

SPYWARE

Spyware is any software that obtains information from a PC without the user's knowledge. The two main types are Domestic Spyware and Commercial Spyware. Domestic Spyware is software that is usually purchased and installed by computer owners to monitor the Internet behaviour on their computer networks. Employers and parents use this software to monitor online activities.

Commercial Spyware (also known as adware) is software that tracks your online habits to target you with advertising; you get ads that match your browsing interests and would most likely appeal to you. The people who write these programs make money from the advertisers who have a product to sell, and the advertisers make money on the one in ten thousand people who actually buy their products. Advertising revenue is generated on a per-click or per-sale basis. Here is a list of a few kinds of adware:

Popups are just small windows that popup when you arrive at particular websites. Some are benign and merely want to set the user's preferences for that website's language. Some are advertising that entice the user to click on them to learn more about the product advertised. Most popups either lead to another website, or install a program or drop a cookie on the hard drive. Do not click on them if at all possible, right click on them down on the task bar and close.

Browser hijackers change your home page to theirs and won't allow you to set them back. Their home pages are frequently portals leading to other advertising "opportunities". These are installed as a combination of programs and ActiveX controls, usually as a Browser Helper Object. BHOs, malignant or benign, must be installed with user intervention. An installer pops up and won't allow access to content until the user installs it. Windows XP service pack 2 now stops the installer popup and requires the user to click on a gold bar at the top of the browser window to install the BHO.

Toolbars are always installed with the user's permission and involvement. Some toolbars aren't actually spyware or adware, but they always take more memory, so they should be avoided.

PC hijackers place Internet shortcuts on your Desktop and in your Favourites without prompting you. Most times they cannot be deleted. The shortcut will usually have a commercially recognizable name like Ebay, Amazon or Hotmail, but they always lead to some malignant advertising site where even more spyware may be installed.

Three things to remember: First, almost all spyware is installed with the user's participation. Second, getting spyware on your PC is a slippery slope, the more you get the worse it gets. Finally, it is entirely preventable with a little common sense. No website (or internet service) is free and they primarily exist to make a buck. Whatever service it is that you think you are getting for "free" comes at a cost to somebody and your mission is to figure out where the money comes from and goes to. Once you know that, you can avoid installing the programs they use to advertise to you.

If you have question or comments, I can always be reached via email sean@intrex.ca or join our forums at <http://intrex.ca> for more in-depth conversations.