

Online Safety for Older Adults: Socializing Safely Online

The internet has become an important tool for daily life—playing a critical role in connecting with others, exploring new information and places, and conducting business. This makes knowing how to use the internet safely essential. This fact sheet includes best practices for safely socializing online, whether you are connecting on social media or attending online events.



Social Media

Social media allows you to connect with others and create a network of people with whom you can interact using the internet. Over time, a lot of personal information can potentially be gathered from your social media posts. Do you post about family? Kids? Grandkids? Do you include their names? Although there is nothing wrong with sharing these details about your life online, you should keep in mind that this information could potentially be used by scammers. Being aware of how much information that someone with malicious intentions can learn about you online can help you protect yourself against scams.

Below are some steps you can take to ensure your safety on social media, while still enjoying all the benefits of online connections.



ACTION STEPS:

- Only post what you would be comfortable sharing on a public forum. Assume that anything you post on social media can be seen by the general public, regardless of your privacy settings.
- Periodically review your privacy settings to control who sees your posts and who can contact you on social media platforms. You do this in the Privacy section of the platform's settings.
- Make sure that only the people you know in real life can send you direct messages, also known as DMs. Depending on your privacy settings, you may receive message or friend requests from people you do not know. There is no reason to accept friend requests from


people you do not actually know. If you receive completely unsolicited message requests, you should not accept those. If you accidentally accept a message or friend request from someone and you realize the mistake, it is easy to block that person from contacting you again. You can visit the social media platform's help page to learn how to block someone.

➤ As a rule of thumb, the following should never be shared on social media:

- Your address or phone number,
- Your credit card number or other financial information and
- Your Social Security Number.

Navigating New Relationships

It is smart to use caution and look for signs of a scam when meeting new people online. Scammers play on your emotions by using tactics like fearmongering, flattery or sympathy.

 **ACTION STEPS:** When meeting new people online, consider the following:

- Check out their profiles. How long have they been on the platform? Do they post photos or information about their daily lives? If their account is new or if they give little to no information on their profile, use caution.
- Search before you friend or like someone. Conduct an online search to confirm their identity. (No online presence is a red flag.)
- Ask to video chat! Repeat excuses or claiming to have a broken camera could be red flags.
- Never agree to send money to or buy gift cards for anyone.
- Block and report anyone who you suspect of being a scammer. Social media and online dating platforms have conduct guidelines and ways to report users who break those guidelines.



Hosting Virtual Events

Video chat platforms like Zoom are a great way to stay connected with friends and family who are geographically far from you. If you are hosting a virtual event for your book club, condo association, family reunion or just a get-together, here are some best practices to keep in mind to avoid any uninvited guests crashing your virtual event.

- Require a passcode for participants.
- Enable the waiting room.
- Set audio options to “mute upon entry” and video settings to “on.” Muting large groups reduces confusion at the beginning, and encouraging the use of video makes for a more fun experience. Additionally, you can quickly see if someone you do not recognize joins the event.

Resources

For more information, visit the Senior Planet website (www.seniorplanet.org) or call the Senior Planet Hotline at (888) 713-3495.

When socializing online, it is important to be aware of potential scams and fraud. AARP provides a national helpline where you can report a possible scam or fraud and a map that tracks scams near you. The AARP website also offers education on common scams to be on the lookout for and tips on how to avoid fraud.

- AARP Fraud Watch Network Helpline: (877) 908-3360 or www.aarp.org/money/scams-fraud/helpline.html.
- AARP Scam-Tracking Map: www.aarp.org/money/scams-fraud/tracking-map.
- AARP Scams & Fraud: www.aarp.org/money/scams-fraud.
- AARP’s Top 14 Scams to Watch Out for in 2023: www.aarp.org/money/scams-fraud/info-2023/top-scammer-tactics-2023.html?intcmp=AE-FRDSC-MOR-R2-POS3.

The following resources provide more information on possible scams, including grandparent and sweetheart scams, and actions you can take if you suspect a scam.

- Eldercare Locator | Protect Your Pocketbook: <https://eldercare.acl.gov/Public/Resources/BROCHURES/docs/FinancialExploitationBrochure-508.pdf>.
- National Council on Aging | The Top 5 Financial Scams Targeting Older Adults: www.ncoa.org/article/top-5-financial-scams-targeting-older-adults.
- National Council on Aging | Sweetheart Scams: How to Avoid Being a Victim: www.ncoa.org/article/sweetheart-scams-how-to-avoid-being-a-victim.
- AARP | Grandparent Scams: www.aarp.org/money/scams-fraud/info-2019/grandparent.html.

For additional resources and support, contact the Eldercare Locator at (800) 677-1116 or eldercare.acl.gov.

Remember...

As with most of the things we do every day, there are risks associated with using the internet, but the benefits of enjoying online activities and connecting virtually outweigh the risks. Keeping in mind the tips and best practices presented in this fact sheet will help you explore and connect with others online safely and with confidence!

This fact sheet is part of a series of fact sheets on online safety for older adults. Visit www.engagingolderadults.org to learn about the other fact sheets in this series.



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