# StartMail

**EDITOR RATING:** EXCELLENT

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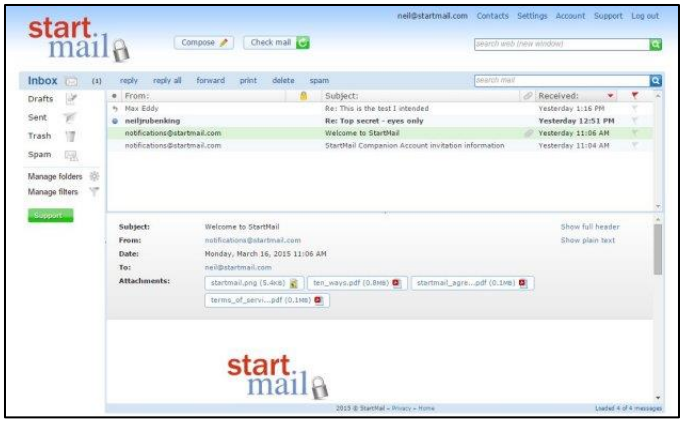
**BY NEIL J. RUBENKING**

It doesn't cost you a thing to search the Internet or to send an email to your friends, right? Well, maybe there is a cost. If you use the best-known search and email providers, you're doing so at the cost of your privacy. The encryption mavens behind search engines ixquick and StartPage think your Internet searches should be private. With the release of StartMail ($59.95 per year) they've extended that protection to your email as well. StartMail may be the easiest way ever to protect your email conversations using industry-standard encryption.




Your StartMail subscription comes with 10GB of email storage, and there's no limit on the number of messages you can send. You can choose any username that's not already taken, and you can create 10 custom aliases—alternate email addresses for use when you don't want to give your real address. If you wish, you can configure your usual email client to connect with StartMail via IMAP.

**PROS**

Can send encrypted email to any recipient using Q&A authentication. Easily enable industry-standard PGP encryption. Subscription comes with two companion accounts. Can create disposable or custom email aliases.

**CONS**

No plug-ins to ease use with email client programs.

**BOTTOM LINE**

Using a free webmail account can cost you in privacy. With the deceptively simple StartMail service, you can send encrypted mail to anyone.

As part of your subscription, you get two companion accounts that aren't quite as full-featured. Companion accounts get 2GB of email storage, and there are some restrictions on usernames. There's no support for IMAP for companion accounts, and sent messages get marked with a StartMail promotional signature. You'll want to give these to your closest confidantes. Of course, if they really like StartMail they can upgrade to a full subscription.

Not ready to plunk down 60 bucks on an unfamiliar service? You can try a free, limited version of StartMail for a week. As with the companion accounts, there's no IMAP support, username choice is limited, and your messages will carry a promo ad from StartMail. In addition, you can create just one custom alias, and you're limited to 40 messages. Still, that should be enough to get a feel for the product.

### Getting Started With StartMail

Setting up your subscription is a snap. You start by choosing a username that isn't already in use; the signup page lets you know quickly when you've chosen an available name. Create an account password, agree to the terms of service, and you're on the way. As you enter your password, StartMail rates what you've typed. Don't stop until you get to a very strong password.

You'll also be prompted to add a recovery email address, so that you can reset your password if you forget it. If you forego this option, StartMail will supply a lengthy code that you can stash away and use if needed for password reset. With the similar Enlocked 2 service, if you forget your password, you're out of luck.

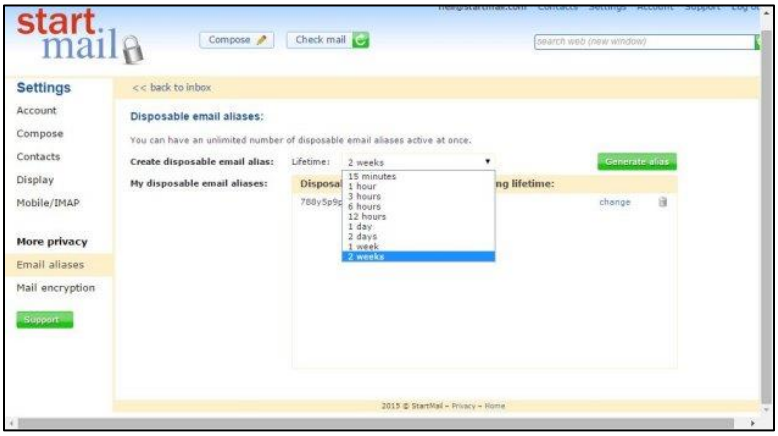
Of course, neither service is capable of complying with a court order to turn over your documents, because they never see unencrypted copies of your messages. Both StartMail and Enlocked encrypt your message locally and transmit the data using secure HTTPS. Send. Pro works a bit differently; it transmits the plain text message using HTTPS, and then encrypts on the server side.

