DEVOURING YOUR COOKIES

This newsletter is one in a series that provides general information on key components of the HIPAA Security Regulation. More detailed information and policies are available on the MCW HIPAA website. In this newsletter we’ll cover information about Cookies that you need to be aware of.

What are cookies? Cookies are small bits of information that get stored on your hard drive (persistent cookies) or in the memory (non-persistent cookies) of your computer. They are placed on your computer by the websites you are visiting.

How are cookies being used? Usually these tiny files are used by the host website to identify you. Cookies are the way a website remembers who you are, so that on your return visit, the website can say, "Hello, welcome back." In some cases, websites allow you to customize the presentation to you by setting your own preferences. Cookies enable the website to "remember" your settings and other amenities that make the Internet a more personalized experience.

Most cookies are harmless and do not affect your computer in any way. They will expire (delete themselves) when you leave the website, in a few hours, days, months, or in some cases years.

However, some websites that are installing cookies on your hard drive may contain malicious code. Some Internet advertising and marketing companies are using cookies to track you online and gather personal and sensitive information about you. This information is then used for their own purposes, usually for financial gain.

This information can include the websites you visit, the duration of your visit, the products you purchase, online subscriptions, and more. Once gathered, this personal information can be compiled and associated to a specific user. In most cases, this is being done without your knowledge or consent.

How can you manage your cookies? You can limit the number of cookies your browser will accept, and you can also set your browser to alert you when a cookie is being sent and saved to your PC. In many cases, you may need the flexibility of allowing a cookie to be accepted so you can access a website. However, you should be able to do this by adjusting the settings on your browser as needed.

You can set your computer's browser to accept all cookies, reject all cookies, or to alert you every time a cookie is sent so you can make a decision to accept or reject them on a case-by-case basis. The process of configuring how you interact with cookies is dependent upon your browser. The “Help” feature for your particular browser contains instructions on how to configure for receiving cookies.

Unwanted cookies? Unwanted cookies should be deleted from your hard drive every 1-2 weeks. To delete cookies in the Microsoft Internet Explorer version 6.0 or greater environment, follow these steps:

1. Open your Internet browser.
2. Click on “Tools”
3. Click on “Internet Options”
4. Under the Temporary Internet Files section click on “Delete Cookies.”
5. On the dialog box asking “Delete all cookies in the Temporary Internet Files folder?” click “OK”

If you have questions on unwanted Cookies on your system, contact your Desktop Technician or System Manager.

YOU CAN REFERENC ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON COMPUTER SECURITY AT:

The MCW HIPAA website: http://infoscope.mcw.edu/display/router.asp?docid=8598
The MCW Information Services website: http://infoscope.mcw.edu/display/router.asp?docid=7798