

Eight steps to better home computer security and maintenance

Note: This brief guide assumes that your computer runs Windows XP.

1. Run up-to-date anti-virus software.
2. Use solid anti-spyware software.
3. Use a firewall of some kind.
4. Use Mozilla Firefox as your default Web browser.
5. Always install Microsoft security updates.
6. Use CCleaner to delete temp files.
7. Defragment your hard drive regularly.
8. Have a backup system for your key data.

1. Run up-to-date anti-virus software.

Everyone using a PC with Microsoft Windows needs to have an up-to-date and working anti-virus program running at all times. If you have a paid subscription anti-virus program, check to be sure that it is current and up-to-date with its definitions. Once your program is installed, set the scheduler so that it automatically runs a full scan at least once a week.

Good, free anti-virus software called AVG can be downloaded at www.grisoft.com.

2. Use solid anti-spyware software.

Everyone who owns or uses a Microsoft Windows PC these days needs to have at least one solid and proven anti-spyware program running. The best anti-spyware program on the market currently is Spy Sweeper 5.0, which costs \$30.00. It can be bought online or at retail computer stores. When your program is installed, be sure to set the scheduler so that it automatically runs a full scan at least once a week.

Spy Sweeper can be found at www.webroot.com.

3. Use a firewall of some kind.

A firewall helps protect a computer network or home computer from unauthorized access (hackers). A firewall may be a hardware device, a software program, or a combination of the two. Check to make sure that your version of Windows XP is up-to-date with Service Pack 2 (also known as SP2) which includes the built in firewall utility as well as numerous other security hole patches and enhancements. If your computer is not up-to-date with SP2, download the entire 266 MB file from the Microsoft website and read the instructions before you install.

4. Use Mozilla Firefox as your default Web browser.

It is a known fact among computer security professionals that Microsoft's Internet Explorer Web browser IE v.6.0 is riddled with security holes and leaves a computer ex-

tremely vulnerable to malware (viruses and spyware). If you use IE 6.0, one step in the right direction is to upgrade your browser to IE v.7.0, which plugs many known security holes. Even better, use the free, alternative browser Firefox v.2.0.3; it is much more secure.

You can get a free download of IE 7.0 at www.microsoft.com.

You can get a free download of Firefox at www.mozilla.com.

5. Always install Microsoft security updates.

It is widely understood that new security holes and flaws in Microsoft Windows are being discovered all the time. Microsoft addresses this problem by sending out security update patches which are received and installed by a Windows utility. If you have Windows XP SP2, you can make the installation of patches automatic by taking these steps:

- Go to Start/Settings/Control Panel/Security Settings.
- Click the "Turn on Automatic Updates" button.

6. Use CCleaner utility to delete temp files.

Temp files are a normal by-product of using your computer, created when you open and close programs, turn the computer on and off and surf the Web. Bits of digital detritus, they build up, take up space on the hard drive and slow down the computer. To address this issue, Windows has a built-in utility called Disk Cleanup. However, a much better, faster and more comprehensively cleaning utility called CCleaner is available for free. I recommend running CCleaner at least once a month.

Download the free CCleaner utility at www.ccleaner.com.

7. Defragment the hard drive.

Another issue created through normal use of Windows is hard disk fragmentation. It is the digital equivalent of having a disorganized office where you work less efficiently because everything is hard to find. To address this problem,



Windows has a built-in utility called “Disk Defragmenter,” which reorganizes and condenses the data on the hard drive so it works more quickly and efficiently. “Defragging” can significantly speed up your computer.

I recommend defragging your hard drive at least once a month -- even if your defragmenting utility says it's not needed. If you have never defragmented, the first time could take anywhere from 20 minutes to two hours plus (depending on how much data is stored on your computer), so plan on doing it when it's convenient to be away from your computer. Don't defragment when you are using the computer and have programs open. Disk defragmenter can be accessed by taking these steps:

- Go to Start/Programs/Accessories/System Tools
- Choose Disk Defragmenter

8. Have a backup system for your key data.

It's a reality that, at some point, your computer hard drive will fail mechanically and/or Windows will crash -- and hope and scattershot backups are not a good way to deal with this fact. These days, it is easier and cheaper than ever to have a good backup system for crucial data stored on your computer; nearly everyone has a CD/DVD burner, USB flash drive or external hard drive. The hard part is remembering to back up regularly.

For this reason, the best backup system is one that can be automated, with an easy way to check the log to see that backups are happening consistently. The two best automated backup systems are external hard drive and online. The best external hard drive is Maxtor with its One-Touch backup utility. Maxtor One-Touch hard drives can be bought at almost any retail or online computer store. Alternatively, a great, inexpensive, and secure online backup service is provided by a company called Mozy (www.mozy.com).

