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National Consumer Protection Week: Beware of Pandemic Scams



This past year, scam artists have taken advantage of people's concerns over the coronavirus pandemic to defraud them of money. According to the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), consumers reported losing more than \$3.3 billion to fraud in 2020, up from \$1.8 billion in 2019.¹

This week is National Consumer Protection Week, the perfect time to take steps to protect yourself from the increase in fraud, identity theft and other scams. Here are some of the latest ones to watch out for.

Unemployment benefit scams

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, there has been a surge in identity theft related to unemployment insurance claims. In fact, over \$5 billion in potentially fraudulent unemployment claims were paid between March and October of 2020.²

Typically, these types of scams involve a fraudster trying to use your personal information to claim unemployment benefits. If you receive an unexpected prepaid card for unemployment benefits, see an unexpected deposit from your state in your bank account, or receive a Form 1099-G for 2020 unemployment compensation that you did not apply for, report it to your state unemployment insurance office as soon as possible.

Economic impact payment scams

Scammers have come up with a number of schemes related to the economic impact payments sent to taxpayers by the federal government. It is important to note that at this time, all first and second economic impact payments have already been sent out. A third economic impact payment may be sent out to taxpayers by mid-March.

The IRS is warning taxpayers to be aware of scammers who:

- Use words such as "stimulus check" or "stimulus payment" instead of the official term, "economic impact payment"
- Ask you to "sign up" for your economic impact payment check
- Contact you by phone, email, text or social media for verification of personal and/or banking information to receive or speed up your economic impact payment

In most cases, the IRS will deposit economic impact payments directly into accounts that taxpayers previously provided on their tax returns. If the IRS does not have a taxpayer's direct-deposit information, a check or prepaid debit card will be mailed to the taxpayer's address on file with the IRS. For more information visit [irs.gov](https://www.irs.gov).

Fraudulent products and vaccine scams

This past year, the Federal Trade Commission has warned about scam artists attempting to sell fraudulent products that claim to treat, prevent or diagnose COVID-19.

National Consumer Protection Week is a coordinated campaign by federal and state government and nonprofit partner organizations to help people understand their consumer rights and make well-informed decisions about money. For more information, visit [ftc.gov](https://www.ftc.gov).

With the arrival of new COVID-19 vaccines, the FTC is warning consumers to also be wary of possible vaccine scams. The FTC is urging consumers to contact their state or local health department in order to find out how, when and where to get a COVID-19 vaccine. In addition, the FTC warned consumers to avoid scammers who:

- Offer to put your name on a vaccine list or get early access to a vaccine for a fee
- Call, text or email you about the vaccine and ask for financial information

Protecting yourself from scams

Fortunately, there are some things you can do to protect yourself from scams, including those related to the coronavirus pandemic:

- Don't click on suspicious or unfamiliar links in emails, text messages or instant messaging services — visit government websites directly for important information
- Don't answer a phone call if you don't recognize the phone number — instead, let it go to voicemail and check later to verify the caller
- Keep device and security software up-to-date, maintain strong passwords and use multi-factor authentication
- Never share personal or financial information via email, text message or over the phone
- If you see a scam, be sure to report it to the FTC at [ftc.gov](https://www.ftc.gov), the Treasury Inspector General for Tax Administration (TIGTA) at [tigta.gov](https://www.tigta.gov) and your local police department

¹ Federal Trade Commission, February 2021

² U.S. Department of Labor, February 2021

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