



TECH 05/22/2015 10:00 am ET | Updated Dec 06, 2017

Your Password Security Questions Are Terrible, And They're Not Fooling Anyone



By Damon Beres

You're probably used to setting up security questions whenever you register an account on a new website. They're supposed to help confirm your identity in the event that you forget your password, but a new study from Google says that they have a number of major shortcomings.

The main problem is that they're either easy to remember or "somewhat secure," but usually not both. That's according to a [blog post](#) written by Elie Bursztein, Google's anti-abuse research lead, and Ilan Caron, a software engineer. If security questions are easy to remember, they're probably easy for an impostor to guess; but if they're too complicated, the person who created them won't be able to remember them.

According to Google's research, which was based on "hundreds of millions of secret answers and millions of account recovery claims," 40 percent of English-speaking people in the United States couldn't recall the answers to their secret questions when they needed them. The numbers were actually much worse for the "safest" questions, the ones that would be hardest for an impostor to guess. "What is your frequent flier



Your Password Security Questions Are Terrible, And The...

250



Meanwhile, simple questions were easy for attackers to bypass. For example, hackers have a 19.7 percent chance of cracking “What is your favorite food?” for English-speaking users. Google helpfully notes that the answer is often “pizza.”

Worse, the [full study](#) notes that a lot of services use questions with “trivially small” pools of potential answers. (For example, “What is your favorite superhero?”) If individuals are able to make up their own security question, the majority tend to create something that’s very easy to guess, also.

And as you might anticipate, a pretty high number of password security questions have answers that are publicly available on social media — about 16 percent in all, according to Google.

As part of the study, Google ran surveys to gauge individuals’ perceptions of security. Almost 63 percent said they “never considered the possibility that their security question could be used against them,” the study states, which might help explain the weak-sauce answers.

So what’s to be done? Google suggests two-factor authentication as a safer way to confirm a user’s identity. If you have the option to get access codes sent to your phone or backup email when registering for a site, you should certainly do so.

Otherwise, you’ll want to think long and hard about the security questions you’re presented with and your possible answers. [Lifehacker](#) once pointed to [a blog post](#) that has a few good pointers:

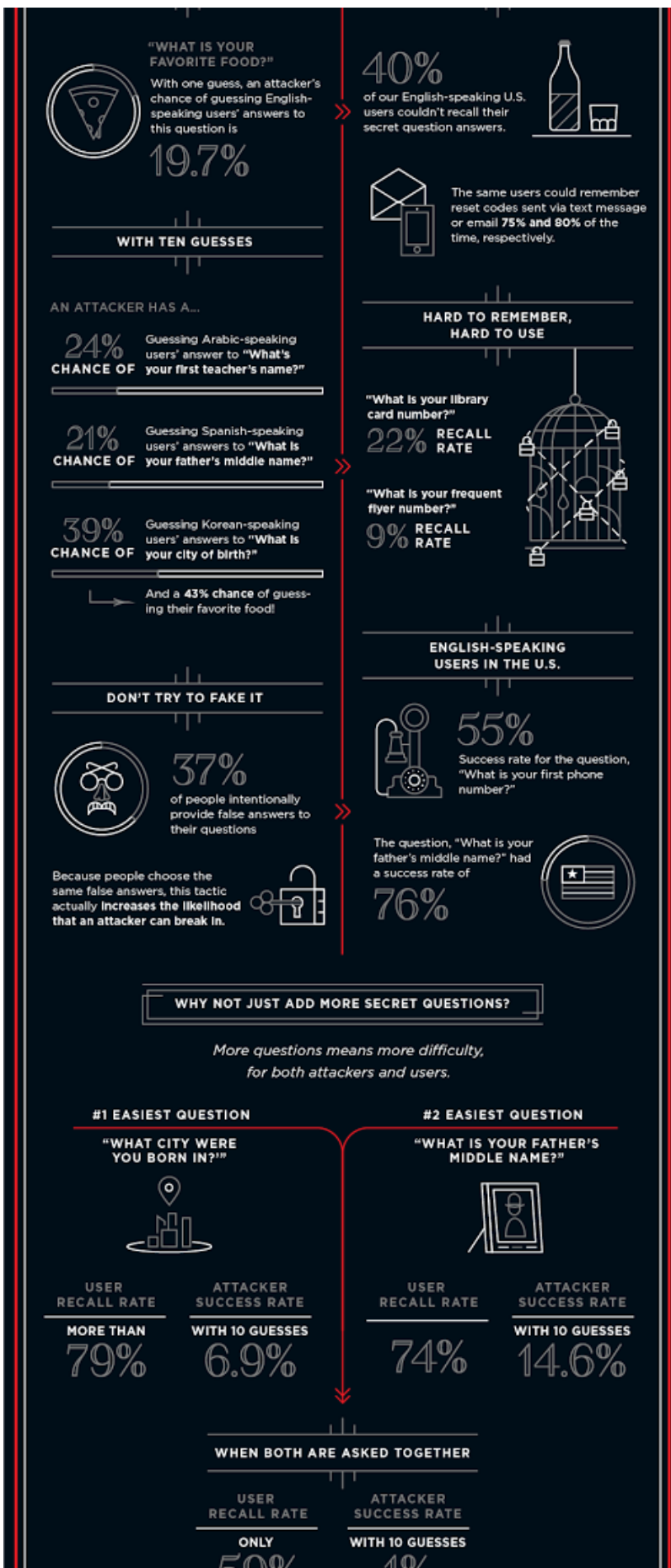
A good security question will have the following characteristics:

