

## HTTP Cookies

1 If you've ever read a newspaper article about the internet, it's likely that someone, somewhere will have **mentioned**  
2 'cookies'. They may have been explained as an evil and intrusive spying **mechanism tracking** your every move on  
3 the net - or a harmless device designed to make your life easier. This guide should clear up any **confusion** and ease  
4 any concerns.

5 First, and **contrary** to popular belief, cookies are NOT programs. They don't do anything at all. They are simple  
6 'text **files**' which you can read using the Notebook program on your own PC. Typically, they contain two pieces of  
7 information: a site name and unique user ID.

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### 9 **How do they work?**

10 When you visit a **site** that uses cookies for the first time, a cookie is downloaded onto your PC. The next time you  
11 visit that site, your PC **checks** to see if it has a cookie that is **relevant** (that is, one containing the site name) and  
12 sends the information contained in that cookie back to the site.

13 The site then 'knows' that you have been there before, and in some cases, **tailors** what **pops up** on screen to take  
14 account of that fact. For instance, it can be helpful to vary **content** according to whether this is your first ever visit  
15 to a site - or your 71st.

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### 17 **The good thing about cookies...**

18 Some cookies are more **sophisticated**. They might **record** how long you spend on each page on a site, what links  
19 you click, even your **preferences** for page **layouts** and colour schemes. They can also be used to **store** data on what  
20 is in your 'shopping cart', adding **items** as you click.

21 The possibilities are endless, and generally the role of cookies is **beneficial**, making your **interaction** with frequently-  
22 visited sites smoother - for no **extra effort** on your part. Without cookies, online shopping would be much harder.

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### 24 **...and the bad**

25 So why the paranoia? The answer probably depends on how you feel about organizations - both big business and  
26 government - storing information about you. There is nothing especially secret or **exceptional** about the information  
27 **gathered** by cookies, but you may just dislike the idea of your name being added to marketing lists, or your  
28 information being used to **target** you for special offers. That is your right, just as others are entitled to go along with  
29 the process.

30 When cookies first started to appear, there was **controversy**. Some people regarded them as inherently sneaky - your  
31 PC was being used (without warning) to store personal information about you, which could then be used to build a  
32 picture of your browsing habits.

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### 34 **Cookies and the law**

35 Most modern websites use cookies in some way, and it is unlikely that the majority of internet users even **notice**  
36 cookies working away in the **background** as they browse from site to site. Until now **it has been up to** individual  
37 users to either block or **allow** cookies using settings in their internet browser. From the end of May 2012 though, a  
38 new EU law will **require** all sites that use cookies to seek your express permission to store and retrieve data about  
39 your browsing habits.

40 Most sites will now draw your attention to their cookie policy when you first visit the home page. Don't **be put off**  
41 by this, you were probably sharing details with the site before without even knowing it. In many cases you can click  
42 to say you understand the cookies **policy** but in many **instances** you can simply ignore the **announcement** and  
43 continue browsing as normal.

44 Sites will continue to use cookies and the information they store in order to make your online browsing an easier,  
45 more enjoyable experience. Cookies are nothing to be scared of, even if the new prompts seeking your consent might  
46 seem a little off-putting for the cautious internet user.

47 In the UK, the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) will be closely **monitoring** sites to make sure that they  
48 comply with this new **legislation**, so there will be no avoiding the **regulations**. Websites have had over a year to  
49 make the changes to their code, so there should be no excuses!

50 You can of course still change how cookies are stored on your machine by clicking on the 'Tools' menu in your  
51 internet browser, but you may find that the new law means your **concerns** about privacy and your personal data have  
52 been **addressed**.

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54 [Adapted from BBC-WebWise](#)