

'Surfing' is a lot different than it used to be

The first 15 years of my IT career were sprinkled with escapes to coastlines in Texas, California, Mexico and Hawaii in search of surfing large clean waves.

Since there was no Internet access at work or home during the '80s and half of the '90s, the only surfing I did back then was on my long board hoping to get tubed.

Risky surfing back then was getting closed out in a 13-foot monster swell off the coast of Baja or being slammed onto



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the coral just three foot under head high waves at Diamond Head. During my 20s and early 30s I came close to drowning four times during intense surfing sessions.

After my priorities changed and my upper body strength gave out, the only surfing I've done in years is with my laptop riding the Internet from home. Risky Web surfing can knock out your computer with malware very quickly and removing those little invaders can take much longer.

Last week we covered all the variants of malware and how they have exploded in number of infections and become more destructive. Just this week I had a client's server get completely corrupted from a malware infestation.

We salvaged the data but had to abandon the 6-year-old server since it wasn't worth the dollars to rebuild the operating system on the old hardware.

Since we can't just not surf the Internet due to all those digital landmines on the Web, we need to surf safely. This takes several tools, applications and best of all some common sense.

To get started, make sure you have a router acting as your hardware firewall that separates you and the DSL/cable/wireless modem. Directly connecting your computer with these broadband modems can leave you wide open for virus infections and hackers.

Leaving the Window's native firewall enabled will also help protect your computer.

Next, for the 125th time, make darn sure you have a good anti-virus and antispyware installed, updated, and active on all your computers. AVG antivirus coupled with SpyBot antispyware is a good combination and both are free for home usage.

A couple of years ago I wrote about McAfee's free utility called SiteAdvisor. This handy plug-in that installs into Win-

dow Internet Explorer flags sites with a red warning sign if you are about to click to it after performing a search through any of the Internet search engines.

This has kept me from falling into those Web sites that try to download intrusive cookies, download spyware, or even plant viruses on my computer. Other similar utilities that help protect you include AVG's Link-Scanner, Norton's Safe Web and Google's Anti-Malware tool. All of these are free and help you avoid those bad Web sites.

There are some easy ways to fall into malware hell really fast and that is to surf porn. Pornography sites are heavily infested with all sorts of intrusive Java, ActiveX and HTML which quickly download and can take over your computer within minutes.

The type of pop-up windows, SPAM and junk that is produced will mark you as a porn surfer to anyone else that uses the same PC.

In other words, if you mess up your computer viewing pornography online and your wife finds out after see nude pop-up window one late night, don't come crying in my beer.

Other bad Internet places to avoid include online gambling Web pages and free music download sites. These are just hornet nests waiting to be stumbled upon.

They can quickly put key-log-

gers and Trojans on your computer which can steal financial or personal information that can lead to identity theft.

Music download sites are the worst for pumping malware down to your computer. There are thousands of those types of sites out there and many have a combination of the words in their URL like free, MP3, music and movies. These sites include Kazaa, LimeWire and BearShare which all should be avoided like the plague.

Since most of us use search engines to find what we are looking for on the Web, we need to be careful which search terms we enter into them. Recently Ki Mae Huessner wrote a piece for ABC News listing the 10 most dangerous search terms that may land you on a site waiting to implant malware on your computer.

He reported that researchers at McAfee took 2,600 of the most popular search terms and came up with a percentage that showed the most negative Web sites via Google, Yahoo and other search engines.

For United States users the top search phrases to get you into trouble were "word unscrambler," "lyrics" and "Myspace."

Others include "free music downloads," "game cheats," "free ringtones" and "solitaire." Use any of these keywords in most any search engine and odds are you will be displayed a

URL that leads to a bad site that could inject malware into your computer.

The authors of these Web sites are hackers and phishers just waiting to plant identity theft software deep into your Windows PC. They list their Web site traps under those keywords because they want the biggest source of people possible to infiltrate.

People who type in these search phrases can be easy prey since they are ready for action by wanting to download music or get free ringtones.

These users are also most likely not very cautious and could even be willing to fork over a credit card number for a small yearly subscription to get all the free music they can download. This is just a ploy to sucker naive people into divulging critical information. Once they have you bad things can happen to your computer, your bank account and your credit rating.

Bottom Line: Safe Web surfing is your responsibility so protect yourself before paddling out to those Internet swells.

Next week's column: My-CleanPC.com.

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