With face-to-face dating, you get to know the person.

Online, it's not so easy.

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NEIGHBOURHOOD WATCH

Online dating scams have increased during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Make sure you keep yours safe.

Online dating has become a very popular way to meet someone new, whether you're looking for love, companionship or just a bit of fun. Millions of people around the world have turned to the internet because of the choice and convenience it offers.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, even more people are dating online, some to combat lonliness, others following a change in personal circumstances.

Whilst the internet has come to many people's rescue, we've also witnessed a substantial increase in romance fraud, where someone you meet online actually turns out to be a scammer, either working alone or part of an organised cybercrime syndicate. Other people have fallen victim to catfishing and other online harms. To the victim, the results range from often substantial financial losses, to major, sometimes life-changing trauma.

Most suitors are genuine, but you can never really tell who you're talking to when it's not face-to-face.

For comprehensive, practical, impartial advice on safe online dating, visit getsafeonline.org, choose 'Protecting Yourself' then 'Safe Online Dating'
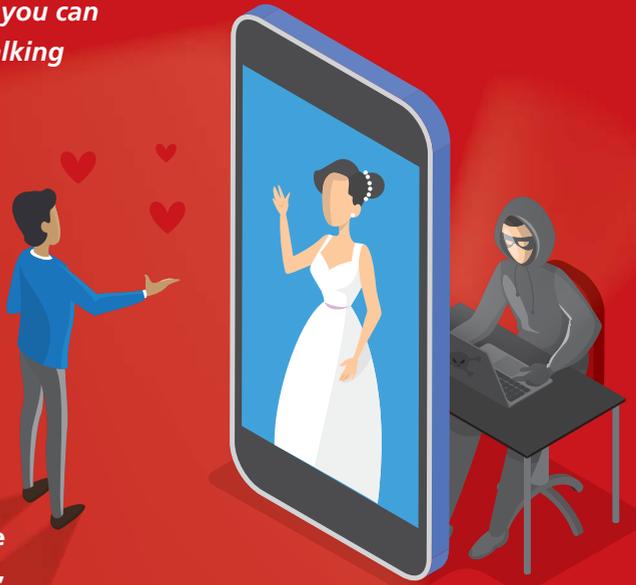
#datesafe

Our experts have put together a set of tips to help you protect yourself, your finances, your identity and your personal safety, so that you can date online with safety and confidence.

- **Choose a reputable dating service** and always keep the conversation on the website or app's messaging service until you're confident the person is who they say they are, and that their motives are honourable.

- Check that the person who has shown an interest in you is **genuine**. Enter their name, profile pictures and any repeatedly used phrases and the term 'dating scam', 'romance scam' or 'catfish' into your search engine. Do a reverse image search to see if the photo is actually of somebody else.

- **Get to know the person, not the profile**. Ask as many questions as you think necessary, don't let your heart rule your head or rush into anything. This may also help you avoid becoming a victim of a false relationship where you're simply being used for sex.

- **Never send money**, your bank details or other passwords to someone you've met online, no matter how convincing they seem, nor how long you've been speaking to them. Banks will try to track and recover your payment, but aren't responsible for your losses if the request is fraudulent.

- **Don't overshare personal details**. Revealing your full name, date of birth, home address or workplace could lead to fraud, identity theft or even personal harm. Protect the names, details and locations of your children and family members.

- Be wary about sending **intimate images or videos** of yourself to someone you've met online. This could lead to problems later on, and you can never be sure who will get to view the content.

- Be wary of anyone you meet online who tells you not to mention them to your friends and family. **Fraudsters and sexual predators work by isolating their victims.**

- **Exercise digital responsibly:** don't use dating services to ask for money, promote products, encourage illegal or irresponsible behaviour, spread ideologies or carry out recruitment of any kind.

- Be aware that reported crimes for **stalking or harassment** on social media and dating apps have increased substantially. Spot the signs and block the perpetrator.

- Before meeting someone in person for the first time (COVID-19 restrictions permitting), **tell a friend or family member that you're meeting, and where**. Keep your mobile phone switched on, and think about arranging for someone to call you during the date to give you the opportunity to make your excuses and leave early.

- If you become a victim of romance or any other fraud, don't be embarrassed but report it immediately to Action Fraud on **www.actionfraud.police.uk** or on **0300 123 2040** (if you're in Scotland, **Police Scotland on 101**). Also, report it to the dating site where you met the perpetrator. Report any assaults to the police.

Get Safe Online

Get Safe Online is the UK's leading source of information and advice on online safety and security, for the public and small businesses. It is a not-for-profit, public/private sector partnership backed by law enforcement agencies and leading organisations in internet security, banking and retail.

For more information and expert, easy-to-follow, impartial advice on safeguarding yourself, your family, finances, devices and workplace, visit **www.getsafeonline.org**

If you think you've been a victim of online fraud, report it to Action Fraud, the UK's national fraud and cybercrime reporting centre on 0300 123 20 40 or at www.actionfraud.police.uk

In Scotland, report fraud to Police Scotland by calling 101.

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