

Computer Tech Talk

Spyware and Viruses

By Dennis Henson

What's the Problem? Your personal computer (PC) that is less than one year old is very slow, it just doesn't perform like it did the day you took it out of the box, or you get "pop-ups" all over the screen every time you get on the internet? Welcome to the world of computer spyware and viruses. These threats are very common and affect most every computer at some point in its life. Before I get too far along, let me acknowledge that most of the information in this article comes from on-line articles written by Microsoft (www.microsoft.com).

What is Spyware? Spyware is a term used for computer software that advertises, collects personal information, or changes the configuration of your PC, etc, generally without your consent. At last count there are around 38,000 identified pieces of spyware out there. You might have spyware if: you are invaded by pop-ups even when you are not on the web, your homepage settings have been changed, you have a new browser toolbar you did not want or your computer is slower than it should be. Often spyware hides in the background stealing your computer resources without letting you know it's there. There is usually NO uninstall menu and no listing in the Add/Remove programs applet of the control panel. A common path for spyware to get onto your PC is to covertly install the software during the installation of other software you want, such as a music sharing program, or cute characters for your email. Spyware is fairly easy to remove from most PCs. There are spyware elimination tools that are free and easy to use. Two popular programs are "Spybot Search and Destroy" from safer-networking.org and "Ad-Aware Personal Edition" from lavasoftusa.com. Check www.download.com for the availability of a free download. Spyware removal programs maintain a list of known spyware. You need to update this list on-line (monthly will do). Scanning for spyware with these tools is a manual task that you must start-up by double-clicking their desktop icon and taking the appropriate actions.

How Do You Avoid Spyware? While it is practically impossible to

completely avoid spyware, here are some good tips to minimize spyware. Don't click YES on any pop-up that you don't thoroughly understand. Do take the time to fully understand all software licensing agreements for software that you do install. Don't visit questionable pages on the internet.

What is a PC virus? A computer virus is a malicious, illegal program that can cause damage to your computer or information on your computer. Viruses often use your computer to spread themselves to your friends, family, co-workers, and the rest of us out there in cyber space. Computer viruses range from mildly annoying to downright destructive. At last count there are about 70,000 computer viruses that have been classified. A worm is a subclass of virus that tries to spread itself automatically from computer to computer by taking over control of features that let the virus transfer itself along the way. Worms spread very quickly and can take up a lot of the available traffic capacity of computer networks. The "Blaster Worm" is a recent example of a worm-virus. By the way, the evil dude that wrote and sent out that virus has not yet been found, but a 19 year old Minnesotan who purposely modified the virus and sent it back out got 18 months in prison for his efforts! A Trojan (horse) virus is a virus disguised as another computer program that appears on the surface to be useful. Beware of "Geeks bearing gifts". Trojan viruses are often hidden in email attachments that lure you into opening them to "check this out" or "see the great picture".

How Do You Avoid Viruses? Countermeasures to improve the resistance of your computer to viruses include all of the following. You should purchase and install anti-virus software, preferably from nationally known, reliable vendors. Three of the main anti-virus software programs are Norton Anti-virus (Symantec), PC-cillin (Trend Micro), and McAfee VirusScan (Network Associates). There are free versions from other vendors, but I don't recommend them. With anti-virus software, you usually get what you pay for. Anti-virus software protection is a subscription service. You MUST keep the subscription service up to date and continue to download virus definition updates to your PC at regular intervals (at least weekly).

Many, many people think that they have anti-virus protection because something came with their new PC. Not so. The introductory versions of these programs (that are free with the PC) usually have subscriptions that expire in 90 days. After that point, no updates happen but new threats are designed by the bad guys and your PC WILL GET INFECTED. Spend the money and keep the annual subscription up to date. By the way, anti-virus vendors offer more thorough products that put up software "firewalls" to try and prevent virus-like attacks from entering your computer, and some also scan for spyware. Most of these more "complete" products require some tuning and adjustment after installation to allow all your legitimate programs and internet traffic to operate properly. Update your operating system (Windows) as often as Microsoft has available critical security updates. In olden times, I used to advise people that once the operating system was stable and did all they wanted, to not change it. You can't operate that way now. Evil programmers are out there everyday trying to find another "exploit" in the Windows operating system to invade your computer with a virus. Microsoft is patching the holes as fast as they can go. Keep up with them by installing legitimate updates from Microsoft using the "Automatic Update" feature of your operating system. Note that these updates are much easier to obtain if you have a broadband connection like DSL or Cable internet connection.

Practice Safe-Computing. Here are some helpful virus protection Do's and Don'ts. Don't open email attachments from unknown senders. Don't activate the "preview pane" or pre-read window of your email program. Don't send email to others while you know you have a computer virus. Don't use a floppy disk or CD-R in your computer that you know has a virus infection. Don't click on inviting looking pop-ups while browsing. Do update your anti-virus definitions at least weekly. Do inform others if you may have sent them a virus (make a phone call, don't send another virus laden email).

Questions and comments about this article may be emailed to: hcs@mchsi.com