

Keep Your Friends Safe

August 3, 2004

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If you've followed the steps outlined in this article, your computer is now a veritable Fort Knox. But yours isn't the only computer in the world. What can you do when a friend phones and says "You know, my computer's been acting kind of slow and strange, with these weird pop-ups. Oh, and my Internet is broken."? If you want to help (or can't get out of helping) a security-challenged friend or relative, be prepared!

Before You Go...

Get a toolbox. The victim may no longer have Internet access or may have a painfully slow dial-up connection, so you need to bring your own tools. Get a pocket-size USB key and keep it on your keychain: 64MB is big enough for our suggested tools.

Fill your toolbox. The victim may not have installed any security products, so be ready to install and use antivirus, antispyware, and personal firewall software (for our recommendations, see below).

Keep your tools sharp. Be sure to keep the products on your USB key up to date. Download the latest signature files for antivirus and antispyware programs, if available separately, since it may not be possible to update automatically after installation.

Secure the scene. If you're not already on-site, tell the victim to disconnect the affected system physically from the Internet (and from the home network, if applicable) and to turn it off and leave it off until you arrive. Determine which operating system the computer is running and whether it has USB ports; if not, you'll have to burn your up-to-date toolkit to a CD.

At the Scene...

Clean up. Install the antivirus product from your toolbox and perform a complete scan. Set it to continue protecting the system. Install each of the antispyware products and run their scan functions as well. For products that include real-time spyware blocking, turn this feature on.

Raise shields. Install and configure the personal firewall from your toolbox. Allow the victim's browser and e-mail client access to the Internet.

Hook up. Reconnect the system to the Internet. Manually update the products you installed. Then perform another full scan with the antivirus and antispyware programs.

Get patched. Go to www.windowsupdate.com and install all the critical patches. Chances are good there will be quite a few.

Get a second opinion. By now you have restored the victim's computer to a reasonably safe and functional state, so you can take advantage of other resources on the Internet. Get a free antivirus scan at <http://housecall.trendmicro.com> or www.pandasoftware.com/activescan . Scan for spyware using the Spy Audit link at www.webroot.com or PestScan at www.pestpatrol.com . Make sure the firewall is secure by using the ShieldsUP! test at Gibson Research (www.grc.com).

Before You Leave...

Train the firewall. Personal firewalls are useful, but they'll often stun the new user with a barrage of prompts. If possible, get the victim to launch all frequently used programs to train the firewall to accept them.

Train the victim. Now that the computer is secure, sit the victim down and explain what you did, in as much detail as is reasonable. Bring up each of the programs you installed and show their basic abilities. Work with the victim to set up a schedule and demonstrate what the various protective programs look like in action. If you don't do this, the victim may ignore them or turn them off.

Upgrade for ongoing protection. The free programs and program trials won't cut it forever, and you may not always be free to go over and fix the same problems. For a more robust solution, we recommend Norton Internet Security or ZoneAlarm Security Suite, plus Webroot's Spy Sweeper.

Security Toolkit

Select your own favorite free security programs or try these suggestions.

Antivirus

- Grisoft offers a free version of its AVG Anti-Virus for personal use. Don't forget to record the serial number, as you'll need it for installation.

www.grisoft.com/us/us_dwnl_free.php

Antispyware

- Spybot Search & Destroy has won our Editors' Choice award in the past and remains an excellent tool for eliminating spyware.

www.safer-networking.org

- Spybot won't catch everything, so you'll also want to bring Lavasoft's Ad-aware.

www.lavasoftusa.com

- Since these two may miss a particularly virulent search bar or home page hijacker, add HijackThis from SpywareInfo.

www.spywareinfo.com

- Finally, if the protean CoolWebSearch hijacker is present, only the latest version of SpywareInfo's CWShredder has a chance of eliminating it.

www.spywareinfo.com

Personal firewall

Windows XP has a built-in firewall of sorts, but the firewall doesn't offer the protection against the misuse of your Internet connection by rogue programs that a standalone personal firewall would.

- The free version of ZoneAlarm is a perennial favorite.

www.zonelabs.com

- Sygate Personal Firewall also offers a free edition.

http://smb.sygate.com/products/spf_standard.htm

Browser

On the chance that the user's browser is damaged or unusable, bring a copy of a free browser (one that's a smaller download than IE).

- Mozilla is free. www.mozilla.org
- Opera has a free 14-day trial version. www.opera.com

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