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Putting A Clamp On PC Pests

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(Photo: AP / CBS)

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LARRY MAGID

(Photo: CBS)

(CBS) Are you feeling a little insecure? You ought to be if you use a Windows PC.

Sadly, there is an unending supply of creeps out there who are trying to steal everything from your privacy to your sanity.

Spammers are among the worst. Despite a recent federal law that makes it illegal to send fraudulent unsolicited e-mail, including messages with fake return addresses, I still get about 200 such messages a day.

Spyware is another big intruder. Have you noticed that your PC is running slower than it used to be? Has your browser's home page been changed without your doing anything? Are you seeing the same advertisements coming up over and over again? If so, you're a victim of Spyware and you're not alone. I don't know anyone who uses the Internet a lot that hasn't be affected by this unscrupulous practice.

Pop-up advertising is another common annoyance. There are two general categories of pop-ups -- those that show up in your browser while you surf the web and Windows Messenger ads that pop up on your computer seemingly all by themselves. There are also pop-under ads -- similar to pop-ups -- that you see as you close your browser windows.

You already know about viruses, worms and Trojan horses -- those little programs that sneak into your computer to do all sorts of damage. Despite widespread publicity about them, they continue to wreak havoc worldwide.

And there are those hackers -- criminals, petty and otherwise who are out to hijack your PC, steal your information or maybe even steal your identity.

Solutions

Fortunately there are solutions to all of these problems. While there is no way to completely secure your computer, there are things you can do to greatly minimize the impact of these modern day parasites. There is a lot that can be written about dealing with these pests, but I'm going to give you the short course

Spam:

Let's start with spam. First, be careful about giving out your e-mail address.

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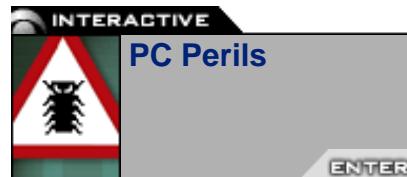
Facts on viruses and other computer menaces, security tips and a timeline of virus attacks.

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Don't post it on Web sites or chat rooms and don't give it to online merchants that you have any reason to distrust. If you must be public with an e-mail address, use a "disposable" one such as a free Hotmail or Yahoo account. Second, consider using an anti-spam filter. Programs such as Matador from MailFrontier, SpamNet from Cloudmark, and SpamCatcher from Aladdin Systems do a pretty good job at separating your good mail from your bad mail. You have to watch them – they can occasionally trap good mail, but once properly configured they all work pretty well, though some spam will filter through. If you want to block 100 percent of your spam, use a challenge response system such as Mailblocks that requires senders to answer a simple question to prove that they're people rather than machines. It works great but it does slightly inconvenience people the first time they write to you. The newest version of Microsoft Outlook (2003) has a built-in spam filter that's reasonably good.

Spyware

It's hard to avoid spyware. I get it even though I'm pretty careful about where I surf, but it's easy to get rid of it. There are two excellent free programs. Spybot Search and Destroy is very aggressive and pretty easy to use. The free version of Ad-aware is easy to use, effective but not as aggressive as Spybot. You can download both from Download.com. Although Spybot is free, the author requests a voluntary donation to support his work. Whichever program you get, you have to use it regularly to keep your system clean.

Pop-ups

One way to get rid of browser pop-ups in Internet Explorer is to download the free Google toolbar (search for "toolbar" at google.com"). Another solution that also helps prevent spyware is Stopzilla, which is free to try but costs $19.95 a year to keep up-to-date.

Stopzilla also suppresses those other type of pop-ups, that come up even when you're not browsing net. There is also a manual configuration that you can use to suppress those annoying messenger ads. You can find instructions at www.pcanswer.com/securitytools.htm.

Viruses

The best way to prevent and eradicate viruses is to get an anti-virus program and keep it up to date. All of the reputable products will do that job as long as you frequently update them to get the latest anti-virus signature. I use both Norton Anti-virus and TrendMicro, but I've also had good luck with products from Panda Software. Regardless of what anti-virus program you use, don't open attached files -- even from friends or colleagues -- unless you're expecting them. Some viruses mail themselves to people in your e-mail address book, so it's possible to get them from friends. If someone sends you an attachment, be sure it's legitimate before you open it.

Hackers

If your PC is connected to the Internet, it's vulnerable to attack. The best way to protect yourself is via a firewall -- software or hardware that blocks outside attacks. ZoneAlarm from ZoneLabs is a free personal firewall program that does the job quite well. Norton Internet Security, which costs $69, protects you from hackers and viruses.

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*A syndicated technology columnist for nearly two decades, **Larry Magid** serves as on air **Technology Analyst** for **CBS Radio News**. His technology reports can be heard several times a week on the **CBS Radio Network**. Magid is the author of several books including ["The Little PC Book."](#)*

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By Larry Magid

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