

Fraud alert, freeze or lock after Equifax? FAQs

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After the Equifax breach, some people are considering placing a fraud alert on their credit file. Others will freeze or lock their credit files to help prevent identity thieves from opening new accounts in their name. Here are some FAQs to help you decide what's best for you.

Fraud Alert

- **What is it?** A fraud alert requires companies to verify your identity before extending new credit. Usually that means calling you to check if you're really trying to open a new account.
- **How does it work?** The process is easy – you contact any one of the three nationwide credit reporting agencies (Equifax, Experian, TransUnion) and that one must notify the other two.
- **How long does it last?** An initial fraud alerts last 90 days. After 90 days, you can renew your alert for an additional 90 days, as many times as you want. Military who deploy can get an active duty alert that lasts one year, renewable for the period of deployment. Identity theft victims (whose information has been misused, not just exposed in a breach) are entitled to an extended fraud alert, which lasts seven years.
- **How much does it cost?** Fraud alerts are free.
- **Is this for me?** With a fraud alert, you keep access to your credit and federal law protects you. But an initial fraud alert lasts only 90 days and then you'll need to remind yourself to renew it every 90 days.

Credit Freeze

- **What is it?** A credit freeze limits access to your credit file so no one, including you, can open new accounts until the freeze is lifted.
- **How does it work?** To be fully protected, you must place a freeze with each of the three credit reporting agencies. Freezes can be placed by phone or online. You'll get a PIN to use each time you freeze or unfreeze, which may take one to three business days.

- **How long does it last?** A freeze lasts until you temporarily lift or permanently remove it (except in a few states where freezes expire after seven years).
- **How much does it cost?** Fees are set by state law. Generally, it costs \$5 to \$10 each time you freeze or unfreeze your account with each credit reporting agency. You can get a free freeze if you are an identity theft victim, or in some states, if you're over age 62. Equifax is offering free freezes until January 31, 2018.
- **Is this for me?** Freezes are generally best for people who aren't planning to take out new credit. Often, that includes older adults, people under guardianship, and children. People who want to avoid monthly fees also may prefer freezes over locks.

Credit Lock

- **What is it?** Like a freeze, a credit lock limits access to your credit file so no one, including you, can open new accounts until you unlock your credit file.
- **How does it work?** Like a freeze, to be fully protected, you must place locks with all three credit reporting agencies. With locks, however, there's no PIN and usually no wait to lock or unlock your credit file (although the current Equifax lock can take 24 to 48 hours). You can lock and unlock on a computer or mobile device through an app – but not with a phone call.
- **How long does it last?** Locks last only as long as you have an ongoing lock agreement with each of the credit reporting agencies. In some cases, that means paying monthly fees to maintain your lock service.
- **How much does it cost?** Credit reporting agencies can set and change lock fees at any time. As of today, Equifax offers free locks as part of its free post-breach credit monitoring. Experian and TransUnion may charge monthly fees, often about \$20.
- **Is this for me?** Depending on your particular lock agreement, your fees and protections may change over time. So, if you sign up for a lock, it's hard to be sure what your legal protections will be if something goes wrong later. Also, monthly lock fees can quickly exceed the cost of freezes, especially if the lock fees increase over time.