You can send invitations to use your companion accounts at any time. Yes, these accounts are a bit limited, but they'll certainly be useful if you do a lot of secure communication with the recipients. This might also be a good time to import your contacts; StartMail can pull from Apple Mail, Gmail, Outlook, Thunderbird, or Yahoo Mail.

### Ask a Simple Question

As soon as your account is configured, you can start sending secure messages, and your recipients don't have to know a thing about StartMail. You get full WYSIWYG editing for message creation, plus the ability to add any attachments you want. For each message, you'll specify a secret question and answer that only the recipients can be expected to know. (You may want to transmit the answer via some other secure avenue). StartMail encrypts the message using its own keys and sends a notification to the recipient.

All the recipient sees is the message subject, your contact info, and a link to read the message. Access to the message requires answering the secret question. The recipient can reply via the StartMail website. No evidence of your communication remains except the original notification message, and it comes from StartMail, not from you. Simple!




### Pretty Good Privacy

Playing 20 questions is okay, but for serious and ongoing private conversations, you'll want to invoke public-key cryptography. StartMail makes it easy. All you do is define a PGP passphrase (different from your StartMail password). StartMail creates the necessary public and private key pair. From this point on, your communications with other StartMail users are automatically encrypted using PGP.

You're not restricted to StartMail, though. From

within the program you can choose to attach your public key to outgoing messages, post it to a popular key registry, or import other people's keys. The nice thing is, you don't have to dive headlong into understanding public/private key encryption. You can just start using it within StartMail.

### Email Aliases

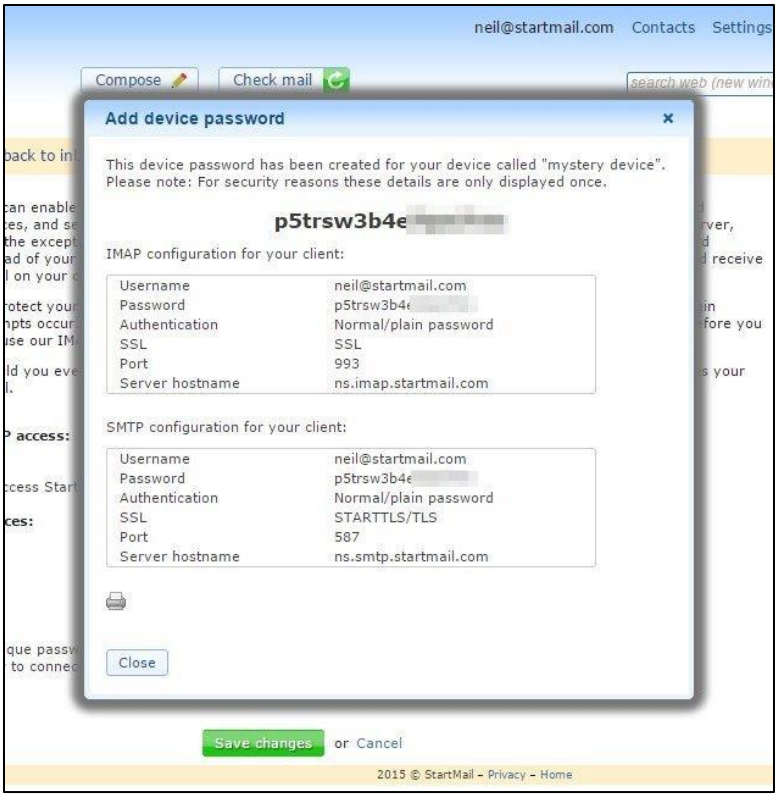
Like the masked email addresses generated by Abine Blur, StartMail's aliases let you communicate without giving away your actual email address. Aliases come in two flavors: disposable and custom.

You can generate as many disposable email aliases as you need, assigning each a lifetime from one hour to two weeks. If you're buying from an unfamiliar merchant, you might choose a two-week span, figuring that's long enough to deal with any back-and-forth about the order. Other situations might merit a shorter lifespan. The auto-generated email address looks something like this: 788y5q9p1@use.startmail.com.

Custom aliases don't have the weird random appearance that disposable ones do. You create them yourself, limited only by the need to choose an address that isn't already in use. Pick a nickname, a joke name, anything you want. You can have up to 10 custom aliases in use at a time. After that, you must disable one in order to activate another. And of course, if any one of them starts getting spam, you can trash it completely.

### IMAP and Mobile

Email clients like Outlook and Thunderbird typically manage email accounts using POP3 or IMAP, as do mobile email apps. You can configure StartMail to make your messages available via IMAP, though in my opinion it's easier to just use it like you would any other webmail account.




StartMail's connection with each IMAP email client is device-specific, and requires generation of a device password. Multiple devices? For each device you'll enter a name and your StartMail account password to get a device-specific IMAP password. Next you'll configure the email client to use that password along with IMAP and SMTP settings specified by StartMail. Note that the generated password is quite lengthy; here's an example: p5trsw3b4e8fz9th.

