

Protect your personal financial data with these tips

With more financial transactions taking place online, it's important for consumers to protect their personal data, especially as cybercrimes like ransomware, phishing attempts and identity theft continue to increase.

"These risks are nothing new in our digital-first world, but far too many people still fail to properly protect themselves," said Michael Sullivan, a personal financial consultant with Take Charge America, a nonprofit credit counseling and debt management agency. "Taking the necessary steps may seem like a headache right now but becoming a victim of cybercrime can cause much bigger headaches for your financial life."

Sullivan shares six tips for consumers to protect their financial data:

***Keep personal details personal.** Never provide details such as your Social Security number or other personal information to anyone you don't trust — especially if

they call or email you to do so. Financial institutions will never ask you to verify these details in an unsecured way.

***Safeguard your devices.** Ensure software on your devices is up to date with the latest security fixes. You also want to sign up for a subscription to security software with a provider like Norton or McAfee that will give you protection from things like viruses and malware.

***Punch up your passwords.** Protect your personal devices and data by using long, unique passwords, phrases or codes that are harder to guess or decipher. And set up unique passwords for each of your accounts. A secure password manager can help you keep your different passwords straight.

***Set up two-factor authentication.** In addition to stronger passwords, set up two-factor authentication (TFA), which requires you to input not only a password but an additional code that's sent via email, text or

through an authenticator app. TFA adds an extra layer of security to your accounts.

***Be wary of public Wi-Fi.** Although convenient, public Wi-Fi connections can easily be compromised or spoofed. Never perform transactions or log into financial accounts when using unsecured Wi-Fi.

***Regularly monitor your credit.** Review your report at least twice a year to check for suspicious or inaccurate information. You can get a free copy of your report each year at annualcreditreport.com. ***Another good option is setting up credit monitoring services through providers like Credit Karma or Credit Sesame.**

Founded in 1987, Take Charge America, Inc. is a nonprofit agency offering financial education and counseling services including credit counseling, debt management, student loan counseling, housing counseling and bankruptcy counseling. It has helped more than 2 million consumers nationwide manage their personal finances and debts. To learn more, visit takechargeamerica.org or call (888) 822-9193.

