Safe On the Internet

Now that you have your new computer and you're ready to go flying the Internet, what should you do first? In order to safely surf the unfriendly Internet, you'll need to prepare in three ways. You'll need antivirus/antispyware software that updates itself automatically. You will need a good software firewall. And you will need to be sure that you keep up with the latest Microsoft Updates. *And if you are running Windows but not using the latest version (XP SP3, Vista SP2 or Windows 7 SP1), it is time to get that done!*

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 thousands 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 for updating your AV software and set it to do so automatically. While you are in there, set the software to scan outgoing as well as incoming email too.

Symantec's Norton Antivirus is a perennial favorite here, and it works quite well nowadays, and has an easy user interface. The newest version, NAV 2012 is really excellent. If you are looking for freeware alternatives, by far the leading option is Microsoft's own Security Essentials product. MSE really stands head and shoulders above other freeware offerings and performs nearly as well as most paid software, but it does not include a software firewall, as do many of the security suites. As a standalone antivirus/antispyware product, MSE protects as well as most, though it is a bit slower to perform scans than most.

Antispyware
Spyware (aka malware) installs itself without notice on your system. Spyware can capture information and keystrokes, open your machine to others, and even turn your system into a spam relaying robot (spambot).   Spyware is the number one threat today. If you already run Norton Antivirus 2011 or newer, you really don't need a separate antispyware utility. If you are looking for free alternatives, Microsoft's Security Essentials is a good choice, and is available to protect XP, Vista and Windows 7, in both 32-bit and 64-bit versions and is a real step up from other freeware offerings such as AVG, Avira and ClamWin. It should go without saying, but be sure NEVER to fall for bogus antispyware offered in spam or as a popup on your PC. Remember, if you didn't ask for it, do not install it!

Software Firewalls
A software firewall keeps the multitudes of the Internet out of your system, unless you very specifically invite them in. Windows XP SP3 incorporates many security updates, and perhaps the best known was the "Windows Firewall" that comes installed and active by default now (also in Vista and Windows 7, in much improved versions). The integrated firewall in both Windows Vista and Windows 7 does a pretty good job of protecting you, but either one can be improved upon with third party products, such as Symantec's.

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. Currently, Norton Internet Security (NIS) 2011 is the best suite going, and though there are no completely free suites out there, once again, Microsoft Security Essentials comes pretty close to filling that bill. The problem of going with a suite usually comes down to the weakness of a single component of the suite. Selecting the right suite can save you time and the issues of dealing with multiple products.

Software 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. Simply go into the properties of My Computer, select the Automatic Update tab and set it to auto download and install them. Of course, other software that does not come from Microsoft also needs frequent updating. Fortunately, there is a simple, free option from Secunia that can handle that for you. Just search for "Personal Software Inspector" or PSI and you'll be able to install one product to keep track of all your necessary updates and even install some of them for you!

Vista and Windows 7
Microsoft Windows Vista offered 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)? Windows 7 builds on those strengths and offers even better native security as well as a degree of control over the rather annoying user access control (UAC) in Windows Vista. Overall, both are a big step forward in terms of security and reliability. However, even Windows 7 requires antivirus, software firewall and software updates 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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