

Many consumers know the basics of protecting themselves from identity theft, a common financial scam. They shred documents with sensitive information, check their credit scores and protect their social security numbers. However, many consumers are unaware of another common financial scam that can severely impact their bank accounts: ATM skimming.

Here are a few things you need to know in order to protect yourself:

What is ATM skimming?

ATM skimming is a crime in which thieves attach a device to an authentic ATM in order to capture the information stored on the magnetic strip on your bank card. A hidden camera is often installed on or near the ATM to record your PIN number as you enter it. The external device used for skimming is normally only installed for a few hours before the thieves remove it and extract the data it collected. The criminals then combine with the PIN numbers obtained on the video with the stolen data to make online purchases or withdrawals at other ATMs using the bank card information.

You can protect yourself.

By being cautious and aware of your surroundings you can defend yourself against becoming a victim of ATM skimming. The crime depends on consumers using a compromised ATM, so inspect the ATMs you use most often. Watch for signs of tampering, such as new scratches, discolored keys, flashing lights and visible wires. Using the same ATMs on a regular basis will help you notice changes more easily. If you must use a strange ATM, use extra care when inspecting it for signs of skimming. If you suspect an ATM is compromised, notify the bank immediately.

Using ATMs located inside bank branches is also safer, due to the increased security compared to ATMs on the street. Another good habit to get into is shielding your PIN as you enter it. You'll be protecting your PIN from video cameras and potential onlookers, as well. The best protection for your PIN is to change it every few months and avoid using numbers like your birthday, anniversary and your spouse/child's birthday.

What if you've been a victim of ATM skimming?

You should monitor your accounts for suspicious activity, and if you notice withdrawals or purchases that you didn't make, notify your bank right away. Check with your bank to see if they offer a service that will notify you via text or email of unusual purchase activity. In many cases, the sooner you notify the bank there is a potential problem, the more likely you are to be refunded the stolen money.