May is Older Americans Month. Earlier this month, we discussed talking to old folks about their finances. This week, let’s take a different tack and think about protecting our elders from financial abuse at the hands of scammers.

Over the last few years, financial losses and complaints have gone up. The numbers are expected to increase as baby boomers age. The Federal Trade Commission noted almost 1.5 million complaints during the last year, an increase of 62 percent over the last three years. However, investigators believe these numbers are probably underreported since there is a certain amount of shame in being duped and little that can be done to recover the losses.

Let’s take a quick look at the types of scams that are currently out there.

**Medicare or insurance fraud.** The scammers pose as a Medicare representative and get personal information from individuals. They will then either bill Medicare for services not rendered and pocket the money or use the information to commit identity theft.

To stop this type of fraud, never give personal information to anyone if you haven’t initiated the phone call. If someone calls from your doctor’s office or Medicare, hang up and look the phone number up. Initiate the phone call yourself to see if the inquiry is legitimate.

**Prize or sweepstakes fraud.** Victims are called or emailed and told they have won a vacation or prize. However, to get the prize they have to pay a fee, postage and handling, or a tax before the winnings are distributed.
If you have won anything, you should never have to pay to get your prize. If you happen to be taken in by this scam, it is nearly impossible to get your money back.

**Merchandise.** I went to my mother’s house one day and found a box full of light bulbs for which she had paid $9 per bulb, 10 times more than the bulb were worth. The scammers had found an easy target by telling her that a portion of the money would go to support services for people with vision impairments. A generous person who was suffering from vision problems herself, she was a perfect mark. Whether it is light bulbs, stationary or gadgets of any type, many elders are prone to believe what they hear — sometimes to the detriment of their finances. And older folks are twice as likely to make a purchase over the telephone, which leaves them vulnerable to this type of scam.

Another similar situation happened a few years back in Florida. A group of scammers who claimed they were affiliated with federal agencies called people and warned them that in order to comply with new regulations and not ruin their septic tanks, they had to buy a certain type of toilet tissue. These scammers duped victims out of almost $1 million before they were closed down. In fact, several of the victims bought enough toilet tissue to last more than 70 years. Again, many older people are rule-followers and believe what they are told.

Money Smart for Older Adults is a workbook from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau that goes through many of the current scams and helps people learn how to protect themselves and their wallets. These materials are downloadable and are available at [http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201306_cfpb_msoa-participant-guide.pdf](http://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/201306_cfpb_msoa-participant-guide.pdf).

No matter what your age, there is a scammer out there who is trying to separate you from your money. If you do happen to fall for one of these scams, there is little you can do to get your money back. Be on your guard and don’t be taken in by scammers.

**Roxie Rodgers Dinstel is a professor of extension on the Tanana District Extension Faculty. Questions or column requests can be e-mailed to her at rrdinstel@alaska.edu or by calling 907-474-2426. The Cooperative Extension Service is part of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, working in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture.**

- 30 -