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Dependent on a computer? Check daily routine for Y2K

James Turner, Special to The Christian Science Monitor

BOSTON— With less than a year to go before the "year 2000 bug" bites, the question being asked of the technologically savvy is, "Just how bad will things be?"

Unfortunately, that's the one question that no one can answer with certainty. One thing is definite, however, some software will fail, and some people will experience disruptions. (The problem is that computers can misread a two digit date and take 00 to mean 1900 rather than 2000, hence Y2K.) This is assured because businesses and governments are already reporting mistakes being made by programs unprepared for 1/1/00.

Let's examine some of the more common perils of the year 2000 bug, their likelihood, and what you can do to avoid them.

End of the world - Likelihood: very low.

In this scenario, some unspecified defect in missile-control software causes World War III. It is unlikely, first because, if nothing else gets thoroughly checked for Y2K bugs, this software will. Second, the command-and-control structure involved in missile launches is so complex with so many levels of verification, that it is hard to imagine a software error that could cause an accidental launch.

Global economic collapse - Likelihood: low. Various gloomy predictions envisage Y2K problems causing an economic meltdown, leading to the collapse of governments worldwide. The danger of Y2K impacting economies is very real, especially among the developing Asian markets. The downturn in the Pacific rim economies means that many of those countries may not have the resources to fix their computer problems in time.

Will this lead to a global depression? Not likely. Civilization is not going to fall as some alarmists suggest. A lot of people seem to forget that the world went through a severe depression in the 1930s, and people still managed to survive and even flourish.

Some of the lights go dark - Likelihood: good. The power companies are working frantically to make sure all the electrical equipment is Y2K compliant. The problem is that the North American power grid is so complex that all it would take is a few stations going off-line or major substations failing to drag much of the grid down.

Planning for a few days without power is prudent. In cold-weather climates, this probably means installing a generator. But bear in mind that buying it is only the first step. You'll need electrical experience or the help of an electrician to hook it up. Also, remember to place it in a safe location. After catastrophic ice storms last winter, deaths of a number of people in Quebec were attributed to carbon-monoxide poisoning from generators.

Financial crisis - Likelihood: low. Will your bank's computer crash leave you stranded without cash, or even

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wipe out your account altogether? Probably neither. The financial industry has been one of the few shining lights in averting the crisis. Banks have been testing and retesting their software for a while.

That said, some of the people you send money to (such as your mortgage company, utilities, and such) may not fare so well. Make sure that any critical bills due around the New Year are paid in advance, and that you keep a proof of payment. Ask your bank, broker, and other companies you do business with to provide a written copy of their Y2K policies and compliance status.

Transportation snarl-ups - Likelihood: fair to good. Few industries are as reliant on computers as aviation. Unfortunately, it appears that the Federal Aviation Administration is well behind in getting its systems in compliance. While few people expect planes to fall out of the sky on New Year's Eve, the chances that either the FAA or airline computers will fail is a real possibility. This could lead to massive snarl-ups as controllers revert to manual procedures and airlines temporarily lose track of their aircraft. And the railroad industry is a heavy user of computers, too, so passenger trains may not be much of an improvement.

Gremlins in the appliances - Likelihood: good.

Next to electrical power, the most likely problems will involve embedded devices. These are the computers that run the elevator or your VCR or your car. A lot of these computers use the date in order to determine if they have run too long without maintenance.

Y2K confusion may cause some to fail or act erratically. This is one area where people can do a lot to protect themselves. If you live in a high-rise, ask your building management if the elevators have been checked for Y2K compliance. If not, insist that they start, and inform your co-tenants about the problem. If you have appliances that store the date, call the manufacturer and ask if they are ready for Y2K. As you go through your day-to-day routine, notice places where you are depending on a computer, and check for Y2K problems.

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