

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.

8 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.

16 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.

23 24 **...and the bad**

25 So why the paranoia? The answer probably depends on how you feel about organisations - 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.

33 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](#)