WHAT IS SPYWARE?

Spyware is a program developed by hackers so that they are used to extract personal information (for example, passwords, IP address, and credit card number), post advertisements on your PC without your approval and to do other harmful actions.

Spyware gets installed on your machine without you being conscious about it when you visit particular web sites.

EFFECTS OF SPYWARE

Spyware can be harmful in the following ways:

Loss of privacy

Spyware collects personal information and send it back to its creator/developer. Sensitive and personal information like credit card number, name of contacts in Outlook Address Book, passwords stored in your hard disk, IP address, Operating System (Windows XP, Linux) installed, List of web pages visited, can no longer be private and secure if Spyware have infected your PC. Normally the hackers use this information for their own personal benefits that can be fatal for the victim. (Imagine your bank balance disrupted after shopping online).

Unwanted changes

Spyware can change your Web browser's home page or search page, or add additional components to your browser you don't need or want. These programs also make it very difficult for you to change your settings back to the way you originally had them. (For example unwanted menus can be attached to your browser toolbar and all options to remove them are disabled.)

Computer becomes slow

Any type of software needs some memory (RAM) and CPU time in order to keep it running. Spyware is normally programmed in such a way so that it is automatically loaded once your operating system starts. It then runs in the background. Thus, the Spyware affects your PC speed and makes it slower than its regular speed.

Web pages take unusually more time to load

After a Spyware is installed in your machine, it interacts regularly with its source (the hacker's machine) when your PC is connected to the net. It uses most of the bandwidth and even pages like Yahoo, Google which normally take a few seconds to load, take a lot of time to be accessed. Thus you have to stay connected for longer periods on the net for simple tasks and hence spend more on the cost.

Pop-up

Pop-ups (Ad Windows that appear on your screen whenever you are connected to the net or visiting particular web pages) are one of the most irritating symptoms of Spyware. Such Spyware infect your computer for the sole purpose of commercial ads. Once connected to the net, the Spyware becomes active and small windows (at times in huge numbers) start appearing on your screen. They basically contain attractive offers and links to other web pages where the offer is available.

Security programs do not function properly

Nowadays most people use Antivirus, Anti-Spyware and Firewalls to keep intruders at bay. But unfortunately not all of these security programs are up to the mark or people do not bother to update their virus definitions. This allows Spyware to modify the security software so that the real time protection is turned off or to delete certain critical components of the software. Hence, you Antivirus, Anti-Spyware, and Firewall can no longer protect your Pc from hackers and intruders.

- **Use up to date and reliable Security Software all the time.**

  Firewalls and **Anti-Spyware** can prevent hackers from getting into your computer and installing Spyware to get your information. A firewall can help block viruses and worms from getting into your computer. It will cause the system to ask for permission to block or not block connection requests. You can then decide whether accept or not. Anti-Spyware can be used to scan your Pc for malicious programs and if any threat detected, it will be removed. The security software should be regularly updated and trustworthy. For example, "Zone Alarm" is a very popular Firewall and it is free. "Windows defender" and "Spybot" are good examples of Anti-Spyware.

- **Adjust Internet Explorer security settings accordingly.**

  Go to the "Tools" menu of your Browser and then click on "Options". Then go to the "Security" section and adjust the security level.

  This will allow you to decide the level of information you are willing to take from a web site. If the website is known and trusted, the security level can be adjusted to "medium" else if there is potential threat from a website that you do not trust or you are visiting for the first time, adjust the security level to "high".

- **Surf and download more safely**

  Be sure you always know and trust the sites you are downloading from. Even the most seemingly harmless downloads can contain Spyware. Sometimes Free Wallpapers and Screen savers come with a series of Spyware, so after all downloads, be sure to scan them with a good Anti-Spyware.

WHAT SHOULD BE AVOIDED TO PREVENT YOUR COMPUTER FROM GETTING INFECTED BY SPYWARE?

DON'TS

- ❖ **Do not accept any free download from web sites that you do not trust**

- ❖ Never give out your **private information** like PC IP address, PC Name, Operating System to strangers. Else you may become an easy target for the Spyware.

- ❖ **Never** ever **disable your real time protection** provided by anti Spyware and firewall if asked to do so while downloading from an unsafe site. Sometimes, hackers fool people by displaying messages like "Please disable your firewall settings to proceed with your free download". The moment you agree, it's just too late because the Spyware is already in your system. Spyware may take just a few seconds to infect a PC.

- ❖ Do **not accept** any **free** download from web sites that you don **not trust**.