

Discussion – Problems With Microsoft's Internet Explorer

During the week a number of sources, including Microsoft itself, announced that Internet Explorer (IE) or Microsoft's Internet Explorer (MSIE) has a problem which allows hackers to take total control of your computer and allows them to do anything with your computer that you can do. I have been warning of the problems with Internet Explorer for some time and I now repeat that message with increased urgency.

Why This Urgency?

Microsoft and others have announced that there is a major security hole in Internet Explorer which has existed for much longer than anybody had realised. This security hole allows any hacker to control your computer and check, modify and delete all the programs and data on your computer.

This means that your photos could magically disappear, that your private correspondence is easy to read and your email address book can be used to infect all your family, friends and business colleagues. None of these people are likely to be delighted to know that you were the culprit who made *their* details available to a number of hacker networks.

The authorities here, in England, in Europe and in the Americas have all warned that this security hole is being actively exploited and that many people have had significant, but as yet unspecified, losses as a result.

Should I Be Concerned?

Yes!

There are some websites which only work when using Internet Explorer (IE) or Microsoft Internet Explorer (MSIE) but fortunately they are few and far between. These websites use Microsoft technologies which only work with IE. For these websites you need to use IE, but you can choose to avoid that website altogether. This is a relic of the Internet Cold War days, in the mid-1990s, when Bill Gates decided that Microsoft was going to own the internet and you could only access it using a Windows computer which used IE as its browser.

Using IE for any other website involves an unacceptable risk. There is a much easier solution for those websites which do not need IE: switch to another browser!

Should I Uninstall Internet Explorer?

No!

Internet Explorer is intimately connected to the innards of Windows itself. This connection means that, if you do uninstall IE you will (repeat **WILL**) do major damage to Windows. In turn, this can mean that a lot of things will stop working.

I only know of one person who attempted to uninstall IE and that led to a massive disaster.

The result was that his wife could not use her email program (Outlook Express). Because emailing was absolutely essential to her business she was, understandably annoyed. My client took the next, fatal, step: he decided to reinstall Windows. During this process he managed to remove all the data held on his computer's hard disc. This annoyed his wife as well so I am surprised that he lived to tell the tale.

A better response would have been to take his computer to a competent repair shop and get them to replace the missing parts of Windows including Internet Explorer. Just because IE is installed on your computer does mean that it will be used to hack into your computer: the program needs to be running and accessing the internet for any damage to be done.

What Is A Browser?

A browser is a program which allows you to surf the internet using sites like Facebook and Google. It also allows you to access your web-based email. That is its sole purpose.

Just as a word processor processes words, a web browser “processes” the web. This concept, which I find easy to understand, seems to stump many people: perhaps you are one of these. Some people think and learn in concepts while others learn by repeating steps over and over again until they have remembered all the steps in the correct order. As far as I can tell, people who find it difficult to understand the concept of a browser are the people who have difficulty in all other areas which involve learning concepts.

A web browser is a tool, so another way of looking at this problem is looking at the subject of tools generally. Just as you use a car to take your children to school and do the shopping so you use a knife and fork to eat with: you would not use a knife and fork to take your children to school!

So, in summary, a browser is a tool, a program, which allows you to browse the web.

Which Browser Should I Use?

Any browser other than Microsoft’s Internet Explorer!

This is, of course, especially true if you use Windows XP because this old version of Windows will not have any updates to Internet Explorer available for downloading.

There are three main alternative browsers, although other browsers are available. Some of these other browsers are screen-readers for the blind which read aloud what is written on your screen, some others do not display pictures so are faster to load a web page, but these are not the subject of this article.

The three main browsers for Windows computers are:

- Google Chrome (my recommended choice)
- Opera
- Firefox

These browsers are free to download and install and all of them are better than IE. If IE is your only browser my advice is that you immediately use it to download one of these other browsers: my suggestion is that you download Google Chrome because it is so much quicker than the others, both to start and then to load a web page.

It does not matter, really, which of these other browsers you install and use. Once you have installed a new browser please set it as your default browser so that it is the browser which opens when you click on a link in an email.

The web addresses of these three browsers are given at the end of this article.

How Should I Behave Online?

Carefully!

The way that most hackers get into your computer is to get you to click on a link in an email or a hacked web page. If you are using IE your computer will almost certainly be attacked immediately: other browsers will be impossible to attack using the IE back door because that method of entry is only open in IE.

Using another browser will protect you from this IE method of attack, but please remember that there are plenty more of these methods of attack that hackers have at their disposal. This means that you should think very carefully before clicking on any link, but especially careful if that link says *Click here* in big, bold flashing letters!

Further Information

Google Chrome www.google.com/chrome
Opera www.opera.com
Firefox www.mozilla.org
Stay Smart Online www.staysmartonline.gov.au/alert_service