



Windows XP Service Pack 2

What is it?

Windows XP Service Pack 2 (SP2) is an update for Windows XP that groups together all the fixes and tweaks that Microsoft has come up with since XP was first introduced in 2001. In addition to fixing a large number of security problems, it also adds new features, like pop-up blocking, and an enhanced firewall to help keep your computer safe when it's connected to the Internet.

Why should I install it?

The simplest reasons are that it gives Internet Explorer the ability to block pop-up ads, and it fixes a lot of problems that could cause your computer to crash. More importantly, it fixes a large number of security issues: weaknesses that allow hackers to take control of your computer, access your data, or even use your computer to send spam to million of other people.

Things that you won't ever know about are fixed too, like the little bug that keeps XP's firewall from starting up right away when you turn your computer on. This means that for several seconds, even if you follow all of Microsoft's recommendations, your computer is vulnerable to attack if you have a high-speed Internet connection. It can take less time than that for a hacker to get in, or for a worm (a type of virus) to install itself. Once that has happened, activating the firewall is like closing a door with a broken lock – the bad guys can get back in whenever they want.

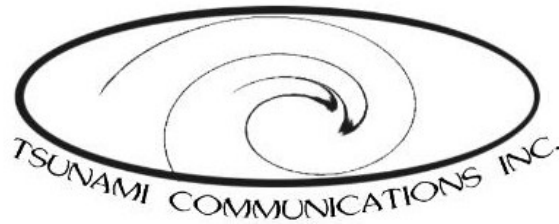
Why shouldn't I install it?

No piece of software is perfect, and Microsoft certainly has had their share of problems with updates like this one; it's wise to avoid being one of the first to install it. There can be problems with your software: some firewalls and anti-virus software won't work without a bit of extra effort on your part. (Microsoft has a list of applications, and how to fix them, on their web site)

Any significant update runs a small risk of causing big problems with your computer: anything from applications that stop working to a system crash – you could even wipe out your hard drive and lose all your data. (You have your important documents backed up, right?)

Fortunately, the risk is quite small, and most people won't have major problems. The installation process backs up all the system files it replaces, so you can uninstall it if you need to.

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Everyone says to wait before installing SP2. When should I install it?

This is the big question. Fortunately, it's easy to figure out. Is your computer ever connected to the Internet? If you answered yes, then you need to install SP2 sooner rather than later.

However, don't just install it without any preparation. You should make sure your computer is in good shape before you start – if there are existing problems, you'll just make things worse. Check to make sure you have several hundred MB free on your hard drive. Make sure your anti-virus software is working and up-to-date. Run a scan for viruses. Use a program like AdAware (www.lavasoftusa.com) to remove any spyware from your computer: Microsoft has identified an issue where certain spyware programs will prevent SP2 from installing properly. Most importantly, back up your important files before you start.

How do I install it?

There are (at least) three ways to get the update. Microsoft has started to make it available via the Automatic Updates feature, so if you have that enabled, it will be downloaded to your PC, and you will be prompted to install it. Or you can go the Windows Update web site (www.windowsupdate.com) and download it from there. If you have several computers, you can download a stand-alone file that you can save to your hard drive, and then use your network or a CD burner to copy the file to each machine.

The first two options will download about 90 MB, while the stand-alone file is almost 300 MB. Make sure you have enough disk space to save the file, and enough time to wait for the download.

In any event, the installation can take 30 minutes or more to complete, and you may think the computer has locked up. Be patient – it's best to leave the computer alone for an hour or so, and then reboot it after it's finished, and it prompts you to do so.

For more detailed information on how to deploy SP2 in your corporate environment, please contact Tsunami (contact@tsunami.ca).

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