



Safe On the Net 2008

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Now that you have your new or recently upgraded system ready to fly on your high-speed Internet connection, what should you do first? In order to safely surf the unfriendly Internet, you'll need to prepare in four ways. You'll need antivirus software that updates itself on a daily basis. You will need a good software firewall. You will also need a good antispyware utility. And finally, you will need to be sure that you keep up with the Microsoft Updates. And if you are not already running Windows XP SP2, you need to install SP2 now. And if Vista is your poison of choice, you'll need to install SP1 instead!

Antivirus

It should go without saying nowadays; don't even think of using your computer without antivirus software installed. Antivirus software relies primarily on "pattern files" that are basically fingerprints of all viruses out there. As there are literally hundreds of new viruses every month, these pattern files are constantly being updated. Unfortunately, viruses are not released on a schedule and on any given day, the next big one could be lurking. Take the time to find the setting that updates your AV software and set it to update daily. While you are in there, set the software to scan outgoing as well as incoming email, if possible.

Symantec's Norton Antivirus is a perennial favorite here, and it generally works well, has an easy interface and comes with many new systems. Unfortunately, their support has declined severely and if you have problems, you are essentially on your own. Free options such as AVG Free are nearly as capable, and very well priced indeed. Also worth considering is "Threatfire," a member of the newly emerging class of software known as behavioral scanners. It watches for suspicious activity and intervenes. It plays well w/your existing antivirus software and has the advantage of being available in a very capable free version.

Software Firewalls

A software firewall keeps the multitudes of the Internet out of your system, unless you very specifically invite them in. Windows XP SP2 incorporated many security updates, and perhaps the best known was the "Windows Firewall" that comes installed and active by default now. SP2's firewall works on inbound connections only and lacks the sophistication and resilience of the better alternatives such as Comodo Firewall or Zone Alarm Free. Though Vista's bidirectional firewall is better, neither compare to the better alternatives.

Antispyware

Spyware (aka adware, malware, etc.) installs itself without notice on your system. At this point, Spyware is the number one threat to your PC safety. Spyware can capture your information and resell it to the highest bidder and even turn your system into a spam relaying robot, emailing at staggering rates. Spyware is the biggest security issue today.

If you want to deal effectively with the threat of spyware today, Webroot's Spysweeper is your best bet in standalone antispyware. If you are looking for a free alternative, Windows Defender works reasonably well both blocking and removing spyware. (Note that there are many fake antispyware utilities out there; some are actually spyware themselves.)

Security Suites

It is always tempting to go with a single solution, rather than to shop around (or download free utilities) for each of these issues. While this can save money, time and the frustration of dealing with multiple products, at this point there really is no one single killer security suite to recommend. Each has strengths and weaknesses and none cover all the bases (antivirus, antispyware and software firewall) well. The best option is to stick with separate solutions for each issue, but if you had to choose, Norton Internet Security 2008 is the best suite going. Suites are not available in free versions, so you'll have to go the a la carte route if you go free. If you choose to go this route, AVG Free Antivirus, Comodo Firewall and Windows Defender is the ticket to beat right now.

Microsoft Updates

It comes as a surprise to many people that there are constant updates to Windows, Internet Explorer, Office, and others, but it is a fact of computing life. These updates should be delivered automatically through Microsoft Update, and configuring this option on your PC is simple and needs to be done just once. Simply go into the properties of My Computer, select the Automatic Update tab and set it to auto download and install them.

What About Vista?

Microsoft Windows Vista offers many security enhancements for home users and businesses alike. Some are very subtle and "under the covers" and others are highly intrusive and questionably useful (user access control, anyone)? Overall, Vista is a step forward if for no other reason than it was created during a time when Internet based threats were far more common and better understood than they were while Windows XP was being created. Even with the new SP1 installed, the bottom line is that Vista still requires antivirus, antispyware, a software firewall and Windows updates in order to remain secure.

The Nut that Holds the Wheel

You are the single most important part of your computer security plan. No software can protect your computer against your own actions. So remember the three simple rules of Internet security. Everyone is anonymous, so you can never tell where a mail message actually came from. The Internet has not turned humanity into altruists, and therefore, nothing is really free. Finally, if it *seems* too good to be true, it *is* too good to be true!

The Final Word on Passwords

Many people resist the idea of using passwords at all. Unfortunately, even for those of you that live in wonderful areas where you can leave your front door unlocked, you cannot do the same with your computer on the Internet. At worst, a few people might have occasion to try your front door to see if it is locked on any given day. On the Internet, literally millions will check to see if you have locked your system "doors" each and every single day. Assuming you've done your homework and implemented the above set of precautions, good passwords are your next line of defense. Good passwords are not names, contain numbers and/or punctuation marks and are not the same for every site you visit!

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To learn more about security, visit netsciences.com or call NSI at (505) 266-7887. Net Sciences builds secure computers, secures those that are not, and helps you learn to stay secure in your computing. NSI is your home security expert.