



With Valentine's Day approaching, many of our thoughts may be turning to romance. Many scammers, however, are out to steal your money, not your heart. Thousands of internet users fall victim to online romance scams each year. In a recent survey, romance scams ranked #1 in total reported losses. These scams can be incredibly convincing and are increasingly found on dating websites and social media platforms.

By appealing to a victim's emotions and feigning personal connections, scammers try to steal large sums of money and personal information. Once these fraudsters have people by the heartstrings, they say they need money, often for a medical emergency or some other misfortune. They often claim to be in the military and stationed abroad, which explains why they can't meet in person. Pretending to need help with travel costs for a long-awaited visit is another common ruse.

What can singles do to play it safe while dating online? Here are some tips to help you spot a bogus suitor:

- Look out for someone who professes love quickly.
- Never send money or gifts to a potential suitor you haven't met in person.
- Talk to someone you trust about this new love interest. The excitement about what feels like a new relationship, can blind you to things that don't add up. Pay attention if your friends or family are concerned.
- Take it slowly. Ask questions and look for inconsistent answers. Try a reverse-image search of the profile pictures. If they're associated with another name or with details that don't match up, it's a scam.
- Help stop these scammers by reporting suspicious profiles or messages to the dating or social media site.
- Report the scam to the FTC at [reportfraud.ftc.gov](https://www.ftc.gov/identity-theft/identity-theft-report)

Contact the Howard County Office of Consumer Protection at 410-313-6420 or consumer@howardcountymd.gov for more information on how to protect yourself from scams and how to stay safe in the marketplace.