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## Firewall offers protection from hackers

By Kiman Wong

Leaving your broadband connection unprotected -- that is, without some kind of firewall -- is akin to allowing a burglar to case your house.

With a firewall your computer is virtually invisible to hackers. Without one, almost anyone could probe your PC.

Thieves will think nothing of stealing your credit card numbers or even your identity. In addition to possible theft, cybertrespassers also might embed zombie-like "Trojan horse" programs on your hard drive that can be used to remotely spam or attack servers.

So what's the solution? If the security of your data is important to you, start with a

firewall ( [www.howstuffworks.com/firewall.htm](http://www.howstuffworks.com/firewall.htm) ). Not only is it going to protect you from unwanted visitors but it also can act as a watchdog for your computer, alerting you to and blocking the entrance or exit of intruders.

There are two major types of firewalls. A "real" firewall is hardware-based and ranges in price from relatively inexpensive (\$50-\$100) for router firewalls from companies such as NetGear and Linksys to more expensive models (\$250-500) that do a commensurately better job from manufacturers such as SonicWall, WatchGuard and others.

If you have a business I'd suggest you spend a few bucks on a decent hardware model.

CompUSA is a good place to start looking, but you might want to go online first and check out CNET's recommendations. If you have really sensitive data I'd suggest you drop a few bucks and get something decent and even look at third-party managed firewall service.

If you just need to protect your single home computer, you'll be fine with a so-called "personal," software-based firewall. Some software firewalls can even download free of charge but as always you get what you pay for. ZoneAlarm ([www.zonelabs.com](http://www.zonelabs.com)) is one of the most popular free firewalls that provides basic protection. However, you might consider getting the commercial version (ZoneAlarm Plus), which has features like e-mail-attachment scanning, advanced IP blocking, privacy protection tools and pop-up-window blockers for around \$50. Another good freebie is Agnitum's Outpost ([www.agnitum.com](http://www.agnitum.com)), which is easy to install. They also have a commercial version for \$40.

(Note that Windows XP also includes a free firewall, but I favor the third party developers.) The downside of these software based firewalls is the possibility of encountering some software conflicts with your favorite programs (e.g. games).

Also, if you have a home network, you will need to set up the software on every computer and this will stop you from sharing files and services among your computers. If you do have a home network, you most likely have a hardware router. Just make sure your router has a firewall built into it and it will take care of these problems.

How do you check to see if your firewall is doing its work? I'd suggest that you go to a site such as Shield's Up! ([www.grc.com](http://www.grc.com)). This is a free online Web site that allows you to run a simulated probe of your own computer. It's quite effective. Be sure and read the instructions carefully. You'll need to hit the links toward the bottom of the page to run the tests on specifics such as file sharing. It also offers tips on shoring up your security and news on the latest patches from Microsoft that you'll need to update your system. In short, it will let you know how vulnerable you are.

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