

Teckspert Talk

What are Cookies?

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First, and contrary to popular belief, cookies are NOT programs. They don't do anything at all. They are simple 'text files' which you can read using the Notebook program on your own PC. Typically, they contain two pieces of information: a site name and unique user ID.

How do they work?

The first time you visit a site that uses cookies, a cookie is downloaded onto your PC. The next time you visit that site, your PC checks to see if it has a cookie that is relevant (that is, one containing the site name) and sends the information contained in that cookie back to the site. The site then "knows" that you have been there before, and in some cases, tailors what pops up on screen to take account of that fact. For instance, it can be helpful to vary content according to whether this is your first ever visit to a site – or your 71st.

The good thing about cookies...

Some cookies are more sophisticated. They might record how long you spend on each page on a site, what links you click, even your preferences for page layouts and color schemes. They can also be used to store data on what is in your "shopping cart", adding items as you click. The possibilities are endless, and generally the role of cookies is beneficial, making your interaction with frequently-visited sites smoother with no extra effort on your part. Without cookies, online shopping would be much harder.

...and the bad

So why the paranoia? The answer probably depends on how you feel about organizations storing information about you. There is nothing especially secret or exceptional about the information gathered by cookies, but you may just dislike the idea of your name being added to marketing lists, or your information being used to target you for special offers. That is your right, just as others are entitled to go along with the process.

When cookies first started to appear, there was controversy. Some people regarded them as inherently sneaky - your PC was being used (without warning) to store personal information about you, which could then be used to build a picture of your browsing habits.

Most modern websites use cookies in some way, and it is unlikely that the majority of internet users even notice cookies working away in the background as they browse from site to site. Until now, it has been up to individual users to either block or allow cookies using settings in their internet browser.

Most sites will now draw your attention to their cookie policy when you first visit the home page. Don't be put off by this; you were probably sharing details with the site before without even knowing it. In many cases, you can click to say you understand the cookies policy but in many instances, you can simply ignore the announcement and continue browsing as normal.

Sites will continue to use cookies and the information they store in order to make your online browsing an easier, more enjoyable experience. Cookies are nothing to be scared of, even if the new prompts seeking your consent might seem a little off-putting for the cautious internet user.

You can change how cookies are stored on your machine by using the "Tools", "Options" or "Settings" menu in your internet browser.