

## Are There Spies in Your Computer



In today's world, you can purchase your entire Christmas gift list online, pay your child's college tuition online and balance your checkbook online, along with a myriad of other tasks. But with this convenience comes threats to your personal and financial safety from hackers, viruses and spies!

The good news is that routine maintenance of your computer can save you a lot of headache and worry from "uninvited" guests.

What is Spyware?

Spyware is software that monitors your computer and tracks your actions and Internet use. Spyware sends your personal information, such as buying habits, to a third party without your permission. This third party will often use this data to send you unsolicited targeted advertisements.

If you have ever downloaded a free game, software or media players, you probably are infected with a marketing type of software. While most spyware is not dangerous, you may receive a barrage of unwanted e-mails and pop-up ads.

There are some actual spyware surveillance tools that allow a user to monitor all types of computer activity, including snapshots and e-mail chatrooms. These types of tools are often used by parents to monitor their children's computer activity or businesses to monitor their employees' computer use.

Here are some warning signs from the Federal Trade Commission which may indicate that spyware has been installed on your computer without your knowledge:

- A barrage of pop-up ads
- A browser that takes you to other sites other than those you type in the address box
- A sudden or repeated change in your computer's Internet home page
- New and unexpected toolbars
- New and unexpected icons on the system tray at the bottom of the computer screen
- Keys that don't work. For example, the "Tab" key might not work when you try to move to the next field in a Web form.
- Random error messages
- Sluggish performance when opening programs or saving files.

Make sure your computer is a valuable tool and not an open portal to your personal information by following the advice of experts to lower the risk of spyware:

- Update your operating system and Web browser software
- Download free software only from sites you know and trust
- Don't install any software without knowing exactly what it is
- Don't click on any links within pop-up windows
- Purchase virus and spyware protection software to keep uninvited users from accessing your computer.

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