VISTA SECURITY

In this lesson, you'll learn about Vista's new security features and how they promise to protect you from viruses, spyware, and identity theft.

It's the rare Windows user who hasn't had to deal with some kind of security hassle: phishing attempts, spyware infestations, virus activity, and the like. Vista brings numerous new tools to the table in an attempt to make your PC safer and less vulnerable.

Internet Explorer 7, for instance, includes a built-in anti-phishing filter. Suppose, for example, you receive an urgent e-mail from your credit card company warning you of fraudulent activity on your account. The message looks legit, complete with the company's logo and boilerplate warnings about identify theft (how ironic). You click the provided link and end up at the company's site, where you're asked to verify your personal information (by typing it in). Problem is, it's not the company's site, but rather an identical-looking fake. Internet Explorer 7 can detect these fakes and issue proper warning. This anti-phishing technology is also included in Vista's Outlook Express replacement, Windows Mail.

Added protections

Perhaps even more important, IE 7 employs a new Protected Mode that should help block the kinds of attacks that made IE 6 so vulnerable. Parts of that mode rely on a new Vista feature called User Account Control (UAC), which blocks certain tasks from running until the user manually approves them. For example, Vista won't install certain kinds of applications without your approval–a helpful safeguard against spyware or a virus that you didn't even know was there. Although UAC can get annoying–you need to provide consent just to access Device Manager–it goes a long way toward protecting you from hidden dangers.

Speaking of spyware, Vista incorporates Windows Defender, an anti-spyware and anti-malware utility that was available as an optional download for Windows XP. It runs in the background, so you won't have to deal with it unless it detects some unauthorized activity and requests your input.

Finally, Vista updates Windows XP's built-in firewall to include outbound protection, meaning that if some malware does find its way onto your PC, it'll have a hard time establishing communications with other PCs. Even so, you might want to consider a third-party firewall product that offers more robust protection, as Vista's blocks only the outbound traffic that matches preconfigured rules.
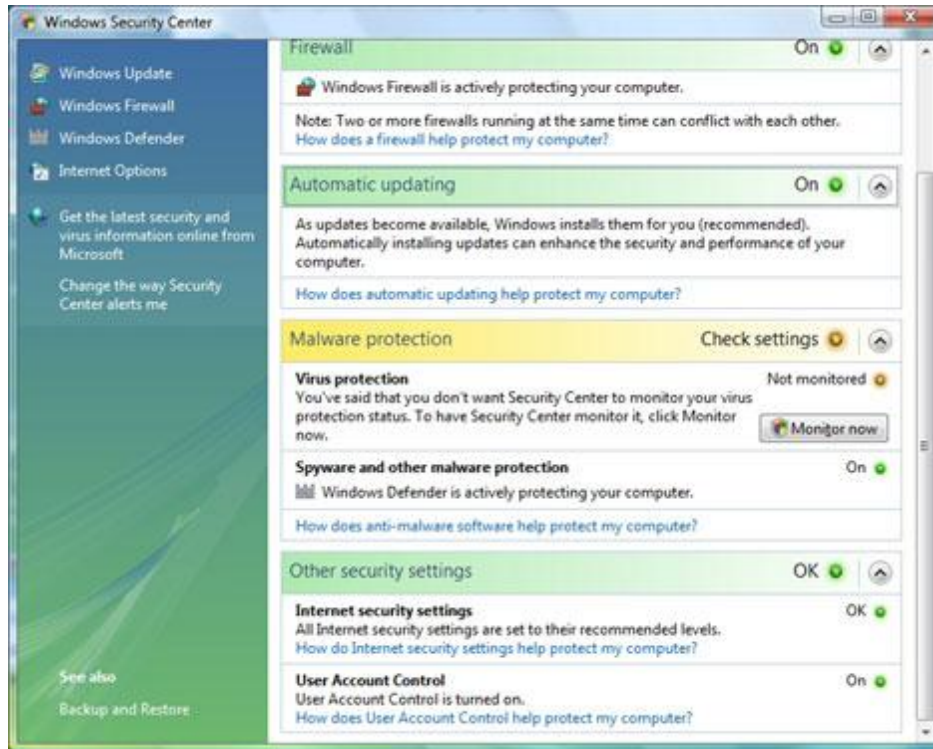
The Windows Vista Security Center

The settings for Vista's security features can be turned on and off from the Windows Vista Security Center screen. This allows you to control Windows Defender and other applications that safeguard your computer, including the Windows firewall and virus protection.

By all reports, Microsoft takes security seriously with Vista. In fact, experts from Symantec and McAfee (two major security vendors) predict that Vista's new security features will shut down current avenues of hacker attack, according to CNET's Security Watch. Still, be ever vigilant against attacks; where there is a will by cyber-criminals to attack Vista, they will eventually find a way.