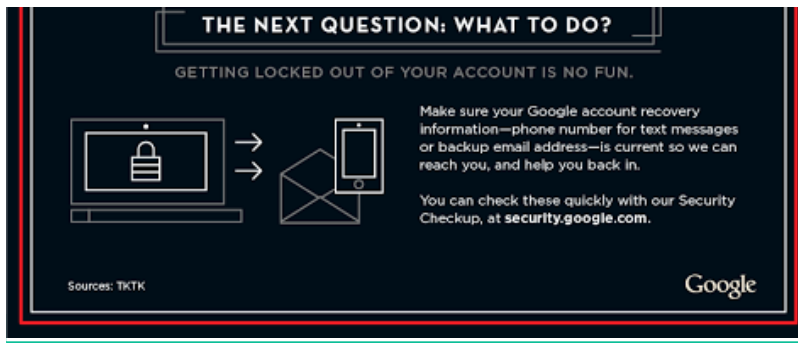
- 1. Easy to remember, even 5 or 10 yrs from now*
- 2. At least thousands of possible answers*
- 3. Not a question you would answer on facebook, myspace, in a “Fun Questions to Ask” survey, or in a article or interview*
- 4. Simple one or two word answer*
- 5. Never changes*

Those seem like good solutions to the problems Google outlined.

For more information on security questions, check out this infographic:







Damon Beres

Tech Editor, The Huffington Post

[Suggest a correction](#)

MORE:

- Google
- Google Study
- Password Security
- Security Questions
- Password Security Questions

MOST SHARED

The Government Shutdown Is Not Shutting Down Robert Mueller's Russia Probe

This Is What The Future Of Legal Weed Looks Like

Overheated 'Doc' Gushes About Trump's Rockin' Bod On 'Saturday Night Live'

Paul Ryan Collected \$500,000 In Koch Contributions Days After House Passed Tax Law

WHAT'S HOT

Mick Mulvaney, Supporter Of 2013 Government Shutdown, Blames Obama For That One

Nevertheless, She Persisted: A Year After The First Women's March, Energy Is Still High

Paul Ryan Declines To Say If He'll Run For Another Term In Congress

Trump Tweeted Support For The Women's Marches. It Backfired.



House Ethics Committee Drops Republican Over Taxpayer-Funded Harassment Settlement

Neo-Nazis Say They'll Protest A Women's March In Tennessee



[ABOUT US](#)

[RSS](#)

[User Agreement](#)

[ADVERTISE](#)

[FAQ](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[About Our Ads](#)

[Careers](#)

[Comment Policy](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Archive](#)



©2018 Oath Inc. All rights reserved. HuffPost Impact