

The Computer Support Newsletter

April 2004

<http://msa.ars.usda.gov/computerhelp>

email news: sntucker@msa-stoneville.ars.usda.gov

Computer Support Newsletter Audience

A note to our many readers.....

Normally, this newsletter is published mainly to inform MSA employees of Information Technology (IT) news and happenings, but since this is the first newsletter in over a year, this issue is being dedicated to computer security for all users.

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A common view of computer security is that the threat comes from a vast group of malicious hackers "out there." Although hackers are still common, the field is increasingly becoming dominated by professionals who steal information for sale and disgruntled employees who damage systems or steal information for revenge or profit. While the threat from outsiders is indeed as great as generally believed, the malicious insider with approved access to the system is an even greater threat!

Desktop Security

3 Steps to Ensure Your PC is Protected

1. Use up-to-date antivirus software
2. Get computer updates.
3. Use strong passwords.

Anti-Virus Software

Understanding Anti-Virus Software

Anti-virus software can identify and block many viruses before they can infect your computer. Once you install anti-virus software, it is important to keep it up to date.

What does anti-virus software do?

Anti-virus software scans files or your computer for certain patterns that may indicate an infection. The patterns it looks for are based on the signatures, or definitions, of known viruses.

Which software should you use?

Users that login to the MSA's Novell network are automatically downloaded Computer Associates eTrust InoculateIT. For those not connected to the network, Symantec Norton Anti-Virus Corporate Edition 8.0 software has been distributed to all Mid South Area Locations. Please contact your Location/Unit Computer Specialist or Assistant for setup.

How do you get the current virus signatures?

Virus authors are continually releasing new and updated viruses, so it is important that you have the latest definitions installed on your computer. Once again those users that login to the MSA's Novell network have updated virus definition files downloaded at login. Users not connected to the network, should ask your computer contact to set your system up for unattended, "live updates". That's right, the program will go out to the Symantec web site and download and install the most current signatures, when available, without you having to bother with it.

Once you have installed an anti-virus package, you should scan your entire computer periodically. There are two types of scans:

- Automatic scans - Allows you to configure the software to automatically scan specific files or directories and prompt you at set intervals to perform complete scans.
- Manual scans - It is also a good idea to manually scan files you receive from an outside source before opening them. This includes:

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- saving and scanning email attachments or web downloads rather than selecting the option to open them directly from the source
- scanning floppy disks, CDs, or DVDs for viruses before opening any of the files.

While installing anti-virus software is one of the easiest and most effective ways to protect your computer, it does have its limitations. Even the best anti-virus software can't protect against a user's bad choices. You can increase your level of protection with a few common sense rules. Most of the current generation of viruses spoof (forge) the "From" address using ones found on an infected machine; because of this be suspicious of every email you receive, especially if it:

- comes from someone you haven't talked to in a while
- comes from a mail list but the subject line seems written for you, such as "Hey [your name]"
- has vague language that encourages you to open an attachment or link to read a full message
- be especially suspicious of all email with an attachment

Hint: To scan your notebook or pc from home, this is a useful site: <http://housecall.trendmicro.com>

Windows Updates

What is Windows Update?

Windows Update is the online extension of Windows that helps you to keep your computer up-to-date. Use Windows Update to choose updates for your computer's operating system, software, and hardware.

Where do I go for Windows Updates?

To manually check if your computer needs updates follow these 3 easy steps:

1. Open Internet Explorer
2. On the menu, select Tools / Windows Update or enter the following in the address bar:
[http:// windowsupdate.microsoft.com](http://windowsupdate.microsoft.com)
3. Click on Scan for Updates

How do I know if I need an update?

Windows Update scans your computer and provides you with a tailored selection of updates that apply only to the items on your computer. During the scan, a list of categories appears under Pick Updates to Install in the Windows Update window.

Critical Updates are important!

Any update that is critical to the operation of

your computer is considered a "Critical Update," and is automatically selected for installation during the scan for available updates. These updates are provided to help resolve known issues, and to protect your computer from known security vulnerabilities. Whether a critical update applies to your operating system, software programs, or hardware, it is listed in the "Critical Updates" category.

Windows XP Users

It is recommended you configure your computer to automatically download updates and prompt you before installing. This will save you the time of having to run the manual check for updates and at the same time give you the option not to install any non-critical updates not wanted.

