

STAY SMART ONLINE ALERT SERVICE

Factsheet 21

When is it desirable to use an alternative web browser?

A web browser is software that enables you to view and access web sites and web-based email. For example, this Factsheet was accessed (downloaded) using a web browser.

When there is a security bug in your default web browser, confirmed by the vendor and for which no patch is available, then it is generally desirable to use an alternative browser.

The period between when the bug is discovered and when a patch becomes available and installed on your computer can leave your sensitive personal and financial information and computers exposed to harmful attacks, especially when it is known that criminals are actively exploiting the bug.

In this situation, the easiest and safest course of action is to avoid using the web browser with the bug until a patch is installed and use an alternative web browser instead.

All web browsers are free to download and install and there is really no limit as to how many browsers you may wish to install for your particular computer/operating system, apart from practical considerations, which are covered below.

Common web browsers are:

Apple [Safari](#)
Google [Chrome](#)
Microsoft [Internet Explorer](#)
Mozilla [Firefox](#)
[Opera](#)

These web browsers are also available via links from the following web site:


www.browserchoice.eu

If you wish to switch from one browser to another, you need to change the default browser settings; otherwise, if you click on a link in an email or other document, the default browser with the security bug will open instead of the alternative browser and may expose your computer and information to an attack.

How to change the default browser settings

If you already have an alternative browser installed, then follow the steps below to change the default browser settings.

For Microsoft Windows 7

1. Click on the Start menu icon (image)  at the bottom left hand side of the screen, then select the Default Programs as shown below.

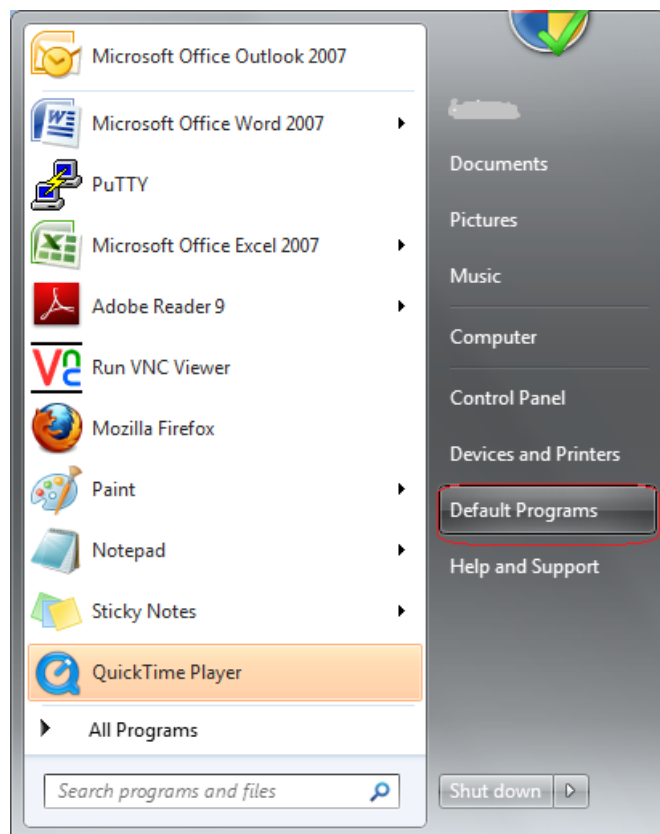


Figure 1, Start menu

2. Then click on "Set your default programs" as shown in Figure 2 below.

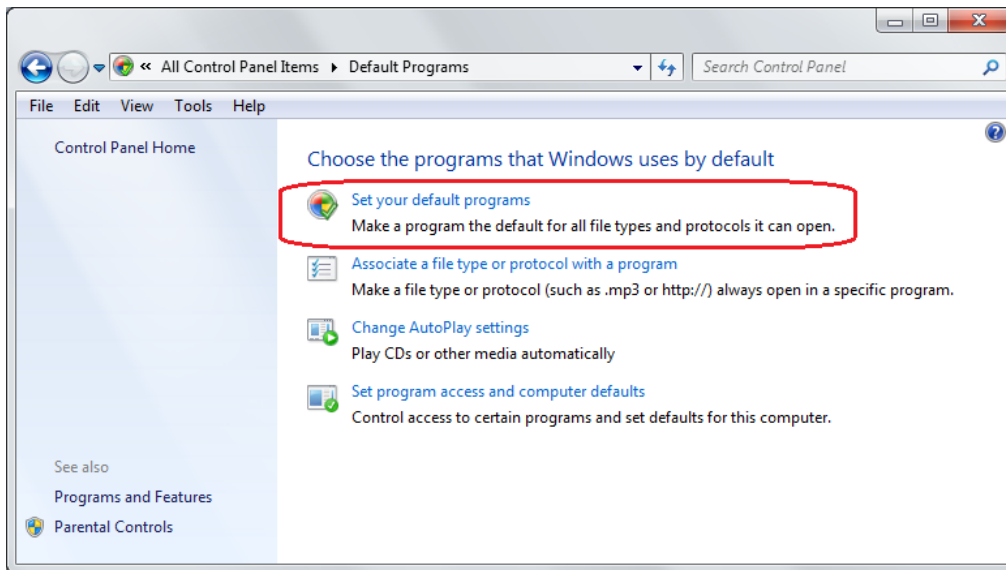


Figure 2, Default Program settings

3. Then select the browser you wish to make the default browser from the list of programs on the left (see Figure 3 below). After this browser is highlighted, click on the "Set this program as default" as shown in the window below.

