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### **Web world full of pitfalls**

computer expert: Internet rife with scams

#### **Barb Pacholik**

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REGINA -- There was a time when Kevin Reddekopp's key advice to avoid getting stung by a computer scam was to stay out of the "seedy side" of the Internet.

But these days, it's just as easy to get robbed in the good neighborhoods, says the Regina computer expert. "It's somewhat dangerous even on main street."

Some 700 SaskTel customers know that all too well after being hit recently by an Internet scheme that resulted in whopping long-distance bills to a tiny African country they likely never knew existed.

The customers, who use a dial-up Internet service, unwittingly had a "dialer" program loaded into their computer, which hijacked their modem and placed direct, long-distance calls to Sao Tome.

Dialer scams have been around for years and have grown more sophisticated, said the owner of Reddecomp Technical Services. Symptoms of a system that might be infected by "spyware," which includes dialers, are that it's slow, crashes a lot, sees lots up pop-up ads, has a changed Internet home page, and new bookmarked pages not intentionally placed there. Reddekopp, who has been providing computer and network service to home computer users and small businesses since 1999, said he's found that at least one in four systems with spyware also have dialers.

When first created, dialer programs had a somewhat legitimate purpose. Much like a 1-900 phone number, they allowed computer users to be directly billed instead of using a credit card to buy time on certain websites -- usually pornography-related, explained Reddekopp. Often there was a warning so the user was aware he was accepting a dialer for use on that site, he added.

But over time, some websites "became a little less forthcoming," he noted. "They went from tactics that were underhanded to illegal."

Many dialers today masquerade as something else in pop-up advertisements. For example, they offer a "viewer application" such as speedier Internet service or a program to listen to music for "free." Some particularly insidious ones pose as legitimate Microsoft windows or anti-virus programs or get in via executable e-mail attachments or viruses, said Reddekopp. "They're designed to dupe even a beyond-average computer user."

And clicking on the words "yes" or "no" or "close" doesn't necessarily lead to the expected result. "They can program any way they like."

Reddekopp said it's very easy for the dialers to slip past the computer user since there may be no indication the modem is in use. Those using a high-speed Internet connection usually aren't affected because they've disconnected their modem, but some are still vulnerable because the modem may be connected to a fax. Moreover, high-speed users aren't immune from many other spyware schemes.

Reddekopp advises anyone who has been hit by a dialer scam to shut down the computer and get an antivirus program to rid the system of spyware or get technical help.

He said the primary way to avoid such problems is to install every available security update on your system. Microsoft has free updates for security flaws at [windowsupdate.microsoft.com](http://windowsupdate.microsoft.com).

In addition, software is available to detect many fraudulent programs. But know exactly what you're looking for since an Internet search will often yield fakes containing spyware.

As for trying to safely disconnect from potentially illegitimate pop-up windows, try the alt F4 key to close them or hold down the esc key while closing.

Bottom line -- be wary. "People trust the Internet a little too much," said Reddekopp.

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