

Basic Guide to Safer Internet Use

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This is a very basic guide to help new or inexperienced Internet users surf the web a little more safely and to help people avoid some common problems. It's not a comprehensive set of instructions; but it should provide a reasonable starting point.

Email & Spam

If you post to Internet newsgroups, make your email details visible on a forum or give them to people you do not fully trust there is a risk that you may receive unsolicited or unwanted email (typically referred to as spam). If it is just one or two items this may not cause too much of a problem, especially with the faster mail transfer speeds available today. However, problems arise when a vast amount of spam is sent or it contains content that may be offensive.

Once your email address has been given it will be very hard to prevent spam, so it is advisable to spend a little time sorting out things before posting or joining any group.

When joining an unfamiliar forum or newsgroup it is wise to set up a new email account first. Free accounts such as a Yahoo or Hotmail (address) are ideal and these should have a good spam handling ability and virus protection built in. Use this email address when posting or in your profile for people to reply to. If the email address starts receiving too much spam or if you have any problems with the group the account can be closed and a new one set up. This will prevent your work or home personal account, which are far harder to change, from becoming unmanageable. Virus Protection

Today it is pretty much essential to protect your computer from virus and malicious programs. They can be transmitted in a variety of ways, most frequently via emails and attachments. A virus may not be noticed or could completely ruin your computer's data causing problems recovering important files and wasting time and money rectifying the problem.

A simple way of reducing the risk of virus infection is to only read emails from trusted senders. Do not open any emails that you are unsure of.

A virus checker should also be installed on your home computer and the software kept up to date. These can be purchased, found free on the front of computer magazines or downloaded from the Internet. AVG is a free program that seems to perform well in tests.

(See <http://free.grisoft.com/freeweb.php/doc/1/>)

Virus protection programs will need their configuration files updated on a regular basis so that they provide protection against the latest viruses. Make sure this is done or they will rapidly become less useful.

It is also worth pointing out that the operating system you use (typically Microsoft Windows) should be kept up to date with the various service packs, especially the security releases. However, please remember there can be problems with upgrades so back up your data! Firewalls

Many operating systems are designed to respond to external requests from the Internet. These features can be used by people to gain access to information and resources on your PC. Confidential information can be read and programs installed that then run without the user's knowledge, they in turn can attack other PCs or send out spam from your PC.

A firewall is either a program (software firewall) or a piece of equipment (hardware) that provides a security system to prevent unauthorized access to a PC from the Internet or network. They may be run together and can vary in price from nothing to several hundred pounds.

A correctly configured firewall should prevent these problems. Software firewalls are the most often used on home PCs and they can be part of the operating system. They are also often provided as part of a virus package. Hardware firewalls are considered to be more secure and range from about £30 upwards. A good option if more than one PC is connected to the Internet in a household is a multi-port router, which starts at about £50. Windows XP Firewall

Many people will be running Microsoft XP on their PC. This comes with its own built in software firewall. It is worth ensuring this is activated. Note any settings before changing them, just in case you have any problems and they need to be reset!

To view the status of the firewall select the 'Control Panel' from the 'Start Menu'. Open the Network Connection settings and then select the properties (right click on the modem or router connection icon, then select 'Properties'). Select the 'Advanced' Tab and ensure the Internet Connection Firewall is turned on (ticked). For more details read through the XP

help. Spy Software

When visiting Internet sites and opening emails software can often be installed on your PC. It is always wise to only visit sites and open emails from people you trust. If you do not know much about the site you should think very hard about whether you run anything from that site.

Even if you have been very careful, some software may infect your PC. Most of it will be harmless, although too much can slow a PC down. There are applications that can be used that will examine your PC and inform you of what is running. You will then have the choice of removing the spyware.

A good application I have used is Spybot Search & Destroy at: <http://www.spybot.info> Clearing Files on Browsers & Cookies

When browsers run they often store information you enter onto sites in cookies. This may often only be a password for logging into a forum or it may be bank details and online banking passwords. Unless you are very confident who uses your PC and that all the virus software and firewalls are set up correctly it is wise not to allow your browser to remember any detailed personal information such as banking details. Browsers can be set up so that these are deleted whenever it is shut down, this may make life a little more difficult but it save the hassle of having your bank balance emptied!

Yahoo mail account: <http://edit.europe.yahoo.com/config/mail?.intl=uk>

Hotmail mail account: www.hotmail.com

Further information can be found in your PC's help files or from these two links:

<http://www.microsoft.com/technet/community/columns/5min/5min-101.msp>

<http://www.cert.org/homeusers/HomeComputerSecurity/>

Finally, if you have any comments or questions there are often people on the IT forum who could help. Click [HERE](#) to go to the forum now.