10 Fast and Free Security Enhancements
PC magazine.

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Before you spend a dime on security, there are many precautions you can take that will protect you against the most common threats.

1. Check Windows Update and Office Update regularly (_http://office.microsoft.com/productupdates); have your Office CD ready. Windows Me, 2000, and XP users can configure automatic updates. Click on the Automatic Updates tab in the System control panel and choose the appropriate options.

2. Install a personal firewall. Both SyGate (_www.sygate.com) and ZoneAlarm (_www.zonelabs.com) offer free versions.

3. Install a free spyware blocker. Our Editors' Choice ("Spyware," April 22) was SpyBot Search & Destroy (_http://security.kolla.de). SpyBot is also paranoid and ruthless in hunting out tracking cookies.

4. Block pop-up spam messages in Windows NT, 2000, or XP by disabling the Windows Messenger service (this is unrelated to the instant messaging program). Open Control Panel | Administrative Tools | Services and you'll see Messenger. Right-click and go to Properties. Set Start-up Type to Disabled and press the Stop button. Bye-bye, spam pop-ups! Any good firewall will also stop them.

5. Use strong passwords and change them periodically. Passwords should have at least seven characters; use letters and numbers and have at least one symbol. A decent example would be f8izKro@l. This will make it much harder for anyone to gain access to your accounts.

6. If you're using Outlook or Outlook Express, use the current version or one with the Outlook Security Update installed. The update and current versions patch numerous vulnerabilities.

7. Buy antivirus software and keep it up to date. If you're not willing to pay, try Grisoft AVG Free Edition (Grisoft Inc., w*w.grisoft.com). And doublecheck your AV with the free, online-only scanners available at w*w.pandasoftware.com/activescan and _http://housecall.trendmicro.com.

8. If you have a wireless network, turn on the security features: Use MAC filtering, turn off SSID broadcast, and even use WEP with the biggest key you can get. For more, check out our wireless section or see the expanded coverage in Your Unwired World in our next issue.

9. Join a respectable e-mail security list, such as the one found at our own Security Supersite at _http://security.ziffdavis.com, so that you learn about emerging threats quickly and can take proper precautions.

10. Be skeptical of things on the Internet. Don't assume that e-mail "From:" a particular person is actually from that person until you have further reason to believe it's that person. Don't assume that an attachment is what it says it is. Don't give out your password to anyone, even if that person claims to be from "support."