Quick Response or "QR" codes, those small squares containing a matrix of dots and boxes, seem to be popping up almost as frequently as road construction signs in the spring. QR codes are a convenient way to direct people to websites. Like so many other things intended to make life easier and more convenient, criminals have found QR codes an area ripe for their illegal craft.

QR codes are easy to make and a great tool when used for legitimate purposes. Need to pay your bill? Scan this QR code. Want to see our menu? Scan this QR code. Would you like to find more information about our product? Scan this QR code. When a QR code is scanned, the scanning device translates the matrix of dots and boxes into a web address and allows the phone to access this web address with the press of a button. Even though they look very different, QR codes are essentially a hyperlink IRL (in real life) serving the same purpose as a hyperlink in an email, website, or text message.

Just as with malicious hyperlinks, a criminal using a QR code will seek to send victims to a phishing site to steal private information or direct a victim to a malicious website that downloads a virus onto the victim's device. Being skeptical of QR codes is the key to keeping yourself safe from a scam. Avoid QR codes that are out of place or unexpected. As an example, a new scam has emerged where a criminal sends an unexpected package to the victim's residence. Inside the unexpected package is a small value item and a printed QR code that links to a malicious website. The criminal is hoping the victim will scan the QR code to determine where the package came from or where it should go. If the QR code seems out of place or unexpected, don't scan it. Other criminals are pasting their malicious QR codes over legitimate QR codes found in the public. The QR code you think will bring you to a restaurant menu or the payment site for a city parking meter could have been compromised by a criminal and replaced with a QR link to a malicious website. Before scanning a QR code, take a close look for any signs that a new code has been added over an existing code. This is a warning sign.

Once you're reasonably certain the QR code is for a legitimate link and safe to scan, look at the web address linked by the QR code. The web address should display on your phone with a confirmation message after you scan the QR code. Does the web address appear to be where you'd expect to be routed? Is there an "https" at the start of the address? Is website asking your permission to install something? If the website isn't taking you to a secure website that matches your expectations or asking to install or control something, don't complete the link. You are the first line of defense against these malicious sites. Pay attention to what the QR code or linked website is asking you to do and if you're not 100% comfortable, leave the site immediately. If you do continue to the website and notice things like grammar errors or an incorrect logo on a "payment" site, leave the site immediately.

Your last line of defense lies in your phone's settings and operating systems. The iPhone IOS operating system does an excellent job of preventing malicious website from automatically downloading malware. If you have an iPhone, be sure to keep your IOS up to date to ensure you have full protection. Android users can achieve some protection from these malicious downloads as well. Android operating systems allow users to prevent downloads from unknown sources. How you enable this settings will depend upon which Android phone you have and which operating system is on your phone. A search for "block download from unknown sources" along with your phone model should get you the directions you need to ensure you are protected from these malicious downloads.

Trust, but verify. A good policy for both relations with foreign countries and QR codes. For more crime prevention information and safety information visit the Benton County Sheriff's Office website at:

https://www.co.benton.mn.us/211/Crime-Prevention. You can also like and follow us on Facebook and Twitter at @BentonMNSheriff for regular updates and crime prevention messages.