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Take steps to fight intrusive spyware

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Adware (aka spyware) is one of the most insidious little devils out there on the Internet.

Although spyware doesn't garner the kind publicity that viruses get, it can wreak substantial havoc.

A spyware assault starts out inauspiciously by giving the impression that your PC is always in low gear. Your computer seems to gag, sputter and crash more than normal. The most noticeable symptom, along with sluggishness, is a high incidence of pop-up ads.

Think you may have spyware? Here are some ways it manifests itself:

>> It can replace your home page and not allow you to change it back.

>> It can add a new set of Web pages to your "Favorites" list. Don't be shocked if some of them are "adult" Web sites.

>> It can add an extra line of text to your Web browser, pitching a variety of items, including X-rated Web sites.

>> It can launch a never-ending series of pop-up ads that appear as quickly as you close them.

If what I'm describing has become a part of your computing experience, odds are your PC has become home to one or more varieties of spyware -- a pest that combines some of the worst features of spam and viruses.

It's similar to a virus in that it can bog down your system, change settings without asking your permission, monitor your every key click and transmit your personal information to people who have no business knowing it.

As with spam, spyware gobbles up bandwidth and pitches you junk products.

Perhaps the scariest thing about spyware is that it can report on your every move across the Internet to a stranger.

Why would anyone care where you go on the Net? Having this type of data allows advertisers to target ads or spam with products specifically aimed at your surfing habits.

How do you avoid this stuff? Stay away from offers to run free programs. For example, a popular ploy is an offer to download an application that places the outside temperature next to your computer's digital clock.

So, once infested, how do you get rid of spyware?

If you're a hands-on user, there are a couple of sites I can suggest. Check out **PestPatrol.com** and run a (free) scan of your system. They will list any spyware/adware found, but because it's an evaluation version you can't remove the offending code. Price is $40 per year for the home user edition. I'd also visit **PCPitStop.com**, which is another good anti-spyware scanner. It will identify spyware and describe in detail how to clean up your PC.

"Ad-aware" is free and is available at **www.LavaSoftUSA.com.** It's easy to run and thorough. It comes in the "standard" edition, which is free, and more sophisticated Professional and Plus versions that will automatically scan for malevolent code. Price for the Plus Edition is $27. The Professional version ($40) provides more "flexibility," according to the Web site.

Another popular free software is "Spybot-Search & Destroy," at **safer-networking.org** . This program works quickly, identifies a number of problems and allows you to easily remove them. It also explains what the offending programs were and "immunizes" you from further exploitation from these particular pests. Lavasoft does not charge a fee, but asks for a donation.

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