

PRODUCT REVIEWS

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Norton Safe on the Web: suitable for security novice

By Joe Peschel

The growth of the Web as a business resource for transferring and obtaining information has also increased the risk of a security breach. Symantec aims to safeguard the Web research and communications of heavy Internet users with its Norton Safe on the Web, Version 42b. This product protects Windows 95 Registered files (you choose the file type) from malicious applications such as hidden hostile Java, JavaScript, and ActiveX applications.

The program also attempts to make browser security settings easier to understand. Norton Secret Stuff is included with the program, intended as a major security feature that lets you encrypt e-mail. Other smaller components of the program include a "live update," a connection to the Symantec Web site

for security briefs, and a slim primer on security.

Currently available as a free download, Norton Safe on the Web is a preview release, but Symantec will be charging for it in the future. Right now, it's worth the time required to download, but future editions will need more capability if Symantec plans to sell it.

I tested Norton Safe on the Web with Netscape Navigator Gold 3.01. It will also work with Microsoft Internet Explorer 4.0.

Norton Safe on the Web requires a Java-compatible browser and uses a collection of local .HTM files to perform its work. Collections of wizards guide you through the chore of protecting file types and changing security settings. I decided to protect .TXT and .DOC files. Safe on the Web

prevented even local programs from accessing those files if the Registry associated the file with another program. When an unauthorized program attempts to control a file, the user has the option to allow or disallow the action.

The .HTM-based wizards also let you choose your security settings. But I suspect most system administrators can easily change those settings within the browser itself.

Norton Secret Stuff, intended to make e-mail secure, lets you create and send self-extracting, encrypted e-mail that your recipient can decrypt by entering a password. The recipient doesn't need to have the program. Although Secret Stuff uses the well-known and secure Blowfish algorithm, the key length (32 bits) is much too small to offer

any real security, as such a length is susceptible to a brute-force attack against the key space.

Another .HTM-based application lets you update Norton Safe on the Web as new releases are available. You also can connect from another local .HTM

page to Symantec's Web site for security bulletins. Yet I found little information on the bulletins, and the Security Basics page is merely a primer of basic computer security terms.

Symantec will need to add a lot of meat to this bare-bones preview release if the company

intends to sell the product in the future. It will also need to increase the size of the encryption key and add more security information on its Web site. But right now, Norton Safe on the Web preview is worth the price.

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THE BOTTOM LINE: GOOD

Norton Safe on the Web, Version 42b

This currently free application uses wizards to protect files and make browser security settings easier to understand but requires more useful features.

Pros: Protects files from rogue applications.

Cons: Some applications slim; file protection can cause problems offline; encryption key too small for real security.

Symantec Corp., Cupertino, Calif.; (800) 441-7234, (541) 334-6054; custserv@symantec.com; <http://www.symantec.com>.

Price: Currently a free download.

Platform: Windows 95.

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