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Internet users unprepared for viruses, research says

Most household computers operate without firewalls or software to combat online risks such as viruses

BY TED BRIDIS
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — Internet users at home are not nearly as safe online as they believe, according to a nationwide inspection by researchers. They found most consumers have no firewall protection, outdated antivirus software and dozens of spyware programs secretly running on their computers.

One beleaguered home user in the government-backed study had more than 1,000 spyware programs running on his sluggish computer when researchers examined it.

Bill Mines, a personal trainer in South Riding, Va., did not fare much better. His family's 3-year-old Dell computer was found infected with viruses and more than 600 pieces of spyware surreptitiously monitoring his online activities.

"I was blown away," Mines said. "I had a lot of viruses and other things I didn't know about. I had no idea things like this could happen."

The Internet always has had its share of risky neighborhoods and dark alleys. But with increasingly sophisticated threats from hackers, viruses, spam e-mails and spyware, trouble is finding computer users no matter how cautiously they roam online.

The technology industry is feeling the pain, too.

Spurred by the high costs of support calls from irritated customers and fearful that frustrated consumers will stop buying new products,

Internet providers, software companies and computer-makers are making efforts to increase awareness of threats and provide customers with new tools to protect themselves.

Still, many computer users appear remarkably unprepared for the dangers they face.

The study being released Monday by America Online and the National Cyber Security Alliance found that 77 percent of 326 adults in 12 states assured researchers in a telephone poll they were safe from online threats. Nearly as many people felt confident they were already protected specifically from viruses and hackers.

When experts visited those same homes to examine computers, they found two-thirds of adults using antivirus software that was not updated in at least seven days.

Two-thirds of the computer users also were not using any type of protective firewall program, and spyware was found on the computers of 80 percent of those in the study.

The survey participants, a cross-section of Internet users, were selected in 22 cities and towns by an independent market analysis organization, said AOL spokesman Andrew Weinstein.

The alliance, a nonprofit group, is backed by the Homeland Security Department and the Federal Trade Commission, plus leading technology companies, including Cisco Systems, Microsoft, eBay and Dell.

The group's chief, Ken Watson, said

consumers suffer from complacency and a lack of expert advice on keeping their computers secure. "Just like you don't expect to get hit by a car, you don't believe a computer attack can happen to you," Watson said.

"There really is quite a perception gap," agreed Daniel W. Caprio, the Commerce Department's deputy assistant secretary for technology policy. "Clearly there is confusion. We need to do a better job making information and practical tips for home users and small businesses available."

Wendy Avino, an interior decorator in Lansdowne, Va., said researchers found 14 spyware programs on her borrowed laptop and noticed that her \$50 antivirus software was not properly configured to scan her computer at least monthly for possible infections.

"We don't go in funny chat rooms, I don't open funny mail," Avino said. "If it says 'hot girls,' I delete it. We do everything in the right way, so how does stuff get in there?"

She complained she was misled believing her commercial antivirus and firewall programs would protect her from all varieties of online threats; most do not detect common types of spyware.

"It is very complicated for the average home user," said Ari Schwartz, an expert on Internet threats for the Center for Democracy and Technology, a Washington civil liberties group.

"There's a lack of accountability all around, from consumers who don't believe they should have to do this to companies who blame the consumer. It's finger-pointing back and forth," Schwartz said.

Quakes: Victims scramble to buy supplies

Continued from page 7

swept away the only road and upended homes and cars. Residents awaited airlifted food and other supplies.

"Carrying out rescue efforts is the most important task right now," Tsutomu Takebe, secretary-general of the ruling Liberal Democratic Party, said on a talk program aired by NHK. "The government is making all the effort to

assess the extent of the damage."

The quake was the most devastating to strike Japan since 1995, when more than 6,000 were killed in the port city of Kobe.

"We were completely isolated," said Takejiro Hoshino, who was evacuated by military helicopter along with dozens of others from Shioya, a small mountain hamlet. Hoshino was uninjured, but his 12-year-old grandson

was killed when their home collapsed.

Japan's Meteorological Agency registered 309 aftershocks — most too weak to be felt — and warned that similar tremors could hit the region over the next week.

With most areas still not getting electricity or water, many residents were expecting a long haul and were buying up supplies wherever they could be found.

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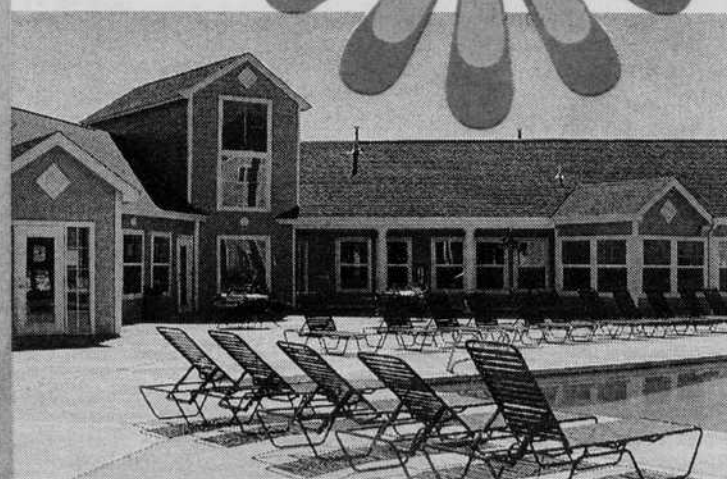
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