

Simple Steps Enhance Computer Privacy, Security

The significant consequences that can arise from connecting an unprotected computer to the Internet vary depending on whether a computer invader takes something, such as information that enables a thief to create a false identity, or whether the invader leaves something behind, such as a virus or program that allows the invader to return to take control of your computer for dubious purposes.

The first step to take in protecting your identity is developing an awareness of the type of information that identity thieves need to pretend to be you. Regard account numbers of any type as sensitive information. That goes beyond credit union/bank accounts to utility accounts and cell phone accounts. Hackers who sneak into your computer to “steal” your identity also are interested in any type of relationship that offers significant personal information, which can then be used to stage an impersonation.

Computer users with high-speed or broadband Internet connections carry additional risk, since hackers are drawn to their enhanced online capabilities. Fortunately, you can take simple steps to protect your home computer.

- Use antivirus software. Antivirus software identifies infected e-mail attachments and other virus carriers before they have a chance to damage your computer. Bundled software packages combine antivirus software and personal firewalls for \$60 to \$80.
- Regularly update antivirus software. Since new viruses emerge every day, the companies that make antivirus programs allow computer owners to subscribe to updates to catch the latest versions.
- Create strong passwords. Hackers easily can steal the information used to create common passwords such as your birthday or a pet's name. They also have access to programs that will plug in every known word from the dictionary in an attempt to crack your passwords. Strong passwords avoid personal information, login names, or adjacent keyboard symbols. Instead, they combine numbers and letters in passwords that contain at least eight characters.
- If you have a high-speed connection, install a personal firewall. This hardware blocks hackers who attempt to locate your computer or access your files. Personal firewalls range from about \$40 to \$50 depending on whether you buy it packaged or purchase it from a major vendor as a download. Virus protection alone runs about \$35 to 450, and annual updates run about \$30 to \$35, depending on vendor and features.
- Be wary of unsolicited e-mail. Viruses often are sent as attachments, and identity thieves may attempt to use e-mail to get personal information by masquerading as an Internet Service Provider (ISP) or another vendor. Always confirm the identity of the e-mail's author before opening attachments, never send sensitive personal information to anyone using e-mail, and always verify that an e-mail request for sensitive material is genuine before sharing personal information.

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