Why you SHOULD be concerned about spyware

Spyware is the term for programs that run in the background most often without your knowledge of their existence that collect data or perform other functions, then hook up to the company they originated from and transmit that data back to them and/or download files to your computer. Sometimes this is done for targeted advertising, sometimes for other purposes. If this is your first encounter with the term "spyware" and you have been on the net for more than a few days, chances are pretty good you have spyware running right now on your computer. The practice is very common on the Internet.

Often when installing free software you will have the option to not download any "companion" programs, but other times it is automatic or even required to be able to use the software you downloaded. Quite often these "companion" programs have nothing to do with the operation of the software but are another company that has paid the person you're downloading from to add their program to the download of theirs. [note: just because a program gives you the choice to opt-out of bundled companion programs during installation doesn't mean they are offering you the choice to opt-out of all included spyware]. You get free software; they get paid for their efforts without it coming out of your personal pocket. You may have activated spyware while cruising the net without realizing you were doing it and it doesn't always take downloading a program to do it. Some spyware can appear simply as the result of visiting a webpage.

Is all spyware evil? That's subjective. If a program bundled with spyware is beneficial to you and you understand exactly what information they collect from you and possibly share with others and feel it a good trade-off, I guess you can let it escape the totally evil brand, although any **considerate** company should give you the opportunity during the installation of their software to completely opt-out of their partnered bundled spyware. If a program was slipped in without your knowledge or buried the fact of what you were getting into and is collecting your info and profiting from it and you get little or nada in return, I give it 100% on the evil scale.

If you are using Gator to fill out forms and passwords, you are using a spyware program. I recommend the free program Roboform which is a much more powerful form and password manager without spyware and you can import your data from Gator into it.

To find out if you have spyware running on your computer, download the free Ad-Ware program from the Lavasoft homepage. This program will show what spyware programs are currently running on your computer. You can then check a box by any or all of them to remove them from your system. You may find that occasionally a program will not run after you have removed the accompanying spyware. You should check the privacy policy page on the software's homepage and determine if what they are doing is fair trade for your free software and if so simply reinstall the program.

OK, you may say, "Who cares who sees what sites I am visiting, I'm not doing anything illegal and have nothing to hide, besides if ads are targeted to me I don't have to see ads for things I'm not interested in." That's fine and good... theoretically, but your computer has the ability of doing only so many things at once before it runs out of the resources to

do them. When I first ran Ad-Ware, I had over 50 spyware programs (almost all I had no knowledge of) free to use whatever resources of my PC they wanted.

Run 20 or 30 or 30 programs on your computer at once, or open 20 or 30 Internet browser windows and see what happens! Is your computer running slowly? You probably have spyware.

I have tried spyware blocking software, but the ones I tried blocked things detected as spyware that weren't which messed up several of my favourite webpages, and any customizing available was confusing. Another problem with these software's is that they are one more program you will have to update regularly (after all, like your anti-virus software it can only block those things it knows about). That means you will be at the mercy of the spyware blocking software to have an up-to-date list of every known spyware. Plus, they are one more constantly running program draining on your resources. The economy of the net is so slow right now that some are trying anything to make a buck, and that involves an escalating number of those who would find value in establishing a relationship with your PC. Considering that some in the spyware business are pretty cutthroat one could expect unscrupulous companies to repackage/change and re-release their programs in an attempt to stay ahead of spyware blocking software.

Let's look at an alternate route. Let's assume that at this point, you have used the spyware removal tool (Ad-Ware) discussed above. You've already removed most if not all of the spyware that was on your computer. Spyware works by "phoning home" to its company. If you block its line out, it can't upload or download from the company. You can incorporate the blocking of spyware with the blocking of any unauthorized use of your computer by using a program called a firewall. There are hackers, and more predominantly, hacker wannabes out there using programs that sniff out unprotected computers for sometimes malicious activities. If you have a cable or DSL connection, they can find you fairly easily. Dialup-accounts tend to be shorter connections assigned a rotating IP address each time you log on, so they are a harder target.

"Installing a firewall" sounds intimidating but it's very simple and you can download a free firewall program at the Zone Labs homepage. If you want more features, they offer a Pro version (the download link at the top of the page), but if you scroll down the page, there is a free version that does a fine job of preventing unauthorized access to your PC. When you download and run it, it will walk you step-by-step, just pay attention to what it is asking/telling you. Once you have it running, anytime a program attempts to connect to the internet, it will ask you if it's OK. You check yes or no and there is a box to always remember your answer, so shortly you will rarely see the popup. There are so many pings and probes you encounter on the internet, so you will probably want to turn off the alerts telling you about them, you'll get tons of them. Don't worry about keeping up with them unless you're curious, each one is telling you they didn't get through:)

If ZoneAlarm is telling you that a program is trying to access the internet and you don't know what it is, enter it's name into the Google search engine and you will find posts by others asking what that program is trying to access the net along with the answer. It's a good way to catch and remove sneaky spyware.

Don't be just satisfied with Zone Alarm keeping the programs from "phoning home"... if you know they're there, remove them from your system, it only takes a few seconds and they are taking up your resources in their never-ending unsuccessful attempts.

The only time you should leave them there is going back to programs that quit working when you remove their partner spyware... If you really must have that software, reinstall it, leave the spyware program on your computer when you run Ad-Ware, but tell Zone Alarm to never allow it to connect to the net. That should work for most (but remember, they are still using resources trying to connect, so make sure the spyware program isn't starting every time you boot Windows).

I've seen tips to defeat spyware by replacing it with a "dummy file" of the same name but there is a problem with that. Spyware notoriously reinstalls itself and if it does it's going straight into a file name you have personally set your protection to allow. I've seen programs posted that claim to allow you to disable spyware without disabling the main software, but I haven't tried any. I'll append this article as soon as I do.

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http://www.pcmedixwebs.com/spyware.htm