WASHINGTON (Reuters) -- Consumers who allow their infected computers to send out millions of "spam" messages could be unplugged from the Internet under a proposal released Tuesday by six large e-mail providers.

Internet users also could be limited on the amount of e-mail they send out each day to ensure they haven't become unwitting spammers, under voluntary guidelines proposed to curb unwanted junk e-mail.

The proposal was developed by Time Warner Inc.'s America Online, Yahoo Inc., EarthLink Inc., Microsoft Corp., Comcast Corp. and BT Group Plc.

Spam now accounts for up to 83 percent of all e-mail traffic, and large Internet providers say the problem costs them billions of dollars each year in wasted bandwidth, legal bills and additional customer service.

Most of the recommendations issued by the group seek to plug holes used by spammers to cover their tracks.

Internet companies should make sure that their equipment has been properly secured so spammers can't route their messages through them, the group said.

Security holes in Web-based e-mail forms and redirection services used to monitor online advertising should be plugged, the group said.

But the group also suggested consumers be held accountable if their machines are exploited by spammers.

A spate of viruses and worms over the past year have allowed spammers to route their traffic through personal computers, allowing come-ons for low mortgage rates and herbal Viagra to appear as if they're coming from a trusted friend.

Internet providers should take those machines offline until they can be cleaned up, the group said.

Providers should also limit the number of messages an individual machine can send to 100 per hour or 500 per day to prevent spammers from routing millions of messages through customer machines, the group said.