



Computer Corner

Oh, What A Tangled Web We Weave When We Download To Receive

by *Evan Schuman*

(NAPSA)—Securing your PC is as important as locking your front door. To keep spyware from downloading onto your hard drive to track personal information and computing habits, there are some preventative steps you can take. You should also know some spyware may provide perks and service you want and enjoy.


Spyware—the software that gathers personal information from your computer, monitors your activity on the Internet and/or transmits information back to the spyware creator—can be placed on your computer without your knowledge. And like any application, it can slow a computer's performance and cause conflicts with legitimate applications and potential crashes.

Spyware can arrive as a hidden component of freeware, shareware or file-swapping programs, such as free music or games downloaded from the Internet. It can come through an e-mail message or attach itself during a Web site visit. Some types of spyware will ask for permission to be installed on your computer as part of a licensing agreement.

In the last few years, the spyware problem has accelerated. At Dell, for example, about four percent of consumer support calls in 2003 involved problems caused by spyware. In early 2004 that number almost quadrupled and at its peak accounted for 15 percent of all tech support calls.

The easiest single thing computer users can do to protect themselves from spyware is to carefully read any user license agreements. If in doubt, do not choose "OK" until you investigate the site further. It may be easier to download later when you know

Symptoms of Spyware

1. Performance slowdown
2. New and unexpected homepage
3. Lots of new pop-up/pop-under ads
4. Download request screens that won't take no for an answer
5. New and unexpected search page 

what you are choosing to put onto your computer than to remove spyware from your PC.

Another big contributor to the spyware problem is the surge in broadband availability and popularity. These connections are so fast that consumers rarely notice the additional download time associated with spyware programs, especially when the programs is piggybacking on an authorized file download such as a game.

Unexplained performance slowdowns, an increase in new pop-up ads, an unexpected default homepage or the inability to connect to the Internet are all good clues that you could have spyware.

Here are a few tips to help:

- Be wary of agreeing to download software. Read the fine print.
- Install anti-spyware software from a Dell-tested and recommended company—such as Sunbelt Software—to protect your computer. Although Dell cannot endorse any specific freeware or shareware utilities designed to remove spyware applications, because they can't test them, some free anti-spyware programs are recommended by industry magazines. Remember, removing spyware could limit your access to some services and perks.
- Minimize connection time. The "always on" nature of broadband keeps people online longer than in the dial-up days. There's a

lower spyware incidence with notebook users than desktop users. Much of that can be traced to the fewer hours that many notebook computers remain connected to the Internet.

• When evaluating the risks to which your computer has been exposed, consider the other people who have access to your PC.

With protective software and vigilant use of good computer behavior—including reading all licensing agreements—you should be able to fend off the spies. To learn more, visit www.dell4me.com/security.

A veteran technology journalist, Evan Schuman's byline has appeared in media ranging from "The New York Times," "USA Today" and "BusinessWeek" to "eWEEK.com," "ABCnews.com," "InformationWeek" and "B2B Magazine." He serves as president of The Content Firm and can be reached at eschuman@thecontentfirm.com.

How to Reduce the Risks

- Keep your operating system up-to-date
- Keep virus definitions current
- Use an anti-spyware software package
- Read license agreements carefully and to the end
- Disconnect from the Internet whenever an active connection is not needed
- Keep browser security settings high, lower only for a specific trusted site and return to high
- Download free software only from trusted sites
- Limit free music, movie downloads
- Minimize or avoid file-sharing sites and programs 