How to tell if a link is safe without clicking on it

By Justin Phelps PCWorld Feb 7, 2012 11:31 am PST

How-To

Even the best security software can't protect you from the headaches you'll encounter if you click an unsafe link. Unsafe links appear to be shortcuts to funny videos, shocking news stories, awesome deals, or "Like" buttons, but are really designed to steal your personal information or hijack your computer. Your friends can unknowingly pass on unsafe links in emails, Facebook posts, and instant messages. You'll also encounter unsafe links in website ads and search results. Use these link-scanning tips to check suspicious links. All of these solutions are free, fast, and don't require you to download anything.

Hover Over the Link

Sometimes a link masks the website to which it links. If you hover over a link without clicking it, you'll notice the full URL of the link's destination in a lower corner of your browser. For example, both of these links connect you to PCWorld's homepage, but you wouldn't know that without hovering:

[Click Here!](#)

http://www.freerolexwatches.com/

Use a Link Scanner

Link scanners are websites and plug-ins that allow you to enter the URL of a

suspicious link and check it for safety. There are many free and reliable link scanners available; I suggest you try [URLVoid](#) first. URLVoid scans a link using multiple services, such as Google, [MyWOT](#), and Norton SafeWeb, and reports the results to you quickly.

URLVoid scans several security databases for information on sketchy Web domain names.

Check Out Shortened Links

URLVoid can't properly handle shortened URLs from services such as bitly, Ow.ly, and TinyURL (URLVoid will scan the shortening service website instead of the link to which it points). To scan the mysterious shortlinks you'll often find on Twitter and Facebook, use [Sucuri](#). Sucuri automatically expands the shortlink and draws upon a handful of services, such as Google, Norton SafeWeb, and PhishTank, to determine if the real link is safe. You can also use Sucuri for scanning nonshortened links, but URLVoid checks more sources.

Sucuri can help you determine whether shortened links are safe or not.

Copy a Link—Safely

Services like URLVoid and Sucuri require you to type in or paste a suspicious link—but how do you quickly and safely grab the URL without opening anything? Easy. Just right-click the link to bring up a context menu, then click *Copy shortcut* (in Internet Explorer), *Copy Link Location* (in Firefox), or *Copy Link Address* (in Chrome). The URL is now copied to your clipboard and you can paste it into any search field.

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