To configure the Automatic Updates feature:

1. Right-click My Computer and then click Properties.
2. Click the Automatic Updates tab, make sure there is a check in the Keep my computer up to date box and then click Download the updates automatically....

Windows 98 Users

It is recommended you install Windows Critical Update Notification by using the

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Windows Update Web Site (if it's not installed on your computer this will be one of the update options once you scan for updates). Windows Critical Update Notification periodically connects to the Windows Update Web site, and if updates are found, you receive a message giving you the option to download and install updates.

Password Security

Your passwords allows only you access to your computer systems. Like the key to your home's front door, your password keeps out unwanted intruders.

Why is this important?

Someone who guesses or steals a password can conceivably access files, email messages, funds, and personal information. Once intruders gain access to a system, they can change or destroy files, send email threats, monitor other machines and systems on the same network and even monitor the remote systems to which the local users connect.

What can you do to help?

Well, to start with, don't leave any password lying around. Passwords, like the keys to your front door, provide security only if handled properly.

What to include in your password:

- Choose a password that is easy for you to remember but difficult to guess. It should contain at least six to eight characters.
- Use punctuation marks or symbols within your password. Do not use a blank space!
- Always mix upper- and lowercase letters.

What not to do:

- Don't write down your password!
- Don't send your password via email. Email is not secure.
- Don't store your password in a file on your computer.
- Don't use dictionary or foreign words, names, doubled names or first/last names and initials.
- Stay away from simple transformations of words (e.g., 7eleven, seven11, etc.) or any alphabet or keyboard sequence (e.g., asdfgh backwards or forwards).

- Don't even consider short words, single characters, phone numbers, or birth dates.

Strategies for choosing a good password

The following are only suggestions for developing a secure password. Please, please do not use these examples! Including them in this document compromises their security.

- Lines from a favorite childhood verse.
Example: London Bridge Is Falling Down
Password: LBif%Dwn
- Expressions about a favorite geographical area.
Example: I left my heart in San Francisco
Password: iLmHiS#F
Example: Sunny California
Password: suNical!
- Foods liked or disliked as a child.
Example: Fish on Fridays
Password: FoFda!
Example: Chocolate Pudding
Password: cHO%dinG

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Agency News

Operating System Recommendations

ARS has published the following minimum requirements for desktop PCs:

<i>Hardware Configuration:</i>	1.33 GHz or greater
<i>Memory:</i>	256MB RAM or greater (we recommend 512MB RAM)
<i>Operating Systems</i>	Microsoft Windows XP Professional
<i>Office Software:</i>	Microsoft Office XP Professional

NOTE: Please make sure the operating system is Microsoft Windows XP Professional and not XP Home. XP Home does not offer the added security of XP Professional.

HINT: For those still running a PC with Windows 98 as the operating system, if your current computer meets the minimum hardware criteria stated above and you're thinking of upgrading, **DON'T!** Upgrading from Windows 98 to Windows XP will only cause lots of problems and headaches. We recommend saving old computer data to an

external medium, reformatting the hard drive and installing Windows XP as a new installation.

Rumor Mill

Here's an update on some of the latest ARS initiatives:

- *Web Migration* – During the next few months the MSA Web site will be merged in to the main ARS website. I will be attending training this month and will hold training here at Stoneville for the local sites web editors soon after.
- *Word / Adobe Training* – We have submitted the names of those that will be receiving the training and are waiting on headquarters to provide more info on how and when. We will provide further news as it is received.
- *Informs Replacement* – No new licenses of informs are being issued. We have no information when an alternate means will be provided. In the meantime, you can download forms to fill out by hand from: <http://www.afm.ars.usda.gov/forms/new-formlst.htm> . More info to come.

- *MS Exchange migration* – We have no information on how or when this will take place. More info to come when provided from headquarters.

Need Help? Got Questions? Who do you Call?

Your local computer support person is your first point of contact for IT issues, including upgrading or replacing hardware and accessories. They can also assist you with installing new applications. See your computer support personnel for learning how to set your PC up for automatic "critical" Windows updates. If you do not have an updated operating system, your PC and/or software applications may not function properly and you're at a greater risk of becoming infected with a virus.

Comments and Questions:

Email your comments or questions to: sntucker@msa-stoneville.ars.usda.gov

Old Issues: Old issues of The Computer Support Newsletter can be found at: <http://msa.ars.usda.gov/computerhelp/newsletters.htm>