

Protecting Your Computer

A Quick Guide to Virus Protection, Spam, Spyware, Adware, Pop-up Ads, and Firewalls Viruses, Worms, Malware

Your computer could be at risk! Malicious programs called *viruses* or *worms* (generally called “malware”) can infect, damage, and disable your computer – whether or not you connect to the Internet. “Malware” can infect your computer in a variety of ways (e.g. e-mail, downloads, networks). How do you know if your computer has a virus? You need special “antivirus” software that scans your computer for viruses. AVG, Symantec Antivirus, and McAfee Antivirus are three popular software titles. Antivirus software must be updated often, so, if your computer came with a virus scanner and you haven’t kept it updated, chances are that software is no longer protecting your computer as it should! You might need to purchase new software or renew your subscription to an antivirus service to keep your computer safe. You can learn some more about viruses by going to **www.thrall.org/viruses**

Spam

If you have an e-mail account, you might receive advertisements and other “junk mail.” Such messages are known as *spam*. Some spam can contain viruses. E-mail of this nature often invites you to “click here” to be “unsubscribed” from the “service.” Doing so can cause *more spam* to arrive. Deleting spam without replying to it is one of the best courses of action. Other options might be available to you, such as learning to use the message filtering function of your e-mail service to route junk mail to the Trash folder or to a special folder you can create to review messages before deleting them. Special spam blocking software can also be purchased in stores.

If an e-mail account is overwhelmed with spam, the most practical solution might be to get a new e-mail account if possible. To lower your risk of receiving spam, do not freely share your e-mail address with just anyone. You might consider getting a second e-mail account, possibly at one of the free e-mail providers (such as Yahoo.com or Microsoft Hotmail.com), to give to everyone and to websites while reserving the other e-mail account for more private purposes (family, friends, coworkers). Consult your Internet Service Provider for more information on getting another e-mail address.

Spyware, Adware, Pop-Up Ads

Besides being threatened by viruses, your computer might also be plagued by “spyware” or “adware.” *Spyware* is a type of program that gets into your computer and monitors your actions while transmitting information, such as passwords and other important personal items, back to some web site for possible exploitation. *Adware* is software that causes advertisements to “pop-up” on your screen (in addition to ads normally encountered while browsing the web).

Programs exist to help you detect and remove spyware from your computer. Two popular examples include the freely downloadable programs “Spybot: Search & Destroy” and “Ad-Aware,” which are available at web sites such as Download.com. Pop-up blocking software also exists; for example, the free web Firefox browser (from Mozilla.org) allows you to selectively block pop-ups from certain sites. Recent versions of Internet Explorer also support pop-up blocking.

Firewalls

Firewalls provide extra layers of protection and control between your computer and other computers on the Internet. Some operating systems, such as Windows XP, offer basic firewall protection for Internet connections. A popular example of a free and easy to install firewall is Zone Alarm from Zonelabs.com. Some Internet Service Providers also offer firewall services.

Updates

Even the most updated and “secured” computer systems remain at risk from unidentified threats, software glitches, and recurring problems. Updates might exist for your virus protection software, operating system, and other programs on your computer. Investigate what updates might be available for your system. Also check with your Internet Service Provider to see what additional steps you can take to improve your computer’s security and performance. Do not wait until it’s too late! Act today to protect your computer – and yourself!