This will never happen to me!" But to keep your money and personal information safe, it's vital to stay abreast of the latest scams.

Coronavirus Email Scams Spreading

We've all read the headlines about the coronavirus. Unfortunately, this serious health threat has presented an opportunity for those hoping to profit from the growing fears surrounding the virus.

Although there are a few coronavirus scams, one of the most insidious has been fake emails that look like they're from the World Health Organization (WHO) or Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). At first glance, these emails look legitimate. Some even include "safety measures" and feature the WHO or CDC logo. So, what gives them away as phishing attempts?

- Contain spelling and/or grammatical errors
- Request your email address and password
- Ask for a donation (sometimes via bitcoin)
- Include instructions to click on suspicious links or open attachments

How to protect yourself. It's important to know that the CDC and WHO would not ask for your login credentials. Further, best practice is to never click on a link from an unknown source, as scammers use these links to download viruses on to your computer. Finally, if you're looking for facts on the coronavirus, go directly to the [CDC](https://www.cdc.gov) or [WHO](https://www.who.int) website. That way, you won't put your personal information in the wrong hands.

The Phony Lotto Phone Call

Imagine answering the phone and the caller delivering the best news ever: you've won the lottery! It sounds too good to be true—and, sadly, it likely is. What's the giveaway? To get the prize money, you must first send in a small amount of money, perhaps to pay lawyer's fees or taxes. Over time, the requests for your money will continue, growing larger and larger. Another red flag is that the caller may ask to keep the conversation "confidential" until your winnings have been formally announced.

How to protect yourself. Many individuals (particularly seniors) have fallen for this scam. Before they realize their grand prize is never coming, they've lost thousands of dollars. Bottom line? If someone calls you claiming to be from the lottery *and* asks for money, hang up! If you suspect you're being scammed, you may also reach out to your local police department for help.

The Romance Scam

Here's a heartbreaking statistic for those looking for love online: Americans lost \$201 million in online romance scams in 2019. How did this happen?

Generally, fraudsters create fake profiles on popular dating apps or social media to connect with their victims. Many will claim to be working abroad, in the military, on an oil rig, or as a doctor embedded in an international group. Whatever their supposed situation, it eliminates the chance of face-to-face contact.

To establish trust with their victims, these scammers will communicate frequently. Once they feel the online relationship is secure, their true motive emerges: getting your money. Different reasons will be given for needing funds, including airfare, medical bills, or travel visas. Plus, they'll likely ask for this money in the form of gift cards. Why? Gift cards can easily be turned into cash, they allow the recipient to remain anonymous, and the transaction is difficult to reverse.

How to protect yourself. There are two rules of thumb to help steer clear of the romance scam: (1) do not send money to someone you haven't met in person, and (2) be wary of anyone who requests payment by gift card. If you do suspect you've become a victim of a romance scam, be sure to stop all contact immediately and report your suspicions to the [Federal Trade Commission](#).

Sophisticated Social Security Scam

Last, but certainly not least, we come to what the government refers to as the most reported scam in America: the social security scam. It has cost American seniors \$38 billion.

As with other scams, this one may begin with a phone call (either recorded or from someone claiming to be a government employee), indicating that your social security number has been compromised or has been used to commit fraudulent activities. That's scary to hear, but the bad news is often coupled with a threat of arrest or legal action unless you immediately pay a fine. To avoid this, the victims are asked to send money using methods that are difficult to trace, like wire transfer, gift card, or internet currency (e.g., bitcoin).

How to protect yourself. If you do get a call like the one described here, simply hang up and report it to the [Social Security Administration](#) (SSA). Also, keep in mind that the threat of arrest or legal action is a definite red flag, as the SSA would *never* threaten such an action. And if there's a real problem with your social security number or if you do need to submit legitimate payments? The SSA usually sends a letter in the mail (not an email, text, or phone call).

Be in the Know

When it comes to the latest scams, being aware of the warning signs is half the battle. By knowing what to look for—and what to do if you suspect you've fallen victim—you will be well positioned to protect yourself and your finances.

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