

ForgetAbout-IT's Four Basics

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If you're going to connect a computer to the internet, there are four things you'll need in order to keep the computer and your data relatively safe.

First, you've got to have good anti-virus software, and you've got to keep it updated. This software isn't just for computers hooked up to the internet, though. Even stand-alone computers that aren't hooked up to any network at all need good virus protection. Keychain drives are small and cheap, and quite handy for copying files and programs from one computer to another. Because of this, they are an excellent method of introducing viruses to computers that aren't connected to a network of any kind. No computer should ever be without good virus protection.

Second, your computer should be behind a firewall. Firewalls hide your computer and all its open ports from the rest of the internet, and they act as a bit of a traffic cop by not allowing stuff into your network unless it was requested by one of the computers on your internal network. Really good firewalls can also inspect all the data travelling into and out of your network and restrict the kinds of data that can pass. This can prevent unauthorized content such as pornography, hate-related material, and even harmless content such as music downloads that you just may not want on your corporate network.

Third, you need anti-spyware software. Spyware is software that monitors your internet activity and reports back to a server out there on the internet somewhere. This can be fairly harmless, such as reporting to a department store that you spend more time looking at the sporting goods than you do the electronics so they can better target the advertisements you see while at their site. Or this can be downright scary by reporting any 16-digit numeric strings you type in (such as a Visa card number) and whatever you typed before and after the number. This is a good way to get your identity stolen.

Fourth, you need a good backup program. Chances are, if you're using a computer, you've got some data somewhere on it that you want to keep. All hard drives will die eventually. It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when. If data is worth anything at all, then you should probably keep it in at least two places.

Lastly, this software does not have to be expensive. As a matter of fact, there are several good programs out there that will cost you nothing at all, as long as you use it at home on your home computer. Commercial-use software is rarely free, but home users have some pretty good choices without spending a penny.

For free anti-virus software, check out Avira AntiVir, AVG Free Edition, or ClamWin. If you think your computer is already infected, Trend Micro has a web site that can scan

your computer for viruses free of charge. To find it, do a Google search for Trend Micro Housecall. If you have a computer that engages in pretty risky behavior, then you might also want to pick up a copy of Threatfire. It's free and it's anti-virus software that works differently than traditional anti-virus software. Instead of relying on virus definition files (files that describe known viruses to the anti-virus software so that it knows what to look for) it relies on descriptions of virus-like behavior. Because of this, it may catch viruses that are too new to have definitions available. Please keep in mind that it should never be your only virus solution, but it makes a good addition to the other anti-virus program on your system.

I don't know of any free hardware firewalls, but for home use, Belkin and Netgear firewall/routers can be found at reputable on-line retailers like NewEgg.com for under \$40.00. Software firewalls such as ZoneAlarm and the built-in Windows firewall are free. Personally, I believe the ZoneAlarm firewall to be far superior, but you can also completely disable your own internet connectivity with it if you don't know what you're doing. It's pretty powerful.

Anti-spyware software can also be free. Windows Vista comes with Windows Defender, but you can also download Windows Defender for Windows XP from Microsoft, and it's as free as Internet Explorer. Spybot Search and Destroy is also very good anti-spyware software, as is Ad-Aware SE. Both are free for personal use, and they're the same tools that the professionals use.

If you want a good backup program, you don't need to spend any money. If you know what you're doing with computers, then fire up Microsoft Backup. It comes with Windows XP. You might not see it loaded on your computer if you're using XP Home Edition, but you can install it pretty easily if you have your original installation CD. It's on there. If you'd like something a little easier to use, try Paragon Drive Backup Express. Again, completely free for personal use, and it's easy to use as well.

With all this software out there at your disposal, there's absolutely no reason why your computer can't have at least a reasonable amount of protection and safety from all the junk out there that is up to no good. As always, consult with your computer professional if you need any assistance. They should be able to answer your questions in plain English, or you should get a different computer professional.

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