The documentation for StartMail Web access advises logging off any time you're done using your account, for security. That's smart. But when it comes to email clients or mobile email apps, users never log out. If security is really what you're after, you'll do best to stick with Web access.

Enlocked integrates with Outlook so that all you need to do is click Send Secure. It even offers a reminder if it detects words in the message suggesting you meant to send secure, much the way some email clients ask whether you meant to

add an attachment. And a Chrome plug in automates use of your Enlocked account with Gmail. If you really object to using a webmail portal, Enlocked might be a better choice.

**Nothing Is Free**

StartMail costs $59.95 per year. A basic Enlocked account goes for $9.99 per month, rising to $29.99 per month if you want no limits on use. On the flip side, if you can stick to sending no more than 10 secure emails per month, you can use Enlocked for free.

Why would you pay for one of these products when you can get a totally free account from Gmail, Yahoo, and others? It's all about privacy. You can pay dollars up front, or you can pay by letting Internet giants filter your mail for keywords that they then use in targeting ads. How to pay is your choice.

I really like the fact that you can use Enlocked for free if you don't send a lot of mail. But if you don't want limits, StartMail is quite a bit less expensive. Either product lets you start using industry-standard email encryption with ease. Both products merit our Editors' Choice designation for encrypted email.

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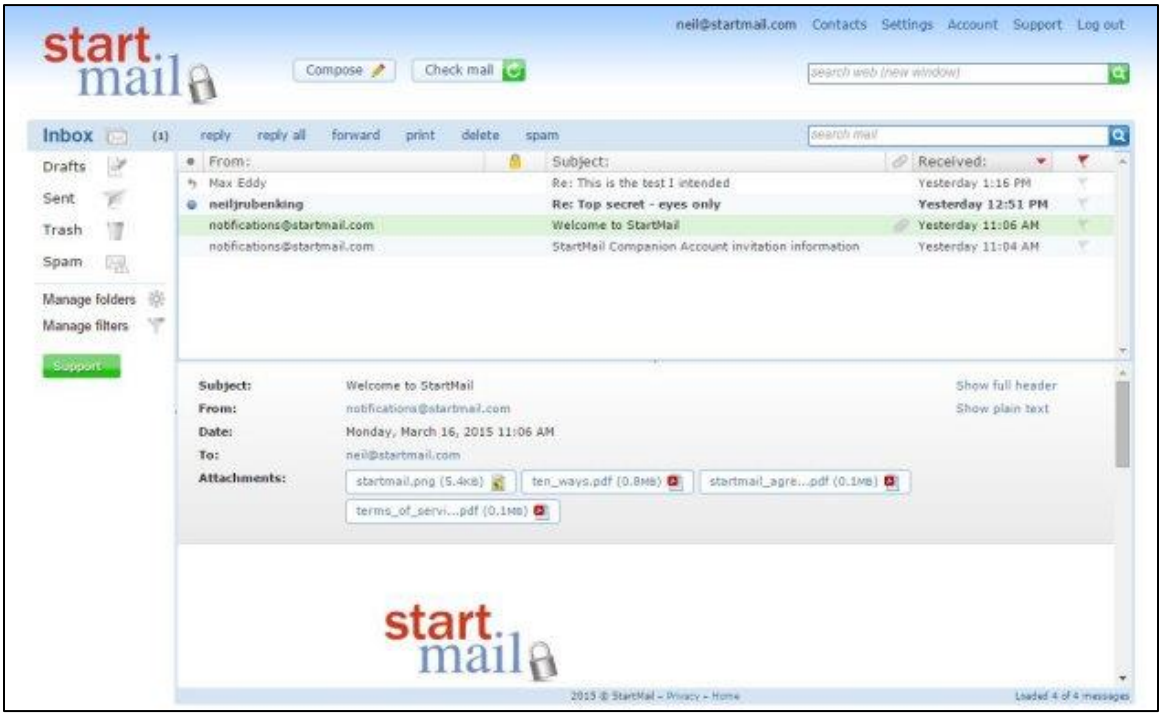
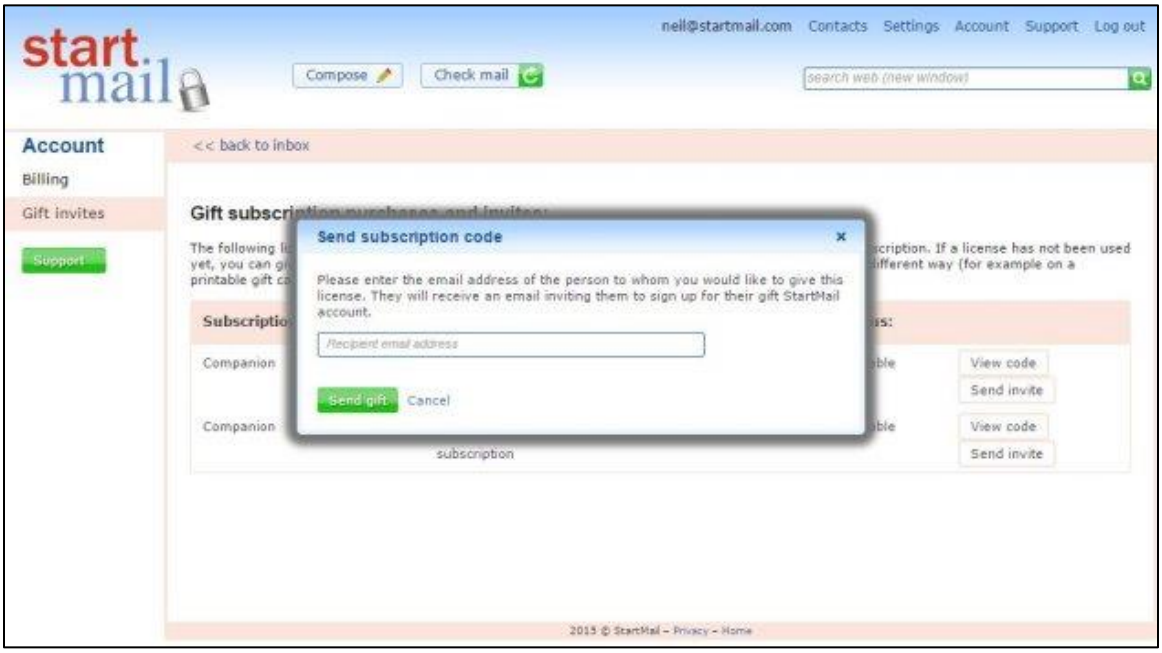
**Main Window**

