

The War on Spyware

If you have turned on a computer lately, chances are good that you have encountered the latest computer risk, dubbed "spyware". A recent government-backed study conducted by the National Cyber Security Alliance revealed that nearly 80% of all U.S. household PC's are infected with spyware.

What is spyware?

Spyware is a piece of software installed unknowingly on a users machine. It is usually poorly written, causing slowdowns and freeze-ups, and can cause serious data loss. Some spyware can install itself when you visit a web page with special code embedded in it, but mostly it is bundled with software downloaded from the internet that may have been advertised as 'free'. Well, as you might guess, nothing is really free. Spyware is usually designed to record anonymous information about the user` of the machine it is installed on, such as the type of web pages they visit, or which programs they use and how often. However, it could easily be designed to record credit card info or emails, too.

This information is then sold to companies that will advertise to you based on your habits and interests. Sometimes the spyware itself can show these advertisements in relation to a site you are visiting, say by showing you an ad for a car loan if you are on a car dealer's website. It is a highly effective (and extremely lucrative) tactic, but this unwanted intrusion causes more trouble than any of the supposed 'valuable offers' are worth.

How Did I Get It?

Often when I visit a client, they will blame it on a child or an employee. In truth, spyware can fool or get past anyone, since some requires no user intervention at all to install itself. To make my point, I ran the donation-ware product SpyBot Search & Destroy (see link below) just prior to writing this article. 13 infections were found. It is important to note that I update my anti-virus software daily (That's MUCH more frequently than most users), and practice obsessive spyware-avoidance techniques.. I also use a firewall, and visit Microsoft Windows Update (windowsupdate.microsoft.com) regularly to install system updates. This is very important, because the Windows operating system has several serious flaws which allow unscrupulous spyware writers to access your machine and your data using special links in web sites.

How Do I get rid of it?

There are many offerings out there, but two of the best products are actually free for home users (business users must pay) I recommend using both these products, to be sure. AdAware (www.LavasoftUSA.com) allows full system scans and a special, deeper clean for NTFS formatted drives (Such as Windows XP). Spybot S&D (www.safer-networking.org) offers a full scan, as well as several immunization options to prevent the infections proactively. If this doesn't work, you may need to back up your information and restore your computer using the disks provided with it. You may also want to visit the NCSA (www.staysafeonline.info) for a free risk assessment test and tips on protecting yourself.

..About the Author

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