

FTC FACTS for Consumers

Keeping Laptops from Getting Lost or Stolen



laptop computer defines convenience and mobility. It enables you to work from home, a hotel room, a conference hall, or a coffee shop.

Maybe you've taken steps to secure the data on your laptop: You've installed a firewall. You update your antivirus software. You protect your information with a strong password. You encrypt your data, and you're too smart to fall for those emails that ask for your personal information. But what about the laptop itself? A minor distraction is all it takes for your laptop to vanish. If it does, you may lose more than an expensive piece of hardware. The fact is, if your data protections aren't up to par, that sensitive and valuable information in your laptop may be a magnet for an identity thief.

Chances are you've heard stories about stolen laptops on the news or from friends and colleagues. No one thinks their laptop will be stolen — at least not until they find the trunk of their car broken into, notice that their laptop isn't waiting at the other side of airport security, or get a refill at the local java joint only to turn around and find their laptop gone.

OnGuardOnline.gov, a website managed by the federal government that is devoted to computer security, protecting personal information, and guarding against Internet fraud, suggests keeping these tips in mind when you take your laptop out and about:

Treat your laptop like cash. If you had a wad of money sitting out in a public place, would you turn your back on it — even for just a minute? Would you put it in checked luggage? Leave it on the backseat of your car? Of course not. Keep a careful eye on your laptop just as you would a pile of cash.

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Keep it locked. Whether you're using your laptop in the office, a hotel, or some other public place, a security device can make it more difficult for someone to steal it. Use a laptop security cable: attach it to something immovable or to a heavy piece of furniture that's difficult to move — say, a table or a desk.

Keep it off the floor. No matter where you are in public — at a conference, a coffee shop, or a registration desk — avoid putting your laptop on the floor. If you must put it down, place it between your feet or at least up against your leg, so that you're aware of it.

Keep your passwords elsewhere. Remembering strong passwords or access numbers can be difficult. However, leaving either in a laptop carrying case or on your laptop is like leaving the keys in your car. There's no reason to make it easy for a thief to get to your personal or corporate information.

Mind the bag. When you take your laptop on the road, carrying it in a computer case may advertise what's inside. Consider using a suitcase, a padded briefcase or a backpack instead.

Get it out of the car. Don't leave your laptop in the car — not on the seat, not in the trunk. Parked cars are a favorite target of laptop thieves; don't help them by leaving your laptop unattended. That said, if you must leave your laptop behind, keep it out of sight.

Don't leave it "for just a minute." Your conference colleagues seem trustworthy, so you're comfortable leaving your laptop while you network during a break. The people at the coffee

shop seem nice, so you ask them to keep an eye out while you use the restroom. Don't leave your laptop unguarded — even for a minute. Take it with you if you can, or at least use a cable to secure it to something heavy.

Pay attention in airports. Keep your eye on your laptop as you go through security. Hold onto it until the person in front of you has gone through the metal detector — and keep an eye out when it emerges on the other side of the screener. The confusion and shuffle of security checkpoints can be fertile ground for theft.

Be vigilant in hotels. If you stay in hotels, a security cable may not be enough. Try not to leave your laptop out in your room. Rather, use the safe in your room if there is one. If you're using a security cable to lock down your laptop, consider hanging the "do not disturb" sign on your door.

Use bells and whistles. Depending on your security needs, an alarm can be a useful tool. Some laptop alarms sound when there's unexpected motion, or when the computer moves outside a specified range around you. Or consider a kind of "lo-jack" for your laptop: a program that reports the location of your stolen laptop once it's connected to the Internet.

Visit OnGuardOnline.gov for more tips on securing your computer, protecting personal information whether you're using a wireless connection or a traditional one, and guarding against Internet fraud. OnGuardOnline.gov is maintained by the Federal Trade Commission, the nation's consumer protection agency.

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