

Your Important Papers: What to Keep and Where

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This guide offers a personalized and efficient system for preserving and safeguarding important family papers. Also provides a handy reference for deciding what items to keep.

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THE BEGINNING OF EACH NEW STAGE OR CHANGE

in your life calls for a fresh look at the types of records and papers you should be keeping. If you have recently married, divorced, had a baby, bought a house, are attending college or are recently widowed, now is the time to update your important papers. New roles and responsibilities call for new ways of keeping personal records.

Households should be viewed as mini-businesses since many of the functions of planning, purchasing and record keeping are the same as they are for any other type of business, large or small. Keeping financial records are a vital part of your life. They are a key to your credit standing, essential to help you save money on taxes, and provide a continuing indication of your financial progress.

A systematic plan for keeping track of important papers which come into your home can save hours of anxious searching, can help preserve peace and harmony and make it easier to cope with emergency situations.

Record-keeping, however, is more than merely a matter of neatness and order. Legal and safety factors enter in as well. Some records and papers can be kept in a home file for ready access, while others should be left with your attorney or placed in a safe-deposit box or in a fireproof, waterproof, and burglar-proof home safe. A good rule to follow is to keep the item at home unless it is a legal document that is difficult to replace or duplicate. In that case it should be kept in a safe-deposit box or left with your attorney.

Plan and evaluate the need for storage of all papers to determine which ones should be discarded and which ones should be stored and where. Make your decisions and file each paper accordingly. Do not just stack papers and plan to return to them later. This is the way papers become lost and cause you to waste valuable time in searching for or replacing them.

Home Filing System

A home filing system with space for the important documents is the key to managing the mass of family papers. Items to be kept at home do not call for fancy filing cabinets or for special "offices." A "business corner" can be set up in any room in the house. A cardboard drawer or metal box can serve adequately for storage of bills and family papers. Filing systems must be set up to meet your needs. Detailed files may not be necessary at the present time. But remember, every type of important paper should be assigned a certain space and kept there until needed.

The following guide to record-keeping will help you work out a personalized and efficient system for preserving and safeguarding important family papers. Moreover, it will provide a handy reference for deciding what items to keep, why you need to keep them, where they should be kept and how long to keep them.

If you are new to filing your papers, get organized by creating files in advance. Make a folder for every section listed in this publication. When the time arises to add the information or paper work, you are more likely to file the information rather than add it to a pile of papers. If your family travels frequently or has critical medical needs, prepare a file for each family member for doctor's records, past dental records, shot records, etc. for quick reference and travel purposes.

You will note that duplicate copies of many family papers should be kept at home for immediate reference. Important reasons for storing some family papers at certain locations are explained beside each category. However, you must make the final decision about where you will store your documents. Remember that these are your records and you must make the ultimate decision of what is best for you and your family. There may be areas where you need to be more detailed or less detailed depending on your stage in life.

Permanent and Semi-Permanent Records

Many records should be kept for long periods of time. Before you decide to toss any out, look them over carefully to see if any are permanent or semi-permanent records. Keep these types of records in a safe deposit box or a fireproof, waterproof, burglar-proof home safe—with a list of the contents of the box in your home file. Due to the danger of identity theft consider destroying any documents you decide that are out-dated and should be discarded. Important data is also important to destroy: name, address, Social Security Number, debit/credit card numbers. Go through credit card offers and detach your personal information.

If your identity is stolen, contact the State of Montana Office of Consumer Protection, (406) 444-4500 or (800) 481-6896. They will provide you with steps on how to recover from identity theft.

ITEM TO KEEP	REASON FOR KEEPING	HOW LONG TO KEEP
FAMILY RECORDS (Keep a copy of an inventory of important family records also in the home file.)		
Baptismal and confirmation records	Acceptable evidence of birth date when obtaining a delayed birth certificate; proof of church membership	Indefinitely
Copyrights and patents	Proof of ownership rights	Indefinitely
Insurance policies: List of policy numbers, name of each insured, beneficiary, company, agent	Reference for kinds and amounts of coverage; provides record of payments and premiums and location of policy; provides record of claims	Until collected or expires; until all claims settled; duplicate copies of policies can be obtained from your insurance company
Passport	Identification required for international travel, even to Canada as of January 2008.	Retain expired passport to satisfy application requirements for a new one, then discard/destroy
Wills (copy)	Reference; essential for settlement of estate	Keep original indefinitely in safe deposit box or with attorney or Clerk of District Court
Immunization records	Review to prevent unnecessary duplication of shots	Update as necessary

