

A quick guide to credit freezes and protecting yourself from identity theft

It can be confusing staying on top of the different ways to protect yourself from identity theft.

Our recommendation is simple: get credit freezes.

Doing so will prevent identity thieves from opening new credit accounts in your name. You will need to place separate credit freezes, also known as security freezes, with all three national credit bureaus - [Equifax](#), [Experian](#), and [TransUnion](#). It is completely free to do so, under a [federal law](#) that took effect in 2018.

How credit freezes work

When you apply for credit, the business will check your credit score, which is derived from your credit report. If you have a credit freeze in place, the business won't be able to access your credit report and therefore won't extend you a line of credit. So if an identity thief uses your stolen Social Security number and birthdate to apply for credit in your name, a freeze will block the account from being created. Since a business might run a credit check with any one of the three national credit bureaus, you'll need freezes on your credit reports with all three. You can always unfreeze your credit reports when you want to apply for credit.

You have probably heard of credit monitoring.

All that does is let you know about activity on your credit reports *after* it has taken place. So, at best, you would be alerted to a fraudulent account after it has already been opened. It doesn't hurt to have credit monitoring if it's free. But there's really no need to pay for it with a monthly subscription, especially since you can prevent fraudulent accounts in the first place with free credit freezes. You can also just [check your credit reports](#) yourself for free.

The credit bureaus also have something called a "credit lock."

It does the same thing as a credit freeze. However, a credit lock is subject to the terms and conditions of the credit bureaus. Whereas everyone has a right to free credit freezes by federal law, no strings attached. We therefore recommend the freeze over the lock.

You can check out our [guide](#) for detailed instructions for placing credit freezes.