

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

Detect, Protect, Dis-infect: Consumers Online Face Wide Choices in Security Products

With new threats to computer security and data integrity a regular feature of the evening news, a panoply of products that promise to detect, protect, and dis-infect are being marketed to consumers. Intrusion detection systems, firewalls and anti-virus software are critical to online security, but the Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, says computer users — from grade school kids to grandparents — need to know exactly why they need online security products and what they're buying.

Why the Need

Computers “talk” to each other over the Internet by sending data through their communications ports. If a port is open, it “listens” for communications from the Internet. A computer has thousands of ports: which ones are open depends on the software the computer is running. Hackers can “eavesdrop” or scan the ports to determine which are open and vulnerable to unauthorized access.

Detection

An intrusion detection system (IDS) monitors incoming Internet traffic, much like a security camera “watches” your front door to see who might be trying to come in. When the IDS detects a suspicious pattern, it sends an alert (and creates a record) that an intruder may be trying to break in to your computer. Some IDS alerts — but not all — show a pop-up message on your screen. An IDS alone cannot prevent an unauthorized entry into your computer; only a firewall can do that.

Protection

Firewalls block hackers' access to your computer by creating a barrier — like a wall — between your ports and the Internet that allows you to control the data that comes and goes through your ports. Your firewall protects your ports even if you don't have an IDS. Sometimes a firewall is bundled with an IDS. If not, and if you want an IDS, be sure it's compatible with your firewall.

Dis-infection

Anti-virus software detects and deletes viruses that are in your computer. Viruses often attach themselves to your computer through email attachments and floppy disks. That means a firewall can't catch them. Similarly, an IDS won't alert you when a virus is attacking your computer. Look for anti-virus software that recognizes current viruses, as well as older ones; that can effectively reverse the damage; and that updates automatically.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit www.ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft, and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure, online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.



September 2004