

PARKING LOT SAFETY

Your walking to your car after hours of shopping. It's dark, you're tired, you're absorbed in missed texts on your phone. To thieves you're the perfect victim — unaware, alone and toting new purchases.

According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, more than 1 in 10 property crimes occur in parking lots or parking garages, but you don't need to be the victim of one.

"It all comes down to heightened awareness," says Jack Richter, an officer with the Los Angeles Police Department. "Be aware of where you are, your surroundings and who's around you. Trust your gut to know when an area doesn't look or feel safe."

To protect yourself — and your car — keep these safety tips in mind when you leave your car in a parking lot or garage.

Be prepared

Shop during daylight hours when possible. Obviously, it's easier for thieves to strike under cover of darkness. Fewer people shop at night too, which ups the odds that you'll be alone in the parking lot or garage.

Plan to rely on your debit or credit card for purchases; don't carry lots of cash. Leave flashy jewelry, your expensive handbag and other high-end accessories at home. "If you dress like someone who has a lot of money, it's an advertisement that you're a potential victim," says Richter.

Park, lock and more

If it's an option, park in a lot with an attendant. Thieves aren't as likely to lurk where someone's on watch.

Park as near to entrance as you can. The closer you are, the less time you'll have to spend walking through the lot or garage. Choose a well-lit spot. Parking in a dark corner is asking for trouble. Note where you're parked. Write it down if you have to or take a quick photo of the section or row number. You don't want to be wandering around looking for your car when it's time to leave.

Don't assume that locking your car is enough to keep it safe. Make what's inside look as unappealing as possible. Don't leave tempting items visible in the front or back seat.

Stash packages, purses, briefcases, cameras, your GPS and other valuables out of sight — under seats if they'll truly be hidden or locked in the trunk. If the only thing between your laptop and an experienced crook is a locked car door, chances are he won't be deterred.

The same goes for garage door openers, warns Richter. A garage door opener can give a criminal who manages to get into your car access to your home as well. All it would take is finding your address on your car's registration. Don't even leave evidence that you have a garage door opener or GPS in your car. "A lot of criminals look for the suction cup mark on the front of a dash," Richter adds.

Heads up!

As you're heading back to your car, have your keys out so you don't have to search through your purse or pockets. You can also use your key as a weapon. Carrying pepper spray on your keychain is a good idea as well. Be sure to check the rules in your state if you do decide to carry some — certain states have restrictions on where and by whom it can be used.

Be alert. This isn't a good time to be caught up in texting or checking email, for example. Keep your phone handy, though, in case you need it to call for help.

As you near your parking spot, check out the vehicles close to it. If someone is just sitting in the car beside yours or it has extra tinted windows — or if anything looks fishy — turn around and go back inside. Find a store or mall security guard to escort you to your car.

When you reach your car, get in, lock up and get out. Don't spend time arranging packages in your trunk or fiddling with the radio station.