

THE COMPUTER CORNER

## No. 126. Spyware

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In case you had not noticed, I have moved from Port Washington to a newly purchased home in Saukville. My phone number is new, too, but my email address remains the same, as shown above.

Spyware is pervasive in this day and age, and it pays to “know your enemy” as well as taking steps necessary to prevent intrusion into your machine without your knowledge and consent. Most people don’t know much about spyware and could use a quick awareness-heightening view of the problem.

**Adware** is software that displays advertisements on your machine – pop-up, pop-under and banner ads. Besides slowing your browser’s performance, these programs may track your surfing habits, and may even download third party programs without your knowledge and consent.

A **Home Page Hijacker** or **Browser Hijacker** has the ability to change your Internet Explorer settings to redirect your Web searches through a different search engine, redirect the URLs you are trying to go to, and even to change your default home page. Once your IE settings are changed, you may not be able to reverse the process and change things back to the way they were! Insofar as I am aware, hijackers do not work with the new Firefox web browser, and Firefox is much better than IE anyway, so it pays to make the switch. Yep, once you install Firefox, you can import your IE bookmarks with ease.

**Cookies** were originally started for good reasons, but now a cookie downloaded to your machine can capture personal information such as surfing habits, passwords, user names or anything else and transfer this information to multiple web sites. Enough said? Cookies are to be avoided! Are they enabled in your browser?

A **Dialer** has the ability to disconnect your machine from your usual Internet Service Provider (ISP) and to reconnect using a toll or even international phone number. While they may not spy on you, your phone bill will certainly reflect their presence and activity.

A **Keylogger** is a program that can be downloaded without your knowledge that will record every keystroke you make. That includes your typed email messages, passwords, financial information or anything else that you type with the keyboard. Of course, transferring such information to a third party can put you in jeopardy in many different ways.

**Spam** is, of course, unsolicited commercial email. You say your spam filter works well to keep it out of your mailbox? Right. Except that it still is transmitted on the web to your ISP and downloaded to your machine before your spam filter can delete it. All that takes time. Spam simply clogs up the web and slows down your personal machine. Also, be very careful to NOT use any “remove me from your mailing list” options when you receive spam. The Federal Trade Commission did a study a couple of years ago and found that 63% of the cases where spam offered a “remove me” option, responding either had no effect or caused an increase in spam sent to that address. By responding, the sender knows your email address is active, and they often sell such “guaranteed active” addresses to other spammers.

So then, **Spyware** is software that transmits information from your machine without your knowledge or consent. As mentioned in previous articles, there are free, shareware and commercial programs out there that will help to prevent spyware from doing its dirty work. Ad Aware and Spybot-Search and Destroy are two good freeware programs. Microsoft also has an excellent antispyware program which is

currently free, but they are simply testing it with the public prior to making it a commercial product in 2006. After that, you will need to pay a yearly fee to use it. Spy Sweeper by Webroot Software ([www.webroot.com](http://www.webroot.com)) is about the best paid-for program available at present. If you use the freebies Ad-Aware and Spybot, run both of them! I use these two, checking every few days to see if the definitions have been updated. If one or the other does have updated definitions, I download them and run a scan.

I leave you with a couple of thoughts for the safest computing.

1. At the very least, set your browser to reject third party cookies.
2. Use an anti-spyware program (or two) to keep your machine clean, and update its spyware definition data regularly.
3. Switch from IE to Firefox. Firefox is free, and it is a much faster, leaner and safer browser.
4. Use a firewall. Zone Alarm is still the best in the world, and it is free.
5. Of course, use antivirus software, and update its virus definitions regularly.

Happy Computing!