ITEM TO KEEP	REASON FOR KEEPING	HOW LONG TO KEEP
PROPERTY RECORDS		
Abstract for real estate	To prove clear title	Until property is sold
Automobile title and bill of sale	Proof of ownership	Until vehicle is sold
Burial lot deed—note number of plots	Proof of ownership	Indefinitely
Deeds and mortgages; title policy; property insurance policy; mortgage; receipts for payments on mortgage. Record day, month, and year you acquire or sell property; gross sale price; depreciation; legal fees and expense of sale	For income tax and estate tax purposes; keep records of improvements to compute capital gains or losses	Until property is sold to prove your home's adjusted basis
Household inventory: Appraisals, photos/videos of valuables	Insurance claims	Updated annually. Dispose of when property is no longer owned
Property easements	Proof of use rights	Until property is sold
FINANCIAL RECORDS		
Contracts, notes, debts: Promissory notes, mortgages, liens, installment contracts	Evidence of collectible or payable debts; status for estate settlement	Until estate is settled
Household inventory: including clothing with warranties: Description of article, date purchased, and purchase price	For insurance settlement	Keep up-to-date as you dispose of or add new items
Investment certificates: Stocks, bonds, mutual funds, CDs, real estate	Proof of purchase	After redemption amount received and taxes are settled on gain or loss
LEGAL RECORDS		
Birth certificate (certified copy or original)	Proof of birth	Indefinitely
Death certificates	Proof of death for Social Security benefits and estate settlement	Until benefits are secured and estate settled; note cause of death for family health history
Marriage records/settlement order	For proof of marriage to collect insurance, Social Security or retirement benefits/divorce settlement, and veteran's federal benefit pension compensations; to settle estate	Until all claims are settled, benefits are received, and estate is settled

ITEM TO KEEP	REASON FOR KEEPING	HOW LONG TO KEEP
LEGAL RECORDS (continued)		
Divorce decree	To clear legal requirements for remarriage	Indefinitely
Adoption papers	To prove ages to start to school; for obtaining birth certificates for some jobs; to obtain driver's license; for marriage license; for registering to vote; to qualify for Social Security benefits; to obtain passports; to determine estate heirs	Indefinitely
Military service: Service record; summary of benefits	To qualify for retirement, insurance, medical, education, burial and other benefits	Recommend that county or city clerk create additional official record of discharge certificates
Citizenship and naturalization papers	To obtain certain types of jobs; to obtain passport; prove eligibility to vote	Indefinitely

Records to keep at home

FAMILY RECORDS

Education records/diplomas	Proof of attendance and degrees	Indefinitely
Employment records	To determine retirement benefits or if there is a worker's compensation claim	Keep last official announcement earned benefits; keep record until all worker's compensation claims are settled; keep beyond retirement in case you decide to re-enter the workforce
Insurance policies: Automobile; personal liability; homeowner's or renters; life; health; disability	Reference for details of coverage	Until property is sold or policy expires and until all claims are settled. Review annually.
Licenses to practice (copy)	To verify credentials	Usually displayed; replace with most recent verification; keep copy in a safe place
Family advisers: Names, addresses, telephone numbers, and email addresses	Ready reference when need (medical, legal, etc.) arises	Update when changes are made
Medical history: Immunizations, operations, illness, medications, etc.	Reference	Indefinitely on all family members; update often
Funeral plan documents	Reference	Indefinitely; update as needed
Record of Important Papers	Reference	Indefinitely; update as needed
Subscriptions & buying clubs: Titles with order & renewal dates; membership details	Reference	Until subscription expires; handle complaints or cancellations

ITEM TO KEEP	REASON FOR KEEPING	HOW LONG TO KEEP
FAMILY RECORDS (continued)		
Organizational memberships	Reference	Until membership is dropped
Keys (labeled) to safe-deposit box, car, house, home safe; safe combination	Access as needed	Until property is sold or safe-deposit box is relinquished
PROPERTY RECORDS		
Automobile: Certificate of title and bills of sale	Essential for transfer to new owner when car is sold	Until car is sold or disposed of
Guarantees and warranties	For proof of date of purchase; to determine service and parts guaranteed	Until no longer valid
Household inventories: Record item, cost and date of purchase or sale; take digital photographs of rooms and items	For insurance claims to establish values; net worth statements. Pictures of items are helpful when making claims.	Keep list up-to-date as you dispose of or add household items; make a copy also for safe-deposit box
Appliance and other manuals	For reference on use and care/repair, warranties, guarantees	Until sold or discarded
Pets: Pedigree; health and license records	Identification	Until pet dies or someone else becomes owner
FINANCIAL RECORDS		
Account books: Goals, spending plan, record of income and expenditures	For reference and comparison; used to determine net worth and make changes in income and spending patterns	Personal choice. Shows profit or loss over multiple years
Checking accounts: Number, location, and canceled checks or photocopy pages of checks; electronic transfer card (EFT)	List all account numbers with addresses, phone numbers; save checks needed for income tax deductions and proof of important payments	Minimum of at least six years of checks
Credit and debit card information: Names, addresses and phone numbers of issuing companies; card numbers; photo copy front and back of all cards.	Purchase of items on credit; use of card and payment of balances due can give you a good credit rating	If card is not in current use, cancel by writing to company; if lost or stolen, notify company immediately by phone
Housing records: Improvement receipts, lease/rental agreement copies, utility deposit receipts, mortgage payments, property tax records	Compute capital gains/losses; income tax basis in residential replacements	Keep records until property is sold, which is typically three years after the due date for filing your return for the tax year in which you sold your home
Receipts and receipted bills	Proof of payment. For charge accounts— if they are tax deductible; proof of value on insurance claims.	Keep credit card receipts until bill is paid; keep larger item receipts while items are in your possession
Safe-deposit box inventory	Information for family members	Revise list annually

