**When Should You Monitor, Freeze, or Lock Your Credit?\***

In a world where all personal data is stored online in one location or another – data that’s valuable when it gets into the wrong hands – it’s important to know and understand the differences between monitoring, freezing, and locking your credit.

**Monitoring**

**The What:** A credit monitoring service is a commercial service that typically charges you a fee to watch your credit reports and alerts you to changes to the accounts listed on your credit report. Alerts are typically sent via email, text, or phone call. Before signing up for a service, make sure you understand what you’re getting, especially if the service is “free.” Check for any hidden fees or cancellation requirements. Banks, credit card companies, and other financial institutions often provide monitoring services to consumers who hold an open account with them; check with your agencies to see what services are available to you.

You can also self-monitor your credit. Consumers are allotted one free credit report annually from each of the three nationwide credit reporting companies, Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion.

**The Why:** If your information is compromised in a data breach or through identity theft, a credit monitoring service will alert you to any changes in your credit, allowing you to act against fraudulent activity. Self-monitoring will also allow you to see any unusual activity on your credit report, though only periodically.

**The How:** Signing up online at all three bureaus is easy. Costs are associated with some subscriptions.

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| --- | --- |
| Bureau | Website |
| Experian | [experian.com/credit/credit-monitoring](https://www.experian.com/credit/credit-monitoring) |
| Equifax | [equifax.com/personal/products/lock-and-monitor-credit/](https://www.equifax.com/personal/products/lock-and-monitor-credit/) |
| TransUnion | [transunion.com/credit-monitoring](http://www.transunion.com/credit-monitoring) |

Note that, for TransUnion, the subscription is their locking service; you will need to disable the lock feature if desired. They do not have a service solely for monitoring.

**Freezing**

**The What:** Also called a security freeze, this prevents prospective creditors from accessing your credit file, preventing yourself or others from opening accounts in your name. When your credit is frozen, any lender who asks to evaluate your report for purposes of issuing a loan or credit is denied access to the report. This is free and useful in preventing an identity thief from opening a new line of credit in your name. This does not affect your credit score.

Consumers can freeze and unfreeze their credit record for free at Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion at any time and leave it frozen for as long as desired. Each company must be contacted separately to do so. Additionally, freezes can be temporarily lifted at any time for any amount of time. Pursuant to federal law, you cannot be charged to place or lift a credit freeze on your credit report. Parents and guardians can also freeze credit reports for their minor children.

**The Why:** Credit freezes are designed to prevent credit, loans, and services from being approved in your name without your consent, protecting you from credit fraud without impacting your credit score. Perpetual freezes are useful as a consistent layer of protection from identity and credit fraud.

**The How:** Contact Experian ([experian.com/help/credit-freeze](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cscpe7232%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CMicrosoft%5CWindows%5CINetCache%5CContent.Outlook%5C9ICQLKRU%5Cexperian.com%5Chelp%5Ccredit-freeze)), TransUnion ([transunion.com/credit-freeze](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cscpe7232%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CMicrosoft%5CWindows%5CINetCache%5CContent.Outlook%5C9ICQLKRU%5Ctransunion.com%5Ccredit-freeze)), **and** Equifax ([equifax.com/personal/credit-report-services/credit-freeze](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cscpe7232%5CAppData%5CLocal%5CMicrosoft%5CWindows%5CINetCache%5CContent.Outlook%5C9ICQLKRU%5Cequifax.com%5Cpersonal%5Ccredit-report-services%5Ccredit-freeze)). You will need to provide proof of identity, including your full name, date of birth, all addresses you have held over the past two to five years, SSN, a copy of a government-issued ID, and a recent copy of a utility bill, bank statement, or insurance statement as proof of address.

**Locking**

**The What:** A credit lock lets you restrict and grant access to your credit reports in the same way a credit freeze does but typically comes with extra features. This does not affect your credit score. While each bureau’s subscription costs a monthly fee, the consumer gains additional benefits such as alerts to credit activity, more frequent credit score reports, dark web monitoring, and identity theft insurance coverage. Please be aware that Experian and Equifax provide locking at only that one bureau while TransUnion provides locking at all three. Consumers can see the full list of features provided at the links below.

**The Why:** Providing all the same benefits as freezing plus more, this is the most extensive level of protection a consumer can take to protect their credit and other personal information. Locking is easy to temporarily pause in the event you want to take out a legitimate line of credit or loan.

**The How:** Similarly to freezing, signing up for a credit lock online is easy.

* Experian: [experian.com/protection/identity-theft-and-credit-protection/](https://www.experian.com/protection/identity-theft-and-credit-protection/)
* Equifax: [equifax.com/personal/products/credit/monitoring-and-reports](https://www.equifax.com/personal/products/credit/monitoring-and-reports)
* TransUnion: [transunion.com/credit-monitoring](https://www.transunion.com/credit-monitoring)

Additionally, the identity theft program is available to full-time employees who are enrolled in Long-Term Disability (LTD) insurance with Madison National Life. Please note that not all employees have LTD coverage. More information can be found at [scottcountyiowa.gov/hr/benefits/long-term-disability](https://www.scottcountyiowa.gov/hr/benefits/long-term-disability), and LTD coverage can be verified by navigating to your [MyHR Portal](https://intranet.scottcountyiowa.gov/erp.php?page=myhr) > **My HR** along the menu tabs > **Benefits**.

**\***This is not financial or legal advice. The information provided herein is summarized education to Scott County staff and related financial literacy. Please conduct your own research or consult a professional for personalized guidance.

Sources: Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and Experian, accessed 3/7/2025.