

A Close Look At Cookies

“Cookies” is the term used to describe little pieces of data that web servers can store on your hard drive. Cookies record information about your visit to a particular site and can be read back later only by the site that created them. They are often used to make your web surfing more personal and convenient, but some people fear that cookies could lead to loss of privacy through abuse.

More and more sites are using cookies to enhance your web experience and enable some pretty nice features. Yahoo, for example, uses cookies to help you customize the site to suit your likings. If you specify that you want baseball scores, political headlines and a handful of quotes from your stock portfolio, Yahoo will record those preferences in a cookie. Then each time you return, the Yahoo server will read that cookie and customize the site accordingly.

Some sites require that you create a username and password to login before you can access certain content, but it can be a nuisance to remember and enter this information each time you return. Cookies can be used to remember your default settings. Many search engines (e.g., Google and Bing) allow you to set preferences for language, number of results, output formatting and color schemes. By storing these data as a cookie, you only have to enter it once.

And if you do any online shopping, cookies make it possible to use a shopping cart where you can place your selections before checking out. You can even logoff half way through a shopping expedition and pick up later right where you left off. Some stores will even store your billing address in a cookie so you don't have to re-type when you place another order.

What's in a Cookie?

All of this reading and writing of cookies normally takes place without the user knowing that it's going on behind the scenes. The cookie mystery can disappear by finding out where they reside and what's inside of them: cookies are stored in a variety of places, depending on your browser and operating system.

Here's how to view your cookies in the most common browsers:

- **Internet Explorer:** Click Tools, Internet Options, then click Settings under "Browsing History". Click "View Files" to open the folder containing files where cookies are stored.

- **Microsoft Edge:** To clear cookies saved on your computer, go to **More** > **Settings**, and under **Clear browsing data**, select **Choose what to clear**, and then select the **Cookies and saved website data** check box. To manage cookies, go to **More** > **Settings**, and under **Advanced settings**, select **View advanced Settings**, and then, under **Privacy and services** > **Cookies**, choose the option you want. (**Block all cookies** blocks all cookies that websites try to save to your computer. **Block only third party cookies** blocks third party cookies, which are saved by external web services, such as ads embedded on webpages you have navigated to.)
- **Firefox:** Click Tools, Options, then click the Privacy tab. Clicking the link that says "remove individual cookies" will open a new window which allows you to browse through all your cookies. (You don't actually have to remove any if you don't want to.)
- **Google Chrome:** Click the wrench icon, click Options, then click the "Under the Hood" link. In the Privacy section, click "Content settings" then click "All cookies and site data" to view your cookies.

Once you locate your cookies, you'll probably be surprised at the number of entries squirreled away by sites you've never heard of. That's because many popular sites have banner ads that are served up by other companies such as DoubleClick and LinkExchange. A typical cookies file contains the name of the site that wrote the entry, an expiration date, and some additional data pertaining to your visit to a site. Other crumbs of data that may be stored in cookies include your domain name (e.g., cox.net, gmail.com, yahoo.com, and embarqmail.com—but not your email address), the date and time of your visit, the type of computer, operating system and browser you have, and a history of the pages you visit at a specific site. Not included is your username.

Cookies Are Safe

It's important to remember that a cookie cannot store any personal data such as your name, e-mail address or phone number unless you *explicitly* provide that information on a form at the site creating the cookie. Further, the safety features built into the cookies technology makes it impossible for a website operator to access other files on your hard disk, or to look at cookies that were created by other sites.

Keep in mind these important facts about cookies:

- Cookies are designed to save you time and make surfing easier
- Cookies cannot access personal data or files from your hard drive

- Cookies can only be read by the website that created them