FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

File-Sharing: A Fair Share? Maybe Not.

Every day, millions of computer users share files online. Whether it is music, games, or software, file-sharing can give people access to a wealth of information. You simply download special software that connects your computer to an informal network of other computers running the same software. Millions of users could be connected to each other through this software at one time. The software often is free and easily accessible.

Sounds promising, right? Maybe, but make sure that you consider the trade-offs. The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, cautions that file-sharing can have a number of risks. For example, when you are connected to file-sharing programs, you may unknowingly allow others to copy private files you never intended to share. You may download material that is protected by the copyright laws and find yourself mired in legal issues. You may download a virus or facilitate a security breach. Or you may unwittingly download pornography labeled as something else.

To secure the personal information stored on your computer, the FTC suggests that you:

- **Set up the file-sharing software very carefully.** If you don't check the proper settings when you install the software, you could open access not just to the files you intend to share, but also to other information on your hard drive, like your tax returns, email messages, medical records, photos, or other personal documents.

- **Be aware of spyware.** Some file-sharing programs install other software known as spyware. Spyware monitors a user's browsing habits and then sends that data to third parties. Sometimes the user gets ads based on the information that the spyware has collected and disseminated. Spyware can be difficult to detect and remove. Before you use any file-sharing program, you may want to buy software that can prevent the downloading of spyware or help detect it on your hard drive.

- **Close your connection.** In some instances, closing the file-sharing program window does not actually close your connection to the network. That allows file-sharing to continue and could increase your security risk. If you have a high-speed or "broadband" connection to the Internet, you stay connected to the Internet unless you turn off the computer or disconnect your Internet service. These "always on" connections may allow others to copy your shared files at any time. What's more, some file-sharing programs automatically open every time you turn on your computer. As a preventive measure, you may want to adjust the file-sharing program's controls to prevent the file-sharing program from automatically opening.

- **Use and update your anti-virus software regularly.** Files you download could be mislabeled, hiding a virus or other unwanted content. Use anti-virus software to protect your computer from viruses you might pick up from other users through the file-sharing program. Although your virus

filter should prevent your computer from receiving possibly destructive files, computer security experts suggest you avoid files with extensions like *.exe*, *.scr*, *.lnk*, *.bat*, *.vbs*, *.dll*, *.bin*, and *.cmd.*

- **Talk with your family about file-sharing.** Parents may not be aware that their children have downloaded file-sharing software on the family computer and that they may have exchanged games, videos, music, pornography, or other material that may be inappropriate for them. Also, because other peoples' files sometimes are mislabeled, kids unintentionally may download these files. In addition, kids may not understand the security and other risks involved with file-sharing and may install the software incorrectly, giving anyone on the Internet access to the family's private computer files.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint, or to get free information on consumer issues, visit www.ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters Internet, telemarketing, identity theft, and other fraud-related complaints into Consumer Sentinel, a secure online database available to hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.