



Security and privacy 101: how to prevent spam

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Spam: the unsolicited e-mail you receive more often than not. It's usually commercial advertising and frequently for dubious products, get-rich-quick schemes, or illegal services.



We'll show you how to prevent spam from entering your inbox and give you some valuable tips for gaining control over your e-mail.

Identifying the culprit

The first step in combating the onslaught of spam is to know it when you see it. If you're lucky, you can identify spam based on its subject line. If it's offering you a lower mortgage, a date with Trixie, or free \$\$\$, you know it's spam. But be careful, because spammers often use guile to make the subject line something you might click on, such as "FWD: great punch line." So, even if the subject looks harmless, your best bet is to just delete it if you don't recognize the address.

Many spammers also fake the name of the sender with something common such as "Bob." Is this an e-mail from Uncle Bob? Or maybe it's from your co-worker? You don't know, and the spammer counts on your curiosity.

Also be sure to check the date it was sent. Most inboxes are sorted by time, so spammers may send messages to the top of the list by changing the date to several days earlier or later.

Worse yet, some spammers will fake an e-mail as being from someone you trust, such as a national bank or a well-known online retailer. It's all pretty sneaky.

Handling the evidence

Once you've identified a message as spam, don't just delete it. Here's what to do (and what not to do) when you have unwanted e-mail on your hands.

- » **First, identify spam to your email provider.** Companies like America Online (AOL), Microsoft (MSN/Hotmail), and Yahoo! stop a significant amount of spam using e-mail filters, so make sure your filter is on. Once it's activated, it will funnel unwanted messages into a Bulk Mail or Junk Mail folder.
- » **Never, ever open an attachment from a suspicious e-mail.** It may contain a virus that could wipe out everything on your PC. To compound the damage, it could duplicate the virus and send it to everyone in your e-mail address book, potentially destroying their machines as well.
- » **Don't forward unknown email.** Sometimes spam will have a fake "To" or "From" field. Since it appears that the e-mail was

erroneously sent to you, the spammer hopes you'll read it and helpfully forward it along. Don't.

- **Resist the temptation to unsubscribe.** Sometimes clicking a link that promises to unsubscribe you lets the spammer know that your e-mail address is valid, which means you might be spammed even more.

Handy prevention tips

The best way to fight spam is to keep it from arriving in your inbox in the first place. Here are some tips for preventing unwanted e-mail.

- **Don't post your e-mail address online.** Spammer software scans newsgroups, web sites, and web forums looking for e-mail addresses. If you post in such places, disguise your e-mail address. For instance, instead of jane-doe@something.com, you could type [jane-doe\(at sign\)something\(dot\)com](mailto:jane-doe(at sign)something(dot)com). But spammers are getting wise to these tactics, too.
- **Don't give out your e-mail address unless you know how it will be used.** Read a site's privacy policy (such as [HP's Online Privacy Statement US](#)) to learn about the company. If they don't have a privacy statement, you probably shouldn't trust them with your address.
- **Never buy anything advertised in spam.** Even if you happen to be looking for a lower mortgage rate, don't look for it in junk e-mail. Chances are the services advertised are bogus anyway. Respected loan companies don't randomly flood inboxes.
- **Update your address book.** Make sure that the people you want to have contact with are in your address book: your friends, family, business associates, and companies you've requested e-mail from. Most e-mail systems have a filter, so messages may not be delivered into a recipient's inbox unless the sender's e-mail address is included in their address book. Find out how to keep real mail from [getting filtered from your inbox](#).
- **Activate image blocking** through the settings on your e-mail account to avoid seeing potentially offensive pictures in your e-mail. For example, if you are using Yahoo! mail, choose Mail Options, and then select Image Blocking in the Spam Protection area.

Some images and graphics in e-mail actually alert the sender that you've opened the message, which verifies that your e-mail address is active. If you block these images from being downloaded, the sender won't receive this verification, and spammers will be less likely to buy your address in the future.

- **Use special software.** Many ISPs have built-in filters that work with their mail programs, but others don't. If your ISP doesn't have filtering, you may want to use a product such as SpamSubtract from InterMute, which allows you to filter and block e-mail according to pre-set categories, keywords, domain names, and more, so you won't miss out on any e-mails that are important to you.

Remember to keep reporting spam to your Internet service provider so they can track key offenders. If we all work together, spam may again become just a canned meat product!

It's the law

In response to the infrastructure costs and lost productivity related to spam, U.S. President George W. Bush recently signed a law to limit unwanted e-mail. (CA: new laws have been signed to limit unwanted e-mail.) Now, anyone sending commercial e-mail must provide a valid opt-out mechanism and honor all opt-out requests within 10 days. In addition, they must provide a physical address where customers can send unsubscribe requests via postal mail.

This new law allows criminal and civil action against spammers who don't comply with the law, and it should give consumers the means to limit the amount of unwanted e-mail they receive. Many companies, including HP, will see little change under the law, as ethical companies have long been providing opt-out and other feedback mechanisms to their customers. Even with the new law, the best way to deal with spam is to follow the guidelines mentioned in this article.

Up next: Block web advertising

In the next installment of the PC Discovery Series, you'll learn how to block banner ads, pop-up ads, and spam by using some simple web-browsing techniques, easy e-mail management tips, and more.

Learn more

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