Google's New Privacy Policy

The updated policy can be read online, and describes how Google collects device information, search queries, cell phone-related data, location information, and collects and stores information on users' devices with the use of HTML5 technology, browser storage, application data caches, and cookies and other "anonymous identifiers."

Before the changes, Google was "restricted in our ability to combine your YouTube and Search histories with other information in your account," Google Privacy Director Alma Whitten wrote in the company blog. Now Google can provide a simpler, easier-to-understand privacy policy to users, and improve its products "in ways that help our users get the most from the Web," Whitten wrote.

Google recently promised to follow Do Not Track guidelines in an agreement with the White House, but those changes won't take effect until sometime later in the year. With Google's expanded ability to serve up personalized ads, the company makes certain privacy promises. For example, "when showing you tailored ads, we will not associate a cookie or anonymous identifier with sensitive categories, such as those based on race, religion, sexual orientation or health."

The policy does not affect most business customers, those who have a signed contract with Google to use Google Apps for Government, Business, or Education. Those of us with free accounts will be affected, and while there are ways to annonymize your Google usage they're not universally effective. Google's privacy policy notes that "You may also set your browser to block all cookies, including cookies associated with our services, or to indicate when a cookie is being set by us." However, Google was recently found to be serving up advertising cookies to users of Safari and Internet Explorer using methods of circumventing the browsers' default privacy settings.

So what else can you do? Most browsers today have private surfing modes that you can select. You can visit Google's "Data Liberation Front" website for instructions in exporting data out of Google products. The Electronic Frontier Foundation also has instructions on removing your Google search history from your account. However, even this is not as simple as it sounds. Disabling Web History in your Google account "will not prevent Google

from gathering and storing this information and using it for internal purposes," the EFF notes.

Google does hand over user data in response to government requests on a regular basis, as noted in the company's Transparency Report. The EFF notes that disabling Web History "does not change the fact that any information gathered and stored by Google could be sought by law enforcement."

If your account has Web History enabled, Google will keep the records indefinitely. "With it disabled, they will be partially annonymized after 18 months, and certain kinds of uses, including sending you customized search results, will be prevented," the EFF states.

For those who are really willing to put some work into staying anonymous, downloading a Tor client may be the right step. Tor encrypts your Web traffic and sends it through a randomly selected series of computers, preventing shadowy third parties from learning what sites you visit or where you're located.

http://arstechnica.com/tech-policy/news/2012/03/googles-new-privacy-policy-what-has-changed-and-what-you-can-do-about-it.ars