

# Online dating: Staying safe online

Online dating is a form of [online social networking](#). It can be a great way to meet new people, make new friends, and maybe even find that special connection.

Like any online social networkers, online daters run the risk of giving away too much personal information to people they don't really know.

The desire to make a personal connection may make online daters more vulnerable to risks such as:

- cyberstalking
- online identity theft and fraud
- malicious software (malware)
- reputation damage
- scams.

Specialised online dating sites generally require members to fill out a profile of personal information and have a search function for visitors to the site to find potential partners meeting their stated criteria.

Other online social networking sites increasingly allow members who are interested in a romantic connection or liaison to view and search other members' profiles.

The key to staying safe online is staying in control.

- Know what you're signing up for—always read the privacy policy and terms and conditions.
- Know what information you're revealing about yourself—most sites have information to help you restrict who can see your online activities.
- Make sure you control your profile, including controlling who is able to view, upload, change and delete your information.
- Get a friend to check who can see your profile and how much they can see.
- Don't leave your personal information lying around for others to use.

## Cyberstalking

Anyone may be able to use details posted to dating and social networking sites to obtain your geographical location or contact details.

**What to do:** Protect your physical safety.

- Think carefully about what information you post to a profile.

- Don't provide details such as your surname, employer, address, or email accounts that include your full name.
- Look carefully at photos you upload to make sure they don't reveal information that could easily be used to locate you, such as street signs or number plates.
- If you participate in a local sports team, list only the sport, rather than the name of the team or the location of games or matches.

## Online identity theft and fraud

Criminals can use personal details to steal your identity or scam money from you or your friends.

It's possible that not all potential matches will be interested in meeting you; some may just be trying to obtain enough information to pretend to be you and commit fraud.

**What to do:** Protect your identity online.

- Be careful how much you reveal in early emails and conversations, even after you meet in person.
- Pay attention to how much information you're posting to your profile.
- Think about the questions you're answering, and ask yourself if any of these could be used as security passwords to get into your online accounts.

## Malicious software (malware)

Criminals may email you links that upload viruses and spyware when you click on them. While it's easy to be cautious of links and emails from people you don't know, clever criminals often pretend to be someone you know and trust.

**What to do:** Protect your computer.

- Make sure anti-virus software and firewalls on your computer are up to date.
- Be suspicious of all links and attachments.
- If you have any doubts about the message, phone the sender and check.
- Don't click on links in emails, particularly if they're not from people you know well and trust.

## Reputation damage: Misuse of information

Information on the internet is permanent. Once photos or information are publicly available on dating or social networking sites, they can be used in ways you didn't intend.

**What to do:** Protect your reputation.

- Think about how you would feel if photos or information you upload are seen by people you know.
  - Make sure you control who can see your photos and personal details.
  - Read the terms and conditions BEFORE you sign up. It may sound simple, but many people sign up to sites without realising how their personal details or photos can be used without their consent.
  - Find out as much as you can about privacy settings. You may be happy for people who meet your criteria to view your details, but some sites may use your photo or profile for general advertising, or even pass on your details to a third party without your consent.
- Scams

Scams target everyone. Unfortunately, unscrupulous people will use online information to persuade you to give them money, or information so they can steal it.

**What to do:** Protect your money.

- Even simple conversations can be very revealing; think carefully before sharing any information online.
- Report suspicious behaviour to the site administrator.
- Keep track of what personal details you reveal.
- Monitor your online transactions and bank account balances.
- Never send money to someone you've only met online. For more information about common scams involving money visit [www.fido.gov.au](http://www.fido.gov.au) or [www.scamwatch.gov.au](http://www.scamwatch.gov.au).

## Mobile dating

Some online dating sites can also be accessed from your mobile phone. The same rules apply whether you are accessing your online dating site and friends from a computer or a mobile phone.

- Don't give out personal details such as surnames, phone numbers or address details, until you feel safe to do so. Even then, take some precautions such as using a new mobile number.
- Check to see if the site also provides a service that makes it easier for mobile phone-users to protect their anonymity.

- Think carefully before you send that romantic text or racy photo. Text messages can be stored and forwarded like email. Once you press 'send', it will be out of your control forever.

## More information

For more information about online social networking, see the ACMA's '[Social networking – staying safe online](#)' fact sheet

## Checklist

- ✓ Scammers can target online dating sites. Never provide financial details or forward money to someone you have met on an online dating site.
- ✓ Think carefully before giving contact details to people you meet online. Consider using a new mobile phone or other communication that doesn't reveal your full name and address.
- ✓ Don't display contact details that identify you, including email addresses, instant messaging user name, or mobile numbers, in your profile information.
- ✓ Be careful about giving access to other social networking sites such as Facebook, Bebo or Myspace to people you meet through online dating. Social networks can be a great way to share information with friends, but the details and photos on these sites can be used to steal your identity.
- ✓ Use established and reputable dating sites. Do your research before signing up, determine which sites offer what you're looking for and familiarise yourself with their privacy policies.
- ✓ Report offensive, harassing or undesirable content to the site administrator immediately.
- ✓ If you contact someone and wish to meet in person, arrange to meet in a public place and ensure someone else knows where you are going and that you are meeting someone new.

*Please note: This document is intended as a guide only and should not be relied on as legal advice or regarded as a substitute for legal advice in individual cases.*

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