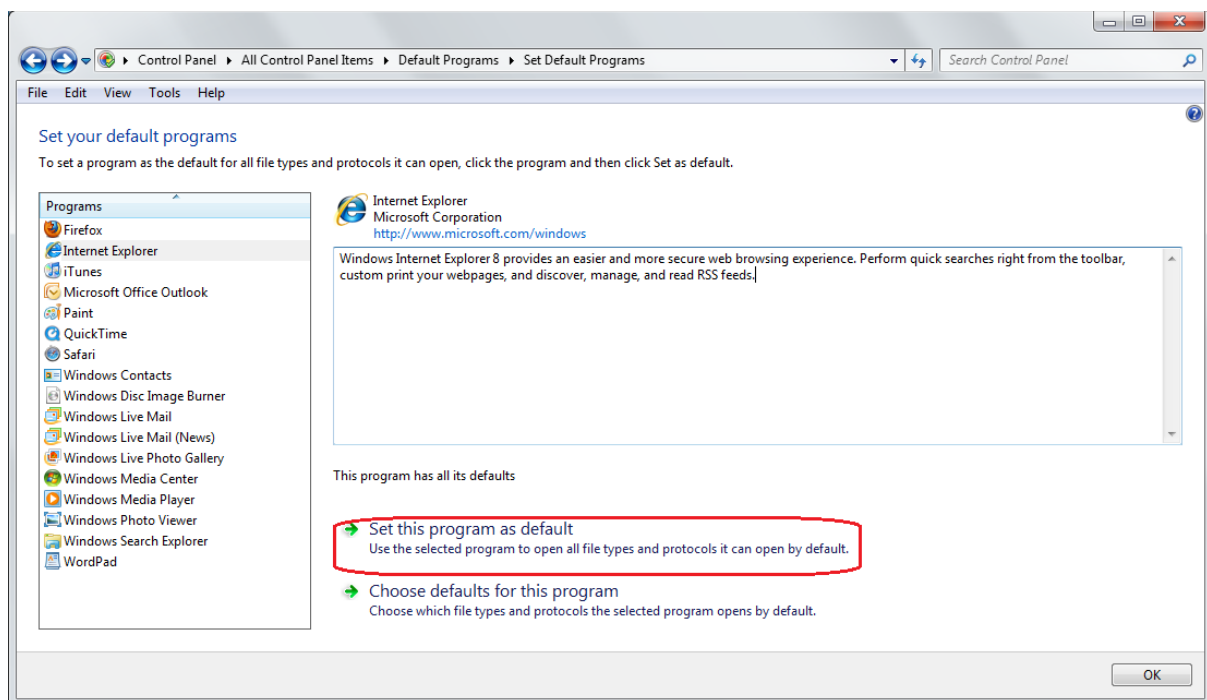


Figure 3, Set default programs

4. Then click OK.

For Microsoft Vista

The steps are similar to the steps for Microsoft Windows 7 above.

Multiple user accounts

Changes to the default browser settings only affect the user account where the changes are made. If there are multiple user accounts on your computer, the default browser settings need to be changed for each account, as required. This is done by logging into each user account and following the steps described.

The default browser settings can be changed at any time by following these steps again and selecting an alternative browser.

Disadvantages

There are some disadvantages with installing more than one web browser. The more software you install, the more software you need to maintain in terms of security patches and security settings.

You should update the security patches for the alternative browser before using it; this includes checking that browser plug-ins such as Adobe Flash Player or Adobe Shockwave are up to date, if they are installed.

If you switch from one browser to another you may wish to export your favourites from your default browser and import them into the alternative browser, and vice versa when you change back (if they have changed in the meantime).

Which browsers should be avoided?

From a security point of view, all browsers are similar. Like other software in common use, security bugs are commonly found in web browsers. We generally do not regard one browser as being intrinsically more secure than another. There are two exceptions to this:

1. beta versions of web browser software. Beta versions are still undergoing development and review and are best avoided; and
2. unsupported versions of browser software. For example, all versions of Internet Explorer 5 are no longer supported and some versions of Internet Explorer 6 are no longer supported. Microsoft is due to cease support for other versions of Internet Explorer 6 and 7 in July 2010. It is recommended that all users of Microsoft Internet Explorer upgrade to version 8.¹ Similarly, Mozilla Firefox recommends against using versions of Firefox prior to 3.5.x.² Moreover, Mozilla will cease support for Firefox version 3.5.x in August 2010 and recommends upgrading to the latest version (currently 3.6).³

Report prepared April 2010

¹ http://support.microsoft.com/gp/lifesupsp#Internet_Explorer

² <http://support.mozilla.com/en-US/kb/Installing%20a%20previous%20version%20of%20Firefox>

³ <http://www.mozilla.com/en-US/firefox/all-older.html>