

## Help! My Computer Is *Haunted!*

You start seeing strange pop-up ads that seem to come from nowhere, even when you aren't surfing the web...

Your web browser's home page mysteriously changes on its own...

Your CD drawer starts opening and closing by itself and strange files suddenly appear...

You find emails in your Sent Items folder that you didn't send...

Some of your files are moved or deleted or the icons on your desktop or toolbars are blank or missing...

### Could It Be That \*Gulp\* Your Computer Is HAUNTED?

Probably not, but you are most likely infected with spyware. Around Halloween, we tend to think about unseen things that terrorize us at night; but spyware is probably the hidden ghost on your computer that is doing a lot more harm than keeping you awake at night.

Spyware is Internet jargon for hidden programs advertisers install on your PC without your permission to spy on you, gather information, and report this information about you and your online activities to some outside person.

Spyware is NOT harmless; it can be responsible for delivering a boatload of spam, altering your web browser, slowing down your PC, and serving up a bounty of pop-up ads.

In some of the more extreme cases, spyware can also steal your identity, passwords, e-mail address book, and even use your PC for illegal activities.

Most spyware finds its way onto your computer network via file downloads including free programs, music files, and screen savers. While you *think* you are only downloading a legitimate program to add emoticons to your e-mails, you are unknowingly also downloading a heaping spoonful of spyware programs. All it takes is one employee downloading a questionable file to infect your entire network.

### How Does Spyware Work?

Spyware piggybacks the download and runs undetected in the background collecting information about you and sending it back to its originator until it is removed. Although spyware has malicious components, it is not illegal, and it is not considered a virus because it doesn't replicate itself or destroy data.

One of the most dangerous aspects of spyware is its ability to cloak its existence. Hackers and the authors of malicious spyware and malware programs go to great lengths to create programs that are difficult to identify and remove. They are also highly experienced at finding tiny, overlooked loopholes in your security to access and infect your network undetected. That means a malicious program can be downloaded and doing its dirty work on your network long before you are aware of it.

## **How To Get Rid Of Spyware**

Some spyware and malware CAN be easily removed using a program such as Spybot's Search & Destroy (you can download it for free at: [www.safer-networking.org](http://www.safer-networking.org)) or Ad-Aware (you can download it at: [www.lavasoftusa.com/support/download](http://www.lavasoftusa.com/support/download)).

However, not all malicious programs can be removed – or even detected – using the above software. Many programs integrate so deeply into the operating system that it takes a skilled technician several hours to fully diagnose and remove the malicious program. In some extreme cases, we have had no alternative, but to wipe the hard disk clean by deleting all of the files on it and re-installing the operating system.

Obviously this is NOT an ideal situation and we do everything within our power to avoid it. Unfortunately there are some malicious programs that are so intelligent that there is simply no other way of removing them.

Of course you can use Spybot or Ad-Aware as a first attempt at cleaning your machine; however, if you continue to notice that your computer runs slow, if you continue to get crippling pop-ups, or any of the other tell-tale signs discussed earlier, you will need to seek the help of an experienced computer technician.