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Christmas and Holiday Safety Advice

Christmas is a time to relax and have fun. Many of us will be out and about more than usual – Christmas shopping, attending parties and other social events – and the last thing we need is to become a victim of crime. To help avoid this, consider some of the following advice:

Personal Safety in the Parking Lot

- » Travel on busy, well-lit roads; and avoid driving alone at night. Park in well-lit and well-trafficked areas, as close as possible to store entrances. Avoid secluded and dark areas, where confrontations are less likely to be seen and cries for help may not be heard.
- » There is safety in numbers, so shop with friends and relatives instead of going alone. Make sure everyone maintains awareness and is not distracted by each other's company.
- » Lock your car and make sure the windows are closed. Be particularly aware of persons in the parking lot, especially those near your car. If there are loiterers, get a security guard for assistance.
- » Always try to walk to and from your vehicle with another person. If you are shopping alone, consider walking near other shoppers in the parking lot. Security guards at some malls will accompany you to your car.
- » Have your keys in your hand well before approaching your car. It will save time in getting into the car and the keys can be used as an improvised weapon if necessary. Lock the car door immediately after getting into your car.
- » If you have to wait for a ride, wait in a busy, well-lit area.

Personal Safety While Christmas and Holiday Shopping

- » Avoid carrying large amounts of cash. Carry only the credit cards and bank card you will need to make your purchases.
- » If your credit card is lost, stolen or misused, notify your credit card issuer at once. Keep a complete list of your credit cards at home, along with the 1-800 numbers you will need to report a lost or stolen card.
- » If you need to use an ATM while shopping, try to use one located inside a busy, well-lit location, and withdraw only the amount of cash you actually need. Also, protect your PIN number by shielding the ATM keypad from anyone who may be standing near you.

Christmas and Holiday Safety Advice (Con't)

- » Wallets and purses are the prime targets of criminals, even in crowded shopping areas. Jostling through crowded malls while carrying your jacket, juggling countless bags and keeping an eye on your children can make you an attractive target for criminals looking to grab wallets, purses and your purchases.
- » Pickpockets and other petty criminals are looking for easy scores. It's a good idea to carry cash, your identification and credit cards in your front pocket. Men should carry their wallet in the front pocket of their pants, rather than in a back pocket or in their jacket. Women should hold their purse in front of them and close to their body, with the opening facing toward them.
- » Stay alert and be aware of your surroundings at all times. It's easy to be distracted by the crowds while selecting the right gift. Criminals will be more likely to confront you if they think you are distracted. Maintain confident body language so criminals pass you over for a "softer" target.
- » If you have a cell phone, be sure to take it with you while shopping for added security.
- » Teach children to immediately go to a store clerk or security guard and ask for help if they become separated from you in a store or shopping mall.
- » Consolidate purchases into one or two large shopping bags so you can keep track of everything. Never leave your purchases unattended, even for a minute.
- » Inside a mall, avoid darkened hallways and other backroom areas, especially near closing time.
- » Avoid using washrooms that are tucked away in a back area of a mall concourse or department. If you can, find a washroom near the mall's food court or other well-trafficked area. Always accompany your child to the washroom.
- » If you are a victim of a crime, report it to the police immediately.

Christmas Shopping Online

During the Christmas season, many of us prefer to skip the long store lines and buy our gifts online instead. Saving time and money can be convenient, but you need to be careful to whom you give your credit card information. Whether you shop online frequently or only once in a while, caution is needed this Christmas season as you hunt for online bargains. When shopping online, make sure you are dealing with a reputable store. Some credit card issuers now provide you with the choice of creating a personalized, protected online transaction number for every online purchase you make, so the retailer never sees your card number.

- » **Don't shop using Wi-Fi.** When using Wi-Fi at a coffee shop, hotel, airport, or restaurant, you are making yourself more vulnerable to identity theft. Your iPhone, Blackberry, Smartphone and laptop can easily be hacked on a free or paid public Wi-Fi location.
- » **Use only one credit card for all your online purchases.** That way, if it is stolen you only have one company to deal with.

Christmas and Holiday Safety Advice (Con't)

- » **Make sure the Internet connection is secure.** Always look for the "https://" when you enter personal information. This means you are transmitting data within a secure site. Also, look for the picture of the unbroken key or closed lock in your browser window which indicates that the security is operative.
- » **Watch where you click.** A new crime wave has been occurring with Spoof sites – sites created using a similar web address and the look and feel of the real site. The fraudulent website captures your credit card information and then uses it to make multiple purchases. Watch for suspicious pop-ups, attachments from unknown sources, or strange web links. Remember that PayPal, Google and Yahoo always refer to you with the name you set up – never "Dear PayPal User" and they never ask you to send personal data via email.
- » **Never include your credit card information in an email.** Security protections do not work in emails.
- » **Get the latest web protection software on your laptop or PC.** Make sure your software has been updated as new viruses, spyware and other malicious software are propagated daily.
- » **Change your passwords regularly.** If you frequent a web site often, don't continue using the same password. Mix it up regularly. Use a combination of letters, numbers, and capital letters to make yourself less vulnerable to identity theft.
- » **Review the return, refund, and shipping and handling policies before placing your order.**

Home Safety During the Holidays

- » Don't put large displays of holiday gifts in view of your windows or doors.
- » Be extra cautious about locking doors and windows when you leave the house, even if you will only be gone for a minute.
- » When going on trips or out for the evening, use automatic timers to turn indoor lights on and off to make it appear that you are at home.
- » Don't advertise what you got for Christmas to criminals by putting big ticket item boxes out on trash day. Break the boxes down and cut them up into small pieces that fit into garbage and recycling bins.