

WASHINGTON — Tax season is stressful enough, but now taxpayers increasingly have to deal with deception.

The Internal Revenue Service has issued yet another advisory warning people about telephone calls or emails from people pretending to be from the agency. The cons are typically an attempt to get you to send money or persuade you to give out personal details in an identity-theft scam.

Even an attorney for the Federal Trade Commission got such a call. In a blog post for the FTC, Lisa Weintraub Schifferle wrote that she received the following voice-mail message: "Hello. We have been trying to reach you. This call is officially a final notice from the IRS, Internal Revenue Service. The reason of this call is to inform you that IRS is filing a lawsuit against you."

These calls can be frightening, which is why people fall for them. In its annual list of "Dirty Dozen" tax scams, the IRS said threatening and aggressive phone calls by someone impersonating an IRS agent remain in the top spot. Callers often tell people they will be arrested, deported or subject to other legal actions if they don't send the money immediately.

The FTC, meanwhile, said tax-related identity theft was the most common form of fraud reported to the agency last year. The goal of the scammer typically is to get your Social Security number so he or she can file a fraudulent tax return to get a refund (one reason to file early). The

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FTC said it received 109,063 complaints last year about tax-identity theft.

It received 54,690 complaints about IRS impostor scams, up substantially from the 2,545 scams reported in 2013.

Coming in second on the IRS "Dirty Dozen" list are phishing scams sent by email. The goal of these messages, which can look very convincing, is to steal your personal information. Armed with that info, someone can get credit cards in your name or tap into your existing accounts.

I've instituted a rule to not believe any unsolicited communications from strangers. Caller ID can be manipulated to appear legit. So when I get a call, I tell the person that I'll independently find a number for the business or agency and call them right back. Almost every time, the person hangs up on me.

In the few other cases, he or she will try to give me a number. But I don't fall for that. I repeat that I'll look for the number myself.

I also don't click on any links in emails that I'm not expecting. I've gotten some convincing emails that appeared to be from my company's IT department. They came around the time we were going through some upgrades. Still, I checked on the authenticity by forwarding them to IT.

Here are some things the IRS says to keep in mind to help avoid being a victim of tax scams:

■ The IRS will not initiate contact with you by phone or email to ask for your personal or financial information. The government loves a paper trail. The IRS will write to you first. If you are unsure about a tax bill, call the IRS at 800-829-1040. You may have to wait on hold for a while, but it's better than getting conned.

■ The IRS will not give you an ultimatum to pay up

immediately. You will get a bill. The agency won't call to congratulate you for getting a refund, another twist on the scam.

■ The IRS will not dictate how you pay your bill by requiring, for example, that you send a prepaid debit card.

You can help stem this crime by forwarding any suspicious email to phishing@irs.gov. Contact the Treasury inspector general for tax administration. Go to <http://www.treasury.gov/tigta>. Click on the link on the homepage for "IRS Impersonation Scam." Also report any suspected scams to the FTC. Go to ftc.gov and click on the link that says "Consumer Complaint?" Yes, the IRS can be aggressive in its collection methods, but don't let anyone scare you. The agency isn't going to threaten to send the police to your house.

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