

COMGEN **(COMPUTERS FOR GENEALOGY)**

Current Issue: This issue of COMGEN deals with three computer issues that need your attention. The first is insuring your computer operating system is at the current release level in light of Microsoft's recently published support schedule. The second is a discussion of how to update your computer. The other deals with the recent notice of a nasty virus named the Conficker virus.

Microsoft Details Support Plans: *Editor's Note:* The following information on the support for your Microsoft products was recently released from a variety of sources. See my recommendations and interpretation of these items at the end of this article.

April marks the deadlines for support — in some cases, free support, in other cases, paid — for a handful of older Microsoft Windows and Office products.

Microsoft is ending mainstream (free) support for Windows XP Home and Professional, as well as for its Office 2003 suite, on April 14, 2009.

Microsoft is offering paid, extended support for XP Professional users (who also have Software Assurance licensing contracts) until April 8, 2014. It also will provide paid, extended support for Office 2003 through August 4, 2012.

(Microsoft continues to provide free security-specific fixes to customers for its products, even if they don't pony up for "Extended Hotfix" support until the extended support date is reached.)

In case you're wondering about support deadlines for other Windows and Office products, here are a few of the key ones.

Windows 2000: Free support ended June 30, 2005; paid support ends on July 13, 2010. Service Pack 3 was retired on June 30, 2005. No more SPs planned.

Windows XP SP2: Service pack will be retired on July 13, 2010.

Windows XP SP3: Service pack due to be retired two years after SP4 (if there is one) releases or in April 2014, whichever comes first.

Windows Vista Business: Free support ends on April 10, 2012; paid support ends on April 11, 2017.

Windows Vista SP1: Service pack will be retired two years after the release of SP2 (which is expected in April 2009), so likely in April 2011 (?).

Office 2003 SP3: Service pack will be retired one year after SP4 (if there is one, which is doubtful) is released or in August 2014, whichever comes first.

Office 2007: Free support ends on April 10, 2012; paid support ends on April 11, 2017.

Office 2007 SP1: Service pack will be retired a year after SP2 debuts, so likely in April 2010 (?).

Editor's Interpretation and Recommendations: There are no surprises here, really. XP remains Microsoft's most popular operating system. What they are continuing, short term, is support for the much older Windows 2000 and the initial version of XP. **YOU SHOULD NOT BE USING THESE VERSIONS ANYWAY!** Microsoft regularly provides bug fixes and security patches for their products. After a period of time they aggregate

these fixes and patches and package them with new minor features into what they call a Service Pack. XP is now at Service Pack 3 for XP. If you are not at this level then you need to force an upgrade. The same goes for your Office products.

How to do I determine the current XP Service Pack release level of my PC (you might ask)? To determine the installed Service Pack level of your PC, follow the steps below:

Step 1. If you have a “My Computer” icon on your desktop move the cursor (arrow) of your mouse on it and click the right mouse button.

If you do not have a “My Computer” icon on your desktop move the cursor (arrow) of your mouse down to the “Start” button on the lower left of your computer screen. A menu will appear and a “My Computer” line will appear, usually on the upper right of the screen, move the cursor (arrow) of your mouse on it and click the right mouse button.

Step 2: After right clicking a context menu will pop up, move your cursor to the “Properties” line and left click.

Step 3: A “System Properties” screen will appear. On the first window the “System” description will appear. The first entry you will see is the operating system information. If you are an XP user you should have installed Service Pack 3. If it is either Service Pack 1 or 2, you need to force and upgrade.

Microsoft Office products also have Service Packs associated with them. For those of you who have Office 2003, and there are millions of us who do, you need to upgrade to the latest Service Pack which is release 3. The method of determining where you are is different than the process detailed above. Follow the steps below to find your release level.

Step 1. Open one of your Office 2003 products.

Step 2. With a product open move your cursor to the “Help” entry on your menu bar at the top of the application.

Step 3. A pull down list will appear, select “About” from the list. Your Service Pack level will be at the top of the screen, usually abbreviated SPX. Once again you should be at the SP3 release level. If you are not, you need to force an upgrade.

Using Microsoft’s Automatic Update Feature: XP and Vista both have an automatic (or not if you don’t choose to use it) update feature. For enhanced security, and to ensure that your computer always receives the latest updates in a timely manner, you should set up Automatic Updates so that it automatically downloads and installs critical updates as soon as they are released.

With Automatic Updates, Windows can routinely check for the latest important updates for your computer and install them automatically. These updates, which include critical updates and security updates, should be installed on your computer as soon as they are released, so that they can help protect your computer against viruses and other security threats.

Automatic Updates finds all important updates for your computer, including security updates, critical updates, and service packs, and installs them automatically, so that you don't have to search for them or worry that some might be missing.

You can control the way that you get updates from Microsoft by going to the “Security Center” on your desktop. Go to “Start”, select the “Control Panel” from the list; then

select "Security Center" from the list. On the Windows Security Center screen select the "Automatic Updates Settings" button and review and select your preferred option. I have chosen to select the 3rd option which notifies me of available updates. I then go and look at the updates and select those I choose to download. In most cases I would suggest that you select the "Automatic Update" option unless you know more about the XP Operating system. From this page you can force an update by selecting the "Check for the Latest Updates from Windows Update" located in the upper left of the window.

Remember that you need to use IE for Microsoft Updates.

Internet Explorer 8 Available: IE8 has been released. I strongly recommend that you do not download it at this time. Current analysis in the technical community have reported that over 2,500 applications do not work with IE8. If you are smart you will use the latest Firefox browser for active Internet work and keep your IE6 or 7 for the Microsoft updates.

The Conficker Virus: Recent attention on this worm in the press is well founded. It is listed as the most dangerous virus (worm) since 2003. It appears to target businesses and networks but workstations as part of those entities can be affected. Once a machine is infected, the worm can download and install additional malware from attacker-controlled Web sites. Since that could mean anything from a password stealer to remote control software, a Conficker-infected PC is essentially under the complete control of the attackers.

What you can do: First, above we talked about keeping your operating system up-to-date with the latest patches, fixes and updates. If you have done so consistently, you are fairly safe and protected. Most of our computers are so low in the fool chain of these Internet predators that we are not much of a target. A security patch for this worm was released by Microsoft in October of 2008. Second, you need to make sure you have antivirus software running on your computer and configured to look out for threats from all media types, e-mail and the Internet. You need to also make sure that this antivirus software has a live update feature and it is downloading new virus definitions at least daily. If you are doing these things habitually then you should be okay.