

## Protect Your Computer for Free

Spyware, adware, malware – sometimes just understanding the threats to your computer can be overwhelming.

I have been blessed with 15 or so years of hassle-free computing. I don't spend hours and hours securing my Windows PC, and I don't spend a lot of money. If you are not especially computer literate, security may seem like too much trouble. But it's really not all that hard, and it's worth it – an unprotected PC connected directly to the Internet can be infected within minutes. (If you are a Mac or Linux user, you may go ahead and feel smug at this point.)

First, you will need a firewall to block nasties from entering your machine. Windows XP and Vista come with built-in firewalls. Make sure they are on. (Go to Control Panel and click “Security Centre.” If the firewall is off, turn it on.)

The Windows firewall is serviceable, but not ideal. The best solution is to install a router. A router can be used to network more than one computer – but it also provides a hardware firewall (which is more reliable than a software firewall like the one that comes with Windows). Routers are relatively inexpensive – you can get one for under \$70 – and easy to set up.

Now, you will need anti-virus software. Norton and McAfee are two of the best-known brands, but I have come to rely on AVG, which is free for personal use. Free in this case does not mean inferior. I have used Norton and McAfee and find AVG to be faster, more friendly, and highly effective. Download it from <http://free.grisoft.com>. A friend of mine was once baffled by her computer's infections – she had installed anti-virus software, but had not updated it in over a year. I have AVG set up to update itself and to scan my computer every day. In fact, it's scanning as I write this. Once you have set it up, you can forget about it.

Finally, you will need software to rid your computer of any bad stuff that may have made its way past your defences and onto your machine. I use a trio of programs for this – all of them free. Why three programs? Because they all work in different ways, and none of them is infallible. Using them all increases the likelihood of cleaning all infections.

My three spyware removers of choice are Ad-Aware ([www.lavasoftusa.com](http://www.lavasoftusa.com)), Spybot Search & Destroy ([www.safer-networking.org](http://www.safer-networking.org)) and AVG Anti-Spyware (<http://free.grisoft.com/>).

Ad-Aware and AVG offer pro editions of their software that you can buy. The main difference between the paid and free versions is that the paid ones will block spyware before it is installed, whereas the free ones will just remove it. Scan your computer often enough and you will be fine.

A few quick notes:

Spybot has a Tea-Timer feature that offers real-time protection like the pro versions of Ad-Aware and AVG Anti-Spyware, but it can be confusing. You can be quite well protected without it.

Don't be alarmed if the first time you scan your computer you come up with hundreds of threats. In my experience most of these are cookies – they allow websites to store your password and track your movement across sites. These are generally not serious infections.

Finally, if you Google Spybot or Ad-Aware, you will be presented with “sponsored links” (ie ads) for similar-sounding products (like No-Adware). These are *not* the same programs as the ones I'm recommending. To be on the safe side, download them from the addresses listed in this column.