At first glance, StartMail looks like any other Web-based email service, and it's no more difficult to use. However, you can send encrypted mail to anyone, or industry-standard PGP-encrypted mail to those prepared to receive it.



### Companion Accounts

Your StartMail subscription comes with two companion StartMail accounts, for your closest confidantes. These accounts have a few limitations, but can send and receive any number of encrypted messages.

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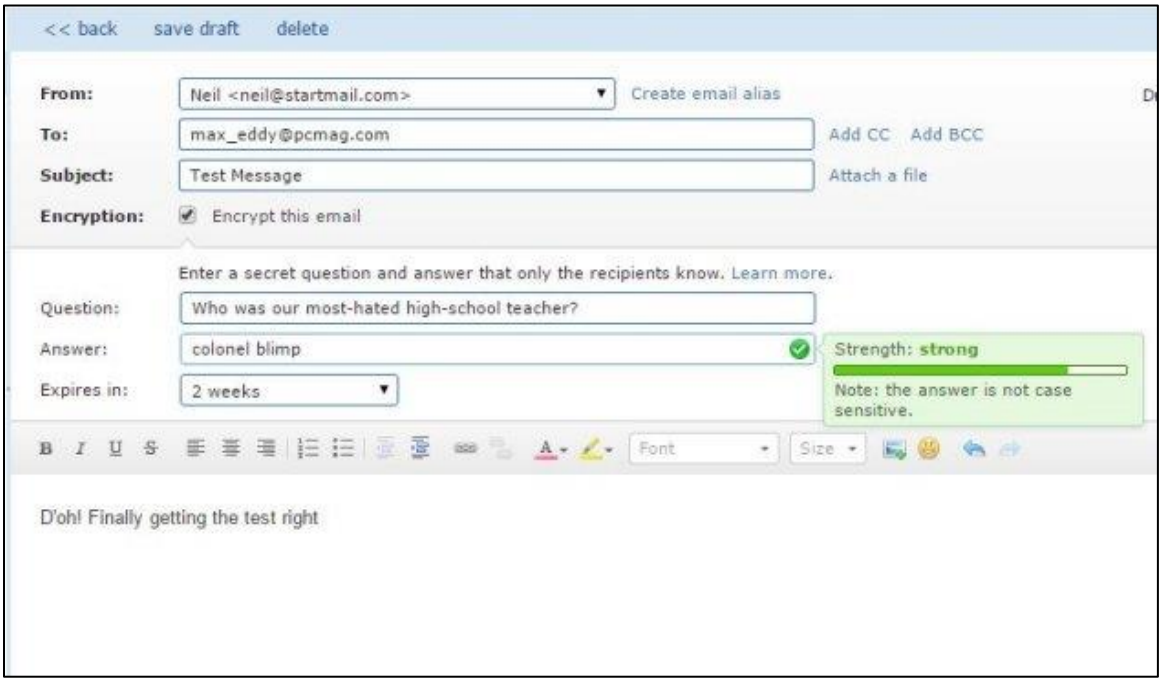
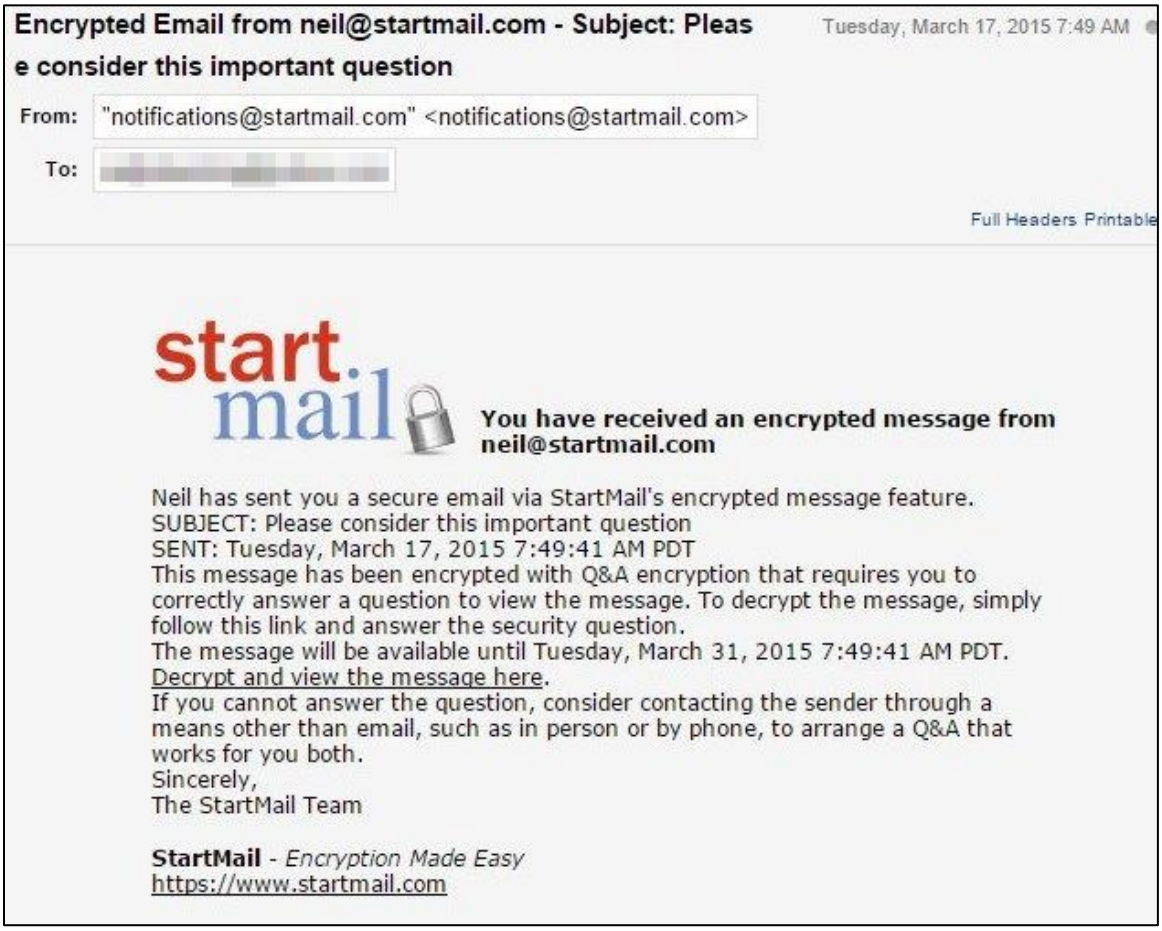
### Question and Answer

StartMail defaults to using a question and answer system for security. You create a question that only your recipient should be able to answer; if necessary, you can transmit the answer by phone or in person.



**StartMail Notification**

The recipient receives a simple notification that offers a link to view the actual message. The actual message never passes through your email account.