ITEM TO KEEP	REASON FOR KEEPING	HOW LONG TO KEEP
FINANCIAL RECORDS (continued)		
Financial institution monthly statements and/or savings pass books	Reference for completed transactions: Deposits and withdrawals	Keep account locations and numbers in safe-deposit box; minimum of a year
Income tax returns: Federal and state (if applicable) returns with substantiating records	Verification of taxes paid	Three years minimum for possible IRS audit; six years if 25% of gross income omitted; unlimited if you file a fraudulent return.
Investments: Copies of mutual funds, stocks, bonds, real estate, CDs, etc.	Statement of earnings and transactions as reference information	Keep initial and current investment quarterly statements
Retirement records: Employee pensions, annuities, Keoghs and IRAs	For reference; proof of employer-employee contributions, payments and benefits received or payable	Until fund is exhausted
LEGAL RECORDS		
Living will (original with additional copies made)	For reference specifying your end-of-life care; instructions to your doctor and other health care providers (i.e., hospital, nursing facility, hospice, or home health agency; instructions for close family members)	Keep a list of where copies are distributed to be able to provide most recent copy if changes are made; Store in Montana End-of-Life Registry. Information about this site at www.montana.edu/wwwpb/pubs/mt200602.pdf
Will and/or trust (copies). Separate listing of tangible personal property; letter of last instruction	Unsigned copy for home reference	Update copy if will or trust is changed
Durable Power of Attorney: Specify the extent of power delegated to one or more persons: and for financial decisions	Gives others the power to make business decisions when you are no longer able to make decisions on your own	Replace with latest version if changes are made
Durable Power of Attorney for health care	Gives others the power to make health care decisions when you are no longer able to make decisions on your own	Keep until updated
Personal Representative and guardian and conservator appointments	For official notification of agent to settle estate and provide care of children and their finances under legal age	Until official duties are completed
Social Security card	Needed to apply for benefits; identification number needed on many types of applications and records	Indefinitely, do not carry in your wallet/purse because your identity could be stolen with your wallet/purse

Papers to carry with you

Make a list of these for your home file.

ITEM TO CARRY	REASON FOR CARRYING
Credit and/or electronic banking cards	To pay for or charge purchases; to make other transactions
Driver's license	Identification and evidence of legal eligibility to drive
Auto insurance card	To identify issuer in case of accident
Donor card	To donate body organs and to donate body to medical school or training program for use in medical education or research
Medical information: Blood type, allergies, diseases (such as diabetes, heart disease, epilepsy)	Emergency treatment. Place note in household files for ready reference in case of loss
Health insurance card (Medicare and/or other)	Identification to use at Doctor's Office and/or during hospital admittance
Personal identification: Name, address, and phone for yourself and friend or relative contact	Identification, especially in case of emergency
Doctor preferred	Notification in case of emergency
Organization membership cards	Identification, proof of membership, discounts on services such as car rental.

Grab-n-Go Emergency Bucket, Box, or Backpack

As an emergency can arise quickly and there is not time before one is ordered to evacuate, a family can put together a "Grab-n-Go" Emergency Bucket or Tote/Backpack. This emergency pack can contain copies of important papers to quickly take without thinking: Credit & banking information, driver's license, birth certificates, insurance information including auto, health, medical, and home, any important medical information such as medication and immunization records, household inventory list, extra set of keys to auto, home, safety deposit box or safe, and enough cash to purchase fuel for vehicle, food, and lodging for several days.



<http://www.montana.edu/wwwpb/pubs/mt199611HR.pdf>

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