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# Protecting Computers from Spyware

Spyware is computer software that is installed on your computer without your consent and which monitors or controls the computer's use. It may be used to send pop-up ads, redirect a computer to alternate websites, monitor internet surfing, or record keystrokes, which, in turn, could lead to identity theft. Clues that spyware is on a computer include:

- A barrage of pop-up ads.
- A hijacked browser (i.e., a browser that takes you to sites other than those typed into the address box).
- A sudden or repeated change in the home page of the computer.
- New and unexpected toolbars.
- New and unexpected icons on the system tray at the bottom of the computer screen.
- Keys that do not work (e.g., the "tab" key might not work when trying to move to the next field in a Web form).
- Random error messages.
- Sluggish or very slow performance when opening programs or saving files.

Experts at the United States Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the federal agency that works to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and with the technology industry, recommend the following measures to prevent spyware installation:

- Keep the operating system updated. Systems, such as Windows or Linux, offer free software "patches" to close "holes" in the system that spyware could exploit.

- Update Web browser software, such as Internet Explorer on a regular basis.
- Download free software only from known and trusted sites. While it may be appealing to download free software, such as games, peer-to-peer file-sharing programs, customized toolbars, or other programs, this software can change or customize the functioning of a computer for the benefit of a hacker. Be aware that some of these free software applications bundle other software, including spyware.
- Do not install any software without knowing exactly what it is. Take the time to read the end-user license agreement (EULA) before downloading any software. If the EULA is hard to find—or difficult to understand—then think twice about installing the software.
- Minimize "drive-by" downloads. Make sure your browser security settings are high enough (e.g., at least the "Medium" setting for Internet Explorer) to detect unauthorized downloads.
- Do not click on any links within pop-up windows, since this could install spyware software. Instead, close pop-up windows by clicking on the "X" icon in the title bar.
- Do not click on links in spam that claim to offer anti-spyware software. Some software offered in spam actually installs spyware.

- Install a personal firewall to stop uninvited users from accessing computers. A firewall can block unauthorized access to a computer and may alert the user if spyware is already on the computer.

If a computer has spyware on it, experts advise taking the following three steps:

- Get an anti-spyware program from a known and trusted vendor.
- Set it to scan on a regular basis — at least once a week.

- Delete any software programs the anti-spyware program detects that should not be on a computer.
- Use anti-virus and anti-spyware software, and a firewall. Use the same basic computer security practices that you would for any computer connected to the Internet.

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