

When your computer calls overseas...without your OK

If you live in the U.S., would you ever call Vanuatu in the Southwest Pacific to connect to the Internet? How about Chad, Guyana or Madagascar?

Chances are you're using a local phone number to get online, and you know exactly what you are paying for the service. Nevertheless, many consumers are finding charges on their phone bills for calls to destinations that give new meaning to long distance. The calls were made through their modems without their knowledge or approval.

How does it happen? Some websites use international dialing to trick consumers into paying to access content. The sites claim to be "free" or advertise that "no credit card is needed," then prompt the user to download a "viewer" or "dialer" program. Here's the catch: Once the program is downloaded to the user's computer, it disconnects the Internet connection and reconnects to an international

long-distance phone number, at rates between \$2 and \$7 a minute.

These scams, typically associated with adult sites, don't require a credit card number for access. That means they are available to children, who can click onto them without their parents' knowledge or permission. Even if parents disable international calling from their phone lines, many modem dialers are programmed to circumvent the "block," and initiate international calls using a "10-10 dial-around" prefix.

The Federal Trade Commission says these scams are very lucrative for the operators, and it may be only a matter of time before they appear on sites that feature games, psychics, gambling and other services.

Here's how you can minimize your chances of finding surprise international long distance charges on your phone bill:

1. Beware of any program that enables your modem to re-dial to the Internet. If you see a dialog box on your computer indicating that it's dialing when you didn't direct it to, cancel the connection and hang up. Check the number you're dialing and continue only if it's a local call.
2. Read online disclosures carefully. They may be buried several clicks away in pages of small print. In addition, carefully scroll through the language in the typical gray boxes on your screen. Don't click on "OK" unless you know exactly what you're agreeing to.
3. Talk to your children. Recognize that they are obvious targets of international modem dialing scams and tell them the consequences of downloading "viewer" or "dialer" programs on the computer.

4. Monitor your children's Internet use. Keep track of the websites your child visits by checking the web browser history files and cache.
5. Be skeptical when surfing the web. Free doesn't always mean free.
6. Take action if you find charges on your phone bill that you didn't authorize. Contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection, toll-free, at 800-422-7128, or use the complaint form at <http://datcp.state.wi.us>.
7. Save your phone bill. If you think you've been a victim of international modem dialing, it may help identify the scammers.

To file a complaint, or to get free information on other consumer topics, contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection at:

(800) 422-7128

FAX: (608) 224-4939

TTY: (608) 224-5058

E-MAIL:

datcphotline@datcp.state.wi.us

WEBSITE:

<http://datcp.state.wi.us/>

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