

Protect Yourself: Helpful software extras

This is the second in a series of bulletins for National Cybersecurity Awareness Month. Each bulletin will address a topic in computer security that will help you keep your computer and your personal information safe. This week's topic is software that you should be using on your computer. The software we will be covering includes running a personal firewall, using antivirus software, and using anti-spyware software. This bulletin will focus on Microsoft Windows XP, as that is the most common operating system on Loyola's network. However, many of the ideas discussed can and should be used on other versions of Windows along with Mac and Linux systems.

Personal firewall software is designed to automatically block a large amount of the network communications sent to your computer. By using a firewall, you are adding another layer of protection to your computer, as much of the traffic that is sent to your computer is an automated set of attacks from other machines that have been compromised by a hacker or a worm. If you are running Windows XP with Service Pack 2, you already have a firewall installed. You can check to make sure it is active at Start -> Settings -> Control Panel -> Windows Firewall. In the window that appears, the firewall should be set to "On". If you do not want to use Microsoft's built-in firewall, there are downloadable firewalls that are free for personal use, including ones from Zone Labs, Sygate, and Kerio Technologies.

Personal antivirus software enables files to be scanned when they are downloaded to your system, and to scan your entire computer on a regular basis. Antivirus software typically comes bundled with a new PC, but often has a short subscription period for new virus definitions. Antivirus software requires virus definitions to recognize new viruses. Without new definitions, your antivirus software will have no way to identify a new virus and prevent it from attacking your system. It is critically important to have current, updated antivirus definitions. If your subscription has run out, you should either renew it or investigate free alternatives. Some vendors provide antivirus software that is free for personal, non-commercial use, including AVG antivirus, Avast Home Edition, and Antivir Personal Edition Classic. Also, there is an open source product, ClamWin, that is free for everyone.

Anti-spyware software allows you to examine your computer for spyware or malware, and to remove any that is found. This is a good idea because spyware can slow down your computer, cause more frequent crashes, and send personal information about you and your habits to third parties. Some of the free programs available for dealing with spyware include Spybot – Search & Destroy, Ad-Aware Personal Edition SE, and Microsoft's Antispyware (Beta). Be cautious of any other free anti-spyware products, as some will actually install additional spyware on your computer.

If you have additional questions, you may want to check out Loyola's Information Security website at http://www.luc.edu/is/security/protect_yourself.shtml or send your questions to InfoSecurity@luc.edu. Next week's bulletin will be about different security behaviors you can adopt in order to keep your identity safe and your computer free of spyware and viruses.