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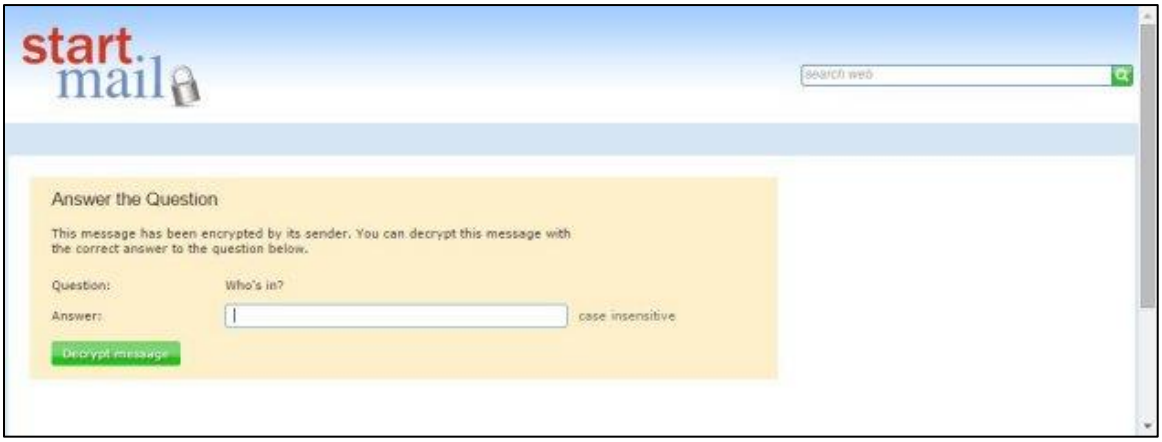
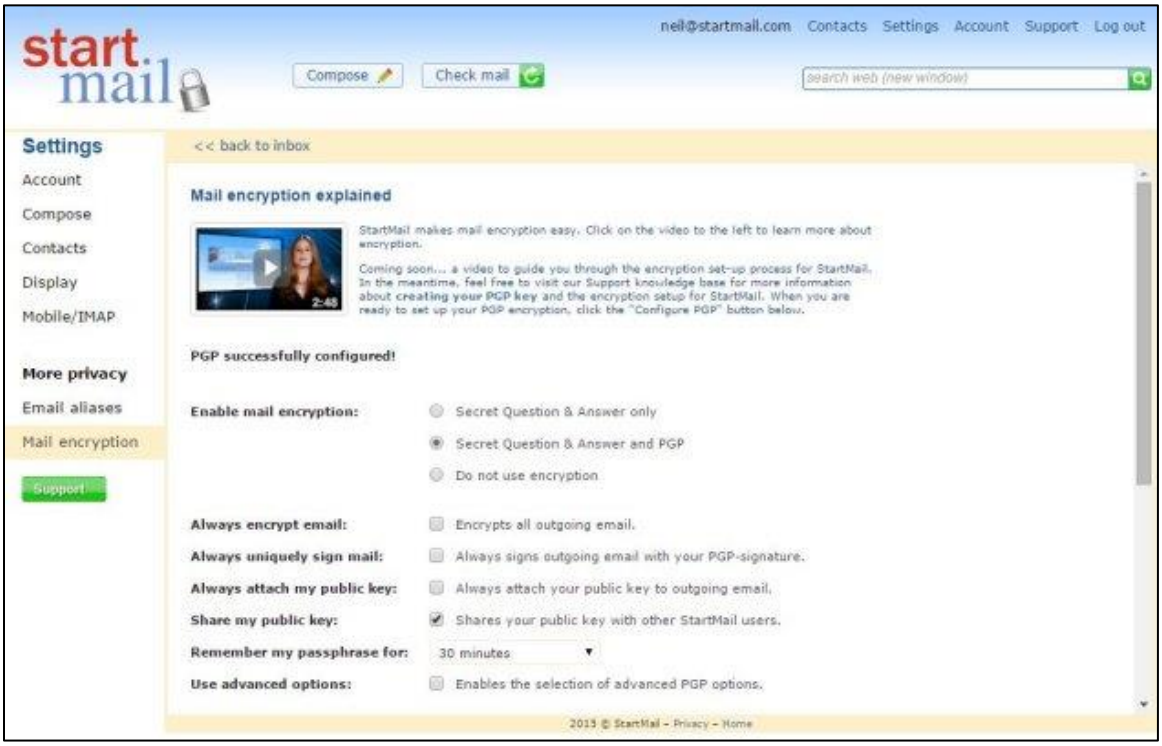
**Answer the Question**

Clicking the link brings up a secure page that demands the answer to the sender's security question.



