Some Experts Tips

1. Turn it off, turn it back on. "Nine times out of ten, rebooting your computer (and any equipment that connects to it) will solve the problem."

2. We're like Santa: We know if you've been bad or good. Fessing up to what really happened right before the system crashed is going to save time-and I'm going to figure it out anyway.

3. Use "strong" passwords. Geek Squad agent Derek Meister suggests combining letters and numbers-but not your birth date-to create a "base" password, and adding a unique suffix for each site you use. If your base password is your spouse's initials and your anniversary date (say, SP061789), your Amazon password might be "SP061789AM."

4. Make sure you have current antivirus and anti-spyware protection, and set it to update at least once a day and run a full-system scan at least once a week.

5. There's no free lunch. Downloading free music, movies, and games from file-sharing sites can open holes in your system for others to exploit. Play it safe and use established services like Rhapsody, iTunes, and Netflix.

6. Remember: Public Wi-Fi is public. If you don't have a compelling reason to check your e-mail or bank account while sipping a latte at the mall, don't do it. While you're on a public network, even one that's encrypted, a nearby hacker can capture your passwords.

7. Give it a rest. Turning off your computer when it's not in use saves energy and clears out the RAM, or temporary memory, which would otherwise slow your machine over time.

8. If you can't get online, call your Internet service provider first. Connection problems can often be checked and fixed-free.

9. No, you can't use your cell phone to pop popcorn. Next time an Internet rumor drops into your inbox, don't just pass it on-check it out at www.snopes.com first.

10. If you don't understand me, I'm not doing my job. Confusing tech jargon is a sign of insecurity, not intelligence.

11. Keep it clean. On a PC, run Disk Cleanup and Disk Defragmenter at least once a month. This will store files more efficiently so your system doesn't slow down. After about four years, your computer is elderly. If you're shelling out for a blazing-fast Internet connection, pony up for a new model.

12. Check the cables. "People are always shocked that a cable came loose," says Geek Squad agent Derek Meister. Of course, everything that needs power is plugged into an outlet, right?

13. Got neighbors? If you do, protect your home wireless network with a password. "If a person

knows what he's doing, getting into a computer on a non-encrypted net-work is easy," says Schildkraut.

14. You backed up your data, right? External hard drives with lots of memory now sell for under $200, and automated programs like Cobian Backup make regular backups a no-brainer. Secure online backup services save your data offsite should anything happen to your home.

15. If you travel with your laptop, get a lock. A 2007 survey by the Computer Security Institute found that 50 percent of respondents had a laptop or other mobile device stolen in the past year. A simple cable lock (starting at about $20) lets you physically secure your laptop anywhere you go.

16. Remember: If your company owns the computer, they own what's on it, too—even your email in some cases. Act accordingly.

20. Please remember: We didn't create the problem; we're just trying to help you fix it.
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