

Tech Tips for Seniors

They're Watching and Listening

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No. You're not being paranoid.

It's just important to be aware of how others may be learning about what you are doing at any moment, what you are saying, and what you are interested in.

Whether you have a computer or a mobile phone, advertising companies such as Google, Amazon and Apple have installed on almost all devices the ability to know what you're typing or saying.

The good news is, you can turn off those information-gathering “cookies” in the Settings menus on your devices.

A “cookie” is built-in software installed by a manufacturer or inadvertently by you. It is a green light for advertisers to look inside your device to collect information about you, such as your age, where you live or even what kind of music you like.

Ever wonder why TV commercials for cars and trucks often promote the dealers in your area or why you get lots of commercials about pharma products made for Senior citizens? It’s because cookies are installed by Verizon and Comcast inside the TV receivers you rent from them. Information about your Zip code, your favorite TV channels and the average age of people in your area are transmitted from those receivers to the TV service you subscribe to.

Siri, the voice-activated app on Apple's iPhones and iPads, lets you ask questions or get driving directions without typing them. It is always turned on unless you turn it off in Settings.

Siri listens to every spoken word and transmits those messages to advertisers. Those companies may send you an E-mail or text message about a product related to a general topic (such as your back pain) you may have been talking to a friend about.

You can quickly and easily turn off Siri by going to the "Siri & Search" pull-down menu in Settings. Slide all of the choices to the off position.

With Amazon's Alexa, here's how to stop it from listening to voices in the room:

- Open the Alexa app on your phone.

- Tap the menu button on the top left of the screen.
- Select “Alexa Account.”
- Choose “Alexa Privacy.”
- Select “Manage how your data improves Alexa.”
- Turn off the button next to “Help Develop New Features.”

Next, it is important to deal with the spying browsers on your computer and phone. Browsers are the apps that allow you to conduct Internet searches.

According to a recent Washington Post article, the worst offender is Google’s Chrome browser.

While Mozilla’s Firefox and Apple’s Safari aren’t perfect, they have built-in blocking software to

deter advertisers from spying on what you type in your web searches.

You can turn off Chrome's ability to report about you to Google's ad customers by following these steps:

- Open Chrome on your computer or mobile device.
- Tap the three vertical dots (the Menu) in the upper right corner of your screen.
- At the bottom of that menu, click "Advanced".
- Under "Privacy and security," click "Site settings".
- Click "Cookies".
- Turn off "Allow sites to save and read cookie data".

You can also turn off cookies in Safari and Firefox. But if you turn off cookies on a computer itself, you may also be turning off

that computer's ability to report operating problems to you.

In other words, not all cookies are bad.

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If you have questions about any of this, feel free to make a "Technology Tips" appointment on Tuesday mornings at Generations, when the center opens. Just call the main number: 215-723-5841.

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