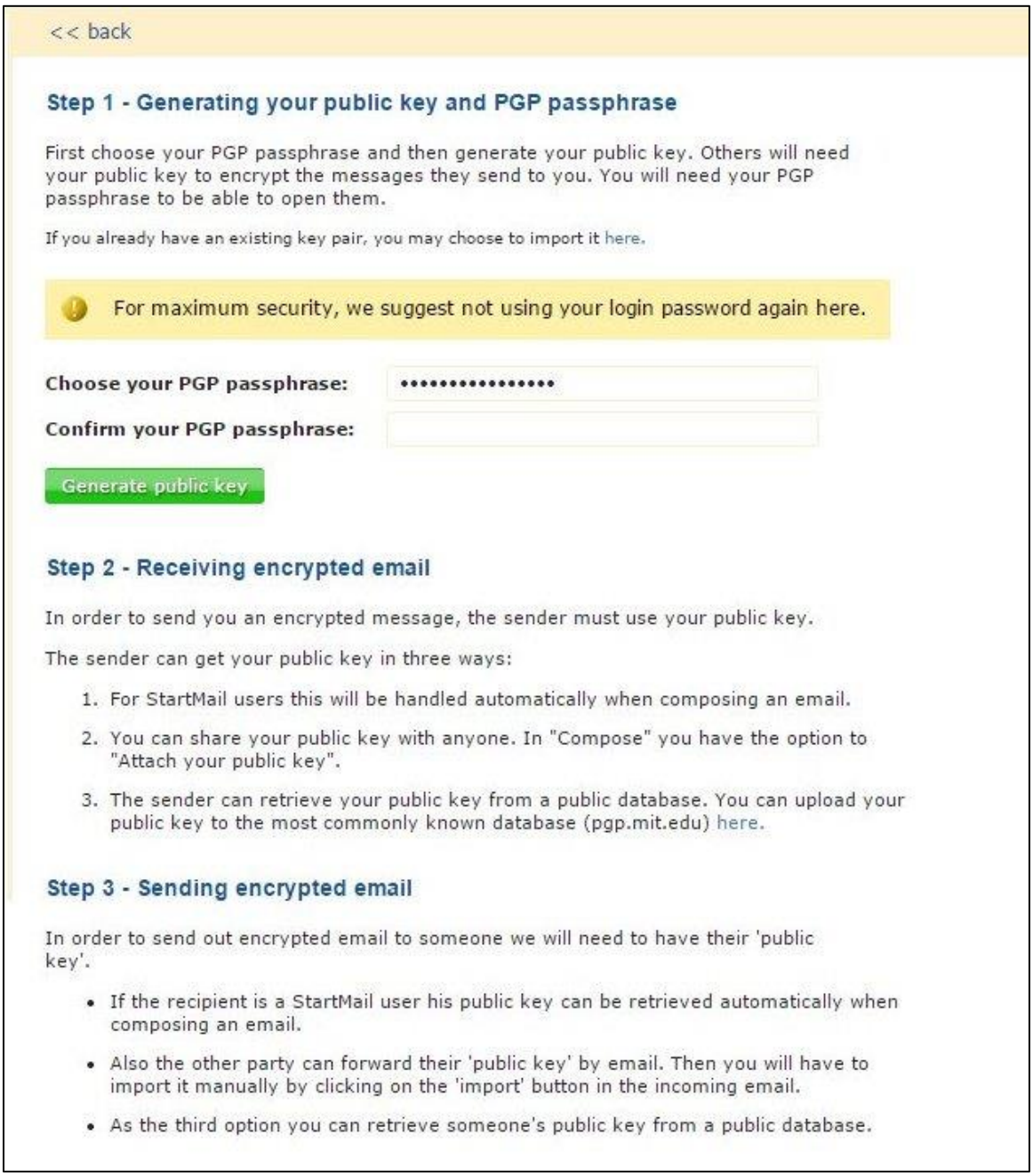
**Encryption Options**

It's simple to set up a PGP public/private key pair using StartMail. Thereafter, it can automatically use PGP for PGP-equipped recipients, but stick with question and answer for others.



**Using PGP**

In the process of setting up your PGP key pair, StartMail displays instructions on just how you make use of PGP. The program has the built-in ability to automatically attach your public key to outgoing messages, so your correspondents will have it at hand.



