

Meltdown, Spectre, Flying Hospitals and Spy Cams

iPhone slowdown

In early 2018 users discovered that Apple was slowing down older iPhones intentionally. The reported reason was to prolong the usable battery life. These changes were made without the knowledge or consent of owners. Unsurprisingly, a community backlash resulted. Apple have announced that from version 11.3 of iOS (for iPhone and iPad) users will be able to disable this type of power management. This version is due to be released in spring 2018. If you have an iPhone 6 or 7 that has become slower of late it will be worth exploring the new power management settings once you get version 11.3 of iOS.

Meltdown and Spectre

In early 2018, two new computer vulnerabilities came to light. Although the dust is still settling, it is worth a brief update here with some broad advice. Both vulnerabilities are caused by design weaknesses in most modern computer processors. The problems occur because of techniques used to increase the speed of computation. Most computers are vulnerable to some degree, including Macs, PCs, iPhones, iPads and Android devices.

These are serious vulnerabilities that could result in sensitive information being disclosed from your devices (like username and passwords).

For a computer to succumb to an attack, a user would have to visit a malicious web page or install malicious software. Some action is needed to get infected though. At the time of writing early attacks that use these vulnerabilities are starting to appear. More will undoubtedly follow.

Patching advice

There is no single easy solution to these problems. Some manufacturers have started producing patches but some came with problems (crashes) and have been withdrawn. Slow performance has also resulted from some of the early patches as some of the techniques to increase performance have been removed. Over time the patches will improve and many of these problems will disappear. The best advice for now depends on the device in use:

Mac, iPhone and iPads: You should ensure all the latest updates are applied to your devices. No easy to use testing software currently exists. Apple will likely update at least all recent devices to protect from these problems. Some older Macs may end up performing slower as a result.

PCs: The situation is more complex here. Certainly ensure you have the latest Windows updates (whether you are using Windows 7, 8 or 10). Separate updates from your PC maker are also likely to be required. For example, HP or Dell owners should check their respective websites for updates. If you want to see if your PC has been adequately patched you can download and run a very small utility called InSpectre from this link (<https://www.grc.com/inspectre.htm>). This will check your computer and let you know if it is patched for Meltdown and Spectre.

Android devices: Modern Android devices will get patched, and many will have been by the time you read this. As usual, ensure that you install all system updates that you are prompted to. If you have an Android smartphone or tablet have a look at this article (bit.ly/ENpatches). There is a table that shows which devices will be receiving the patches. For instance, nothing older than a Samsung Galaxy S6 will be patched.

Orbis Flying Eye Hospital

In January the Medgadget news service wrote up a tour they had around the Orbis flying eye hospital. It is an interesting article and covers the technology in use in their latest aircraft hospital. Here is a short link to the article (bit.ly/ENorbis).

Office collaboration

We have previously covered how good the Google Docs product is at allowing multiple users to work on a document simultaneously. The latest versions of Word, PowerPoint and Excel, on all platforms, now also have a similar feature. In January the Mac was the last platform to have simultaneous collaboration added. Office software obtained from a subscription of Office 365 is required. To start collaborating on a document, one user must use the 'share' option from any of the products. This service will be of use

to clinicians using their home computers, as firewalls and older versions of Office will likely prevent most of us using them on our hospital computers.

Chrome adds a mute feature to each tab

Some popular websites (e.g. Facebook) now start auto-playing videos with sound. The Chrome browser has recently added an individual mute feature to each tab. To activate it simply right click on a tab title and press mute. The setting will be remembered for each website that you activate it on.

A warning for Airbnb users

I, like many, have used Airbnb for booking low cost accommodation for trips. It came to light in late 2017 that occasional users were finding that the owners of some properties had fitted webcams to spy on their guests. I do not intend to stop using the service, but at the time this came to light *The Independent* published some tips for checking your room for cameras (<http://bit.ly/ENairbnb>).

SECTION EDITOR



David Haider,

Consultant Ophthalmologist and Chief Clinical Information Officer, Bolton Foundation Trust, UK.

E: david@drhaider.co.uk
Twitter: @drdavidhaider

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