

Learn More About Spyware

What is spyware?

Spyware is a fast-growing threat that represents a major security and privacy risk. Spyware is a program that is installed, with or without the user's permission, and can monitor computer activity while broadcasting the information back to an outside party that controls the program. Spyware comes in many shapes and sizes. Some types of spyware are simply an annoyance causing increased spam or unwanted pop-ups, while others can threaten your security. These pests often lurk silently on your computer until someone or something sets them off. Spyware can do more than steal your personal information. It can also rob your PC of its speeds, stability and Internet access efficiency.

Common spyware categories include:

- **Spyware** steals information about you, your computer and your surfing habits.
- **Adware** displays unwanted advertising to your computer, can track your Web surfing habits and report it back to a central advertising server. It can slow your PC to a crawl by bombarding it with unwanted ads.
- **Keyloggers** can record every keystroke you make on your PC and steal your passwords and confidential data.
- **Browser Hijackers** can reset your default homepage and search results. Some may prevent you from changing your browser's homepage back to its original default or visiting a particular site.
- **Remote Access Trojans (RATs)** give a hacker complete control over your PC, as if the hacker was at your keyboard.
- **Browser Helper Objects (BHOs)** can search all pages you view in Internet Explorer and replace banner advertisements with targeted advertisements, monitor and report on your actions, and change your homepage.

How do you get spyware?

Spyware can be installed on your computer without you even knowing. It happens in several ways.

- **Web Browsing.** Spyware can be installed by ordinary surfing on the Internet. "Drive-by downloads" are the most common.
- **Peer-to-Peer File Swapping (P2P).** P2P allows users to share files with other members within a file sharing community on the Internet. A good example of P2P is free music sharing websites such as KaZaa or Napster. Although the websites are not spyware themselves, spyware is often bundled within the downloaded program. Another example of P2P that can install spyware is engaging in instant messaging or chat sessions.
- **Installing Legitimate Software.** Spyware and adware can come bundled in software that you intentionally download. For example, adware comes bundled in free downloads such as screen savers with the consent to install buried in a long end user license agreement.

What are the symptoms of spyware?

Spyware can affect a PC or network in various ways. Here is a list of common symptoms to help you decide whether or not you have spyware installed on your machine.

For Consumers:

- **Slower PC Performance.** One of spyware's many effects is the significant slowdown of the performance of your PC. Your computer may seem sluggish, take longer to start when you turn it on, or take longer to get to the Internet. For example, a computer with as little as two adware applications could take more than 14 minutes to boot.
- **New Toolbars.** Certain types of spyware such as hijackers can add new toolbars to your Internet Explorer that you did not knowingly install.
- **New Desktop Shortcuts.** Some spyware may add new shortcuts on your desktop.
- **New Default Homepage.** Browser hijackers change your default homepage to a different default homepage. Some homepage hijackers may prevent you from changing your browser's homepage back to its original default or prohibit you from visiting certain websites.
- **New Search Results.** Hijackers can also change the results of a web search and point you to designated websites that you did not request in your search.
- **New Error Pages.** Error hijackers will display a new error page when a requested url is not found. Excessive Full-Page and Pop-Up Ads: Adware can inundate your computer with targeted ads based on web surfing habits that have been tracked. Adware can slow down your PC to a crawl.

For the Enterprise:

All of the above and the following:

- **Slow Network Performance.** Spyware robs your network of speed and Internet access efficiency. For example, a computer with as little as two adware applications could take more than 14 minutes to boot. This can significantly affect employee productivity.
- **Congested Network Traffic.** Spyware transmits and receives information across a network causing significant overhead and therefore bandwidth waste.
- **Modified or Deleted Files.** If you notice that files have been modified or deleted for an unknown reason, this could be the result of spyware.
- **Lost Control of PC.** Certain types of spyware such as RATs can take control of a PC or an entire network.

How do I remove spyware?

The major challenge of spyware is that it is extremely difficult to remove. Spyware programs can have hundreds of bits of individual code that are cumbersome, difficult and risky to manually remove. The uninstallers of most spyware programs do not usually completely uninstall the program, they can include self-protection mechanisms such as reinstallers, they have constant re-writes to the registry, and can even have two copies of the program running at the same time to protect each other. The easiest way to remove spyware is to install an anti-spyware solution that detects and removes all pieces of spyware

Copyright © 2005 Computer Associates International, Inc. All rights reserved.