### Custom Aliases

You can create up to ten custom aliases—alternate email addresses that feed into your Inbox. If one of them starts to get spam, you can simply discard it.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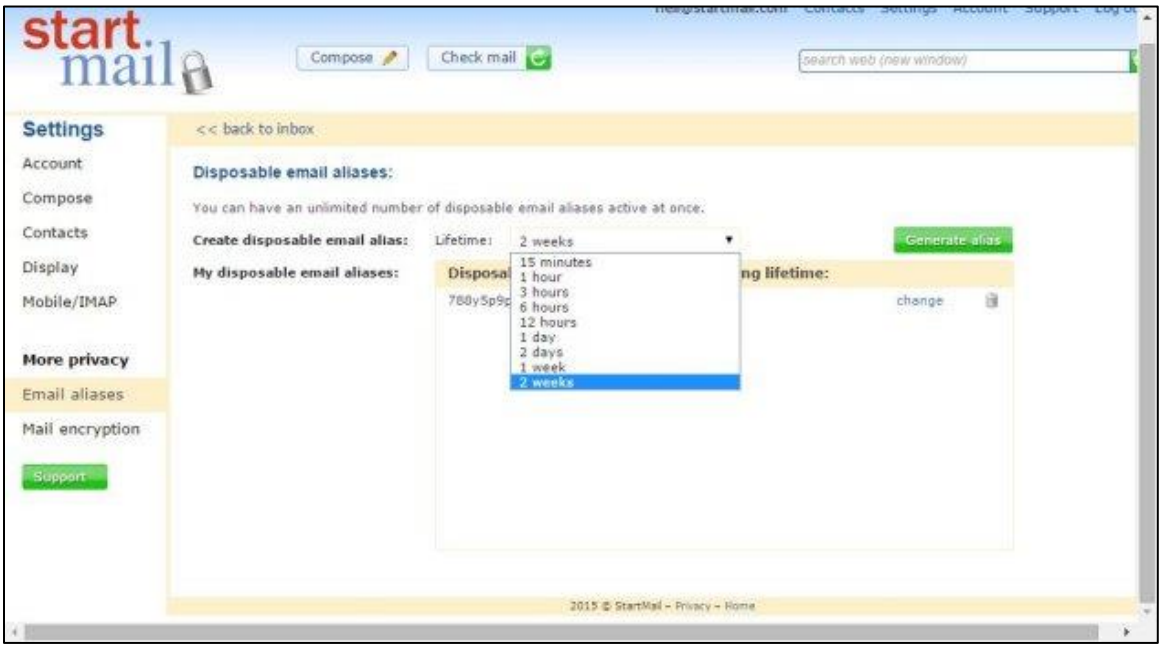
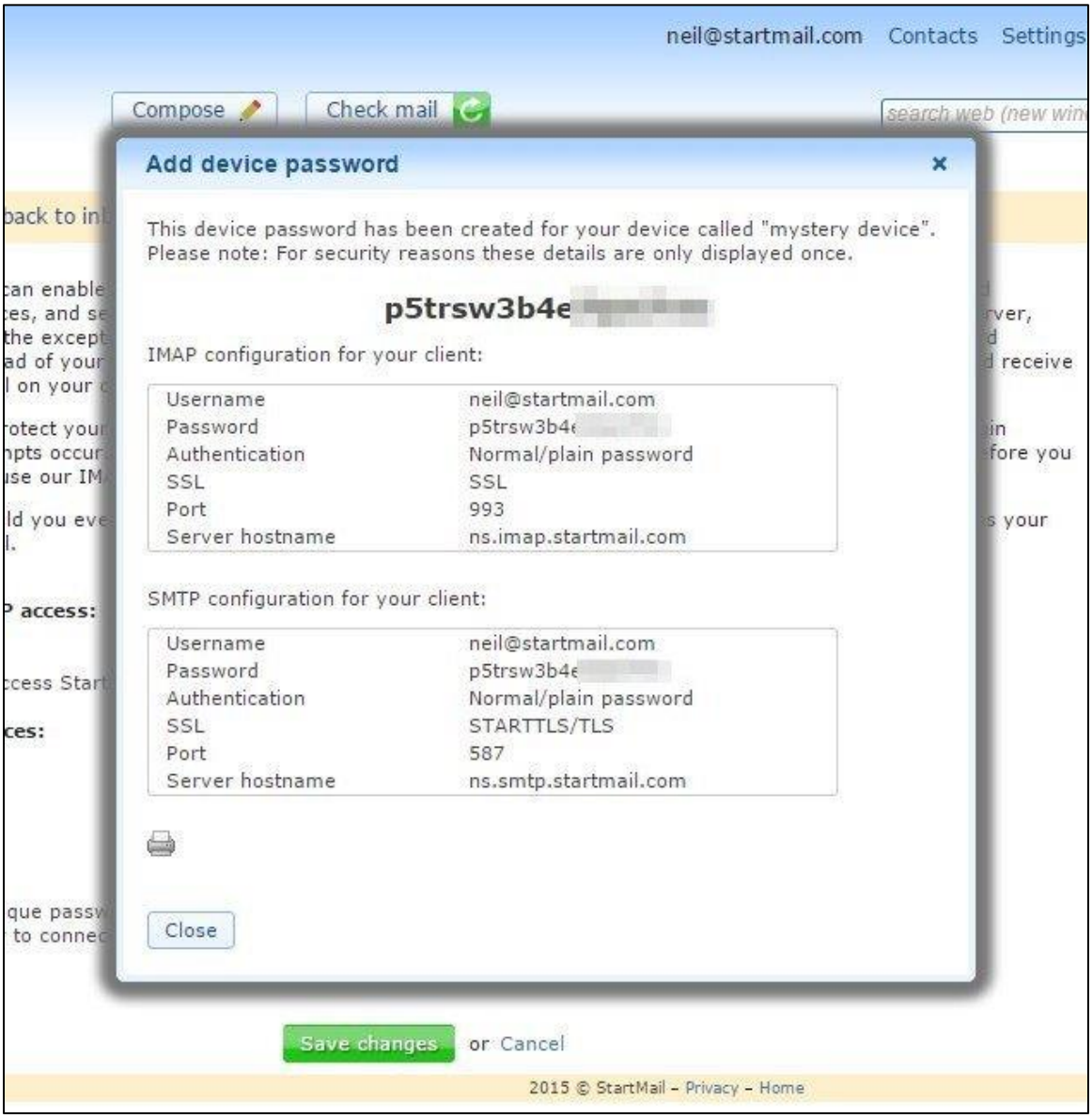
### Disposable Aliases

For situations where you need the short-term ability to communicate via email, StartMail can create any number of disposable aliases. Depending on your needs, you can set each to vanish in anywhere from 15 minutes to two weeks.



**IMAP Access**

To access StartMail directly from a mobile device or third-party email client, you must enable IMAP access and configure each device using the resulting instructions.

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