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I advertise, as a home-based PC Troubleshooter, who makes house calls for removing viruses and performing maintenance needs in the Huntersville area of central North Carolina.

Recently removing spyware has become a second career for me. I get calls every day from my local customer base because their PCs have become sluggish. When I get to the scene, I find that spyware has hogged the PC resources and slowed down Internet connection by over 50%.

It appears that most spyware is downloaded from links to websites and pop-ups sponsored by â€œfriendly companiesâ€. Most users donâ€™t recall exactly how their PC got infected, although they probably acquiesced to some sort of unilateral agreement. To be sure, spyware is not the same as viruses or worms often installed from e-mail. Nonetheless, the spyware takes hold and performs more than simple abuse.

Most PC users are familiar with downloaded freeware, shareware, cookies, interactive content, and file sharing. What they may not realize is that such code (or components) may allow the developers of these applications and tools to actually collect and disseminate information about those using them. Spyware. Examples include: Gator, Weather Bug, BetterInternet, PrecisionTime, AdDestroyer, Incredimail, Comet Cursor, Yoogee, Hotbar, downloaded games and more.

As part of my education, I have subscribed to three Internet Forums to learn more about identifying and removal of spyware. The on-line Forums are extremely helpful, but the average user cannot follow the techniques. Removal is often hampered by the ability of the spyware to morph and reinstall itself. In spite of several spyware removal programs, it is not uncommon for the process to take five to 10 hours to remove hundreds of spyware components. The entries in the Windows â€œregistryâ€ are the most difficult.

PC user education is certainly needed. There is no shortage of information on the Internet, but the time to find, read and take the action steps requires a special state of mind that most users donâ€™t have the patience for.

Viruses and worms perform damage equivalent to graffiti and vandalism. Spyware is equivalent to sneaky intrusion and theft in many forms.

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