

Spyware

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If you've been on the Internet recently, you're bound to have heard the term "spyware" tossed around, perhaps without knowing exactly what "spyware" actually is. Spyware is increasingly becoming a major problem, and knowledge of what it is – and what you can do to protect your computer from it – is becoming more important every day. MidIowa Net hopes to inform you of what spyware is, its symptoms, what to do if spyware is present on your computer, and how to avoid it entirely.

What is Spyware?

The Internet Wikipedia states that "spyware consists of computer software that gathers and reports information about a computer user without the user's knowledge or consent." The information shared can vary, depending on the type of spyware, and can also range significantly in severity. Some pieces of spyware report the type and variety of the web pages you visit, while others can reveal sensitive financial data stored on your computer.

In addition to simply providing information, many types of spyware can disrupt usage of your computer. One of the most common varieties of spyware, called "adware," usually displays pop-up advertisements on your screen. Such adware is usually only a minor annoyance, though it can cause a great decrease in your computer's overall performance, sometimes to the point of the computer being rendered nearly unusable. Other, more harmful forms of spyware include such programs as "homepage redirectors" and "phone dialers." If you've ever gone to surf the Internet and realized your homepage is something completely different than what it should be, chances are you have experienced the effect of a homepage redirector on your computer. Phone dialers will dial a phone number – often an overseas phone line or a pay-by-the-minute number – rather than the Internet provider's phone number, resulting in a massive phone bill. Worst of all, these dialers may dial out automatically without the knowledge of the computer's owner.

What Are Some of the Symptoms of Spyware?

Symptoms of spyware are not necessarily cut and dry and can vary greatly depending on the type present on your computer. The easiest spyware to detect is adware creating pop-up advertisements. A reputable web site, such as the Iowa State University homepage (<http://www.iastate.edu/>), is not likely to have pop-up advertisements, so if you access such a web site and are getting pop-up advertisements, you likely have some sort of spyware present on your computer. Often, computers infected with adware will create pop-up advertisements when you aren't viewing any web page in particular, or even when the Internet isn't connected on your computer.

Another symptom is an overall slowdown in system performance. Spyware often runs in the background without any open windows, but it eats up computer resources nonetheless. This is what leads to a slowdown in system performance. It's important to note that if your computer seems like it is slowing down over time, it doesn't necessarily

mean you have spyware; there are many reasons why computer performance degrades. If your computer is particularly slow and spyware does not seem to be the culprit, a computer repair technician may be able to provide additional assistance.

What Do I Do If I Have Spyware?

If you believe that you have spyware on your computer, the best thing to do is equip yourself with some spyware removal tools. A good portion of spyware can be removed using a combination of free tools. There are also anti-spyware programs available for a fee, but whether or not they do a better job than their free counterparts is debatable.

Keep in mind that you use these programs at your own risk. Additionally, you may find that some programs you've installed will no longer work if their advertising components are removed. The peer-to-peer program Kazaa is a good example of a program that will not function if the adware contained within it is removed.

The following programs will scan your computer and also give you the option of removing any spyware that is found. Note that it's a good idea to try more than one program out, since some spyware removal programs will catch things that other ones will not.

Spybot – Search & Destroy

Available at <http://www.safer-networking.org>

AdAware SE Personal

Personal Edition available at <http://www.lavasoft.com>

Microsoft Windows Antispyware (Beta)

<http://www.microsoft.com/athome/security/spyware/software/default.mspx>

CWShredder

Removes Cool Web Search and its variants -

http://www.intermute.com/spysubtract/cwshredder_download.html

eTrust Pest Patrol (\$29.99)

<http://www.pestpatrol.com>

It's important to make sure you update your program after it's downloaded and installed so that it can catch the most recent spyware threats. All of the above programs should have a built-in updater.

If you're still having problems after trying some of the programs above, your best bet is to take your computer to a computer repair shop to have a technician look at it. While this may be costly, it could save you a lot of time and money in the long run.

How Can I Avoid Spyware?

First and foremost, if you're a Macintosh or a Linux user, you're in luck—spyware is essentially exclusive to Windows computers at the present time. If you're running a computer with Windows, it is extremely important to make sure you're up to date with the latest patches and security fixes. You can check this via Windows Update: While in Internet Explorer, go to the top and click Tools, then choose Windows Update. If you've never ran Windows Update, you may have a lot of patches and fixes to download. It will likely take some time, but the safety benefits are more than worth it.

Next, it's important to pay attention to what you're installing. Programs such as Kazaa are free partly because they install other programs that “piggyback” along with the main program. Make sure you pay close attention during the install process to see if the program would like to install other, optional software. This other software, regardless of what it claims to be, is often not worth the install.

Often times while surfing, you may see a window pop open that says something such as, “You have spyware on your computer! Click here to download software to remove it!” It's best to just close these windows and ignore them completely, as they often masquerade as a good thing, but wind up doing much more harm than good.

Because of a number of security vulnerabilities present in Internet Explorer, a great way to help keep spyware off your computer is to switch to another, more secure web browser. Here are some alternatives:

Mozilla Firefox – <http://www.mozilla.org> (Free Browser)
Mozilla Suite - <http://www.mozilla.org/products/mozilla1.x/> (Free)
Netscape 8 – <http://www.netscape.com> (Free)
Opera – <http://www.opera.com> (Requires a License)

The aforementioned programs also include features that Internet Explorer does not currently possess, such as tabbed browsing.

It is our hope that this newsletter has provided you valuable insight into what spyware is, some symptoms, what to do if you have it, and some information on how to avoid it. The following links may offer some additional insight into spyware if you're interested.

Wikipedia's Spyware Write-up - <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spyware>

How Spyware and the Weapons Against it are Evolving -
<http://www.windowsecurity.com/articles/Spyware-Evolving.html>

Spyware and Adware Removal -
http://www.pcreview.co.uk/articles/Internet/Spyware_and_Adware_Removal/