

Patching: It's essential for PC protection

Today, most computer programs are made to communicate over the Internet. That's a great benefit, but it also leaves them vulnerable to attack from the Internet.

Hackers are constantly discovering new ways to penetrate the defenses of popular software programs. Software vendors respond with "patches" that close newly found security holes. To stay protected, you need to download and install patches for your operating system and applications whenever they become available.

Cyberthieves prey on unprotected PCs

Hackers can scan the Internet, looking for PCs with software vulnerabilities. When they find a way in, they unleash Trojan horses, worms, and viruses. These may contain keystroke logging programs that steal identity information, or programs that allow hackers to manipulate your computer from a remote location.

What is a patch?

When software vendors discover a new vulnerability, they quickly devise and distribute a patch to close it. Patches may also be used to upgrade, fix a bug, or add a new hardware driver. Usually, you can install a patch on top of an existing program without reinstalling the original program.

Most patches are free. In some cases, only registered users may get upgrades. Or a security fix may only be available in a version upgrade, requiring users to purchase (often at an upgrade discount price) and install the new version.

Patches may be required for:

- Applications (Microsoft® Word, Quicken, and so on)
- Web applications (Internet Explorer, Firefox, RealPlayer, Flash, Adobe Reader, and so on)
- Operating system (Microsoft Windows® XP, Windows Vista®, and so on)

How to stay protected

Here's how you can find the patches you need:

- Vendors of most popular Web applications will notify you when you open their program if a security patch is available. If a trusted vendor asks if you want to download and install a patch or upgrade, click OK and follow the instructions.
- Your Windows operating system should be set to automatically receive updates whenever they become available. Go to Start Menu > Control Panel > Automatic Update to check your settings.
- For other applications, visit the vendor's Web site periodically and check for updates.

Until help arrives

A good PC security program can protect your PC and important files against invaders even before a vulnerability is closed. Programs such as Norton Internet Security™ look for suspicious behavior that could indicate an intrusion and block any attempts to steal your data or hijack your PC.

Conclusion

To keep your PC safe, always keep your operating system, Internet applications, and other software programs updated with the latest security patches.