

Protecting Your Home Computer

As a computer administrator, I'm often asked to recommend good ways to protect home computers and networks, as well as guard the people who use this equipment from inappropriate or unwanted content. The problem is, there's no perfect way, and no quick fix. However, a few good tools and some simple tasks can help keep your computer reliable and secure.

The computer has become such an integral part of our lives, as a source of entertainment, a tool for communication, and a base of operations for controlling many of our daily tasks. But the internet is as full of pitfalls and seedy districts as the streets of any average city, complete with malicious individuals waiting to prey on the unsuspecting visitor who happens along.

Keeping your computer clean and safe is not that easy, and definitely not a problem that should be solved with a single product. Also, no particular vendor has created the perfect solution for any of the problems computer users face. Virus, spyware, and security issues are common concerns but many of these issues can be addressed with inexpensive, or even free, software found easily on the internet.

Free antivirus and antispyware tools can provide protection to the many people who might otherwise choose to go without, for either monetary or performance reasons. However, every computer must have these tools in place to ensure the computer is well protected, so it's important to look at the available solutions and install the best one for your needs.

Spyware and viruses are two completely different types of infection, and spam generally has nothing to do with either. In my experience, the "all-in-one" security solutions available from many vendors do not perform well, especially on an older computer. Installing a complete solution, or "security suite", also comes with a higher cost as well as larger downloads and updates. You can get the same or better levels of protection from individual products freely available from the internet.

For virus problems, I generally recommend a product from Avira called Antivir, which can be easily found and freely downloaded by going to Google and typing in "Download Antivir". The software is easy to install and configure, and will not cost you a penny. The only trade-off is that it will pop up a message every time it updates asking you if you would like to upgrade to the paid-for version. To me this pop-up is a small price to pay for the level of protection you receive for free. This is also my first choice for laptop virus protection, as the software will automatically detect an active internet connection and update when it's available.

Another great tool is AVG's free antivirus, which includes protection for Outlook or Outlook Express email accounts. AVG is also easy to install and configure, and does not have the pop-up announcement that Avira does. AVG can also be found by searching for it with Google, and is free to run on any home computer. The default installation will perform updates and scans at 8:00 AM, for best results I would recommend changing the schedule to perform these tasks in the middle of the night. This will prevent the scan from slowing your computer during normal working hours.

Spyware is a completely separate issue than virus infections, and should be treated differently. As with virus protection, there are some great free tools available to keep you secure. AVG also makes free antispyware software, which is as good as their antivirus. Adaware is another freely available tool, as is Spybot. I would recommend Adaware for faster computers, and Spybot for all.

Internet security is a more challenging subject, especially for families with school-aged children. It's easy to find adult content on the internet if you perform a search with Google, or any of the other search websites, but again there are some inexpensive or free tools to help make your internet access more secure.

OpenDNS is a new service which can provide some basic levels of access security, but may be a challenge to set up for the average home user. However, you may wish to ask the person who performs your computer support to help you set it up on their next visit. Used in conjunction with another product such as Cybersitter, NetNanny, or K9 WebProtect, you can shield your family from many internet dangers very well. Cybersitter is a "paid-for" product, and my personal favorite. However, K9 Webprotect is a great free alternative with many of the features of the fee based solutions. K9 will block different categories of websites, and alert a designated administrator to attempted access. Another great feature is that K9 will lock in Google's SafeSearch content filter, and cannot be changed without knowing the program's password.

There are a few important things to consider if you're thinking about installing any of these tools. One is that they are free for home use only, and many of these companies survive on donations from satisfied users. If you like one of the free products, consider sending them \$5 or \$10 to help keep them going. Although this is not required, it does help ensure they'll continue creating and improving their software for years to come.

It's also very important to remember that you can only run one antivirus product at a time. If you would like to use one of the free tools mentioned above, you must remove your existing antivirus software first. You can run multiple antispyware products, and I recommend that you do. Many of the spyware products, paid or free, will find something the others will not, and by running scans with more than one antispyware you improve your chances of spotting and removing a problem.

Lastly, remember that the free or home versions of many tools are stripped down versions of their professional level siblings. This does not mean they are less effective, only that they may require you to perform some tasks manually. Be sure to run manual scans as often as time allows, twice a month or more is best. Also, be sure to perform an update before every scan with either antivirus or antispyware, as this will ensure you have the latest and greatest weapons against malicious software before you launch an attack. With the content filters, reading the logs will help you spot any ongoing issues and help you deal with them before they increase in severity.

Keeping your computer protected doesn't have to be expensive; there are plenty of solutions available to get the job done for little or no cost. Please keep your computer running well by using some of these great free solutions, and make the computer and internet safer for your family. Not only will you be happier you're your equipment, you'll need someone like me a lot less often.