


...VPNs, and why you should use one (sometimes)

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Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) are commonly used to extend networks over the Internet. So, if you work from home and access resources on a corporate network, it's likely your IT team created a secure link between your computer and the corporate network – called a tunnel – using a VPN, that provides similar connectivity that you would have sitting at your desk on-site. VPNs have numerous applications, but one potential use is a means to securely browse the Internet without your Internet Service Provider (ISP) being able to observe the traffic, and hiding the IP address of your computer from sites you visit. Because your Internet connection is being routed through the VPN provider and forwarded to you, the sites you visit only see the IP address of the VPN. Depending on whether the VPN provider is monitoring your usage, this has the effect of anonymizing your Internet browsing. Sound sketchy? Read on.

TOR, a specific anonymous browsing platform that shares some similarities with commercial VPN services, is most commonly associated with the illegal and questionable content found in the Dark Web, even if it can be used for perfectly legitimate purposes. What is discussed less often in the mainstream media are the reasons why “average” computer users would want to use a commercial VPN service, save to try and avoid content filtering for services like Netflix and Hulu (a use which we do not endorse). But consider that wi-fi Internet access has become virtually ubiquitous: coffee shops, restaurants, libraries, hotels, airports, conference centres, and spaces of all kinds now offer free or low-cost wi-fi access to their patrons as a standard amenity. And while this universal availability has many advantages, using a public hotspot or untrusted wi-fi connection could allow your Internet traffic to be recorded and exploited.

Enter the VPN. There are numerous commercial and free VPN services that can encrypt your Internet session while using a public hotspot or an untrusted network. Because your traffic is being rerouted through another network, you may notice a slowdown depending on the speed of the wi-fi connection and the quality of the VPN you choose. While the speed impact may not be enough to affect Web browsing, it may be more noticeable for bandwidth intensive applications like video streaming and video conferencing apps.

As concerns about online privacy and security have grown, VPN services have proliferated so there are many choices in the marketplace. Look for a provider that is well-reviewed, and take advantage of free trial periods before settling on a choice. The good news is that many providers now have easy-to-use interfaces and prices are now quite reasonable, often with a steep discount if you purchase a year of service in advance. If you travel or use wi-fi hotspots frequently, consider the small investment in a commercial VPN account as a security tool to keep your data safe from prying eyes.