



When Cookies are Bad

Tony Olson, March 2013



Yum, nothing is like the smell of fresh baked cookies. Hot out of the oven, they are soft and moist. Pull one apart. The melted chocolate chips stretch like delicious little suspension bridges between the two cookie towers (foreshadowing of the geeky technical nature of this article). Cookies are wonderful!

At some point, you were asked by your browser if you are going to allow web sites to deposit cookies on your computer. Should you deny your computer a cookie? It seems so innocent. Most, but not all, computer cookies are good.

A computer cookie is a small file placed on your computer by a web server. The purpose of the cookie is to allow your computer browser to interact with that web site more efficiently. But not all cookies are what they appear to be. I hate it when I think I'm biting into a tasty oatmeal chocolate chip cookie, only to find out it has raisins instead!

One of the most common computer cookies is the session cookie. I think this type of cookie is really better called a footprint. It leaves information on the site. It can provide protection by ensuring that you are who you say you are, not someone who copied your password. The cookie can help by passing information from one web page to another, while remembering the items you put in your shopping cart. This is essential for e-commerce. The cookie only contains information that you freely provide to a web site.

The entire reason that the Internet is free is because of advertising, and cookies play a role in determining which ads you see. A tracking cookie tells the website owner what ads you read, what pages on the site interested you most, and what other web sites attracted your attention. This is partially how Amazon is able to suggest other book titles you might enjoy. Many people love this capability!

But, cookies can also be used to track the sites you visit, or to show ads that are at best, embarrassing. These are bad cookies, and can themselves be considered spyware. The porn industry is an infamous source of bad cookies, although this isn't the only place to get a bad cookie. Many of the sites that are sources of bad cookies are based outside the USA, but there are bad sites in America as well.

Your browser can't distinguish between good and bad cookies. It will allow you to refuse all cookies, but doing that severely limits what you can do on the Internet. Some people manually review and delete cookies every so often. A problem with this method is that deleting a cookie after it has been used won't undo any impact it has had. This is why D2 strongly encourages the use of a good, up-to-date anti-virus and anti-spyware software. It can help detect and delete some bad cookies, and it will also kill spyware.

In summary, you want good cookies and you need to set your browser to accept them at some level. How can you avoid bad cookies? Don't visit questionable web sites. Don't open emails from questionable sources. DO use a reputable anti-virus and anti-spyware program and keep it up to date. Last, but not least, when using your work computer equipment, it is important that you follow your company's rules about visiting any non-work related sites!