

You're not the only one that can catch a virus!

By: G.C.Silva

Recent talk of West Nile, EEE, and N1H1 (Swine Flu) viruses have many people taking preventative action. No one wants to get sick and miss work, end up in the hospital, or even die from any virus, so people get flu shots, take vitamins, and try to stay healthy.

What does this have to do with computers? I am glad you asked! Computers can get sick too. They can get viruses.

A computer virus is a computer program that can copy itself and infect a computer without the permission or knowledge of the owner. A virus may cause harm to a computer system's data (files), functional performance, or networking throughput.

I am asked at least once every few days: "Why do people create viruses anyway?" Years ago, it was more of a status symbol. Someone could never take public credit for creating a virus, but if the virus made the local, state, or even world news, you were famous in the circle of virus makers.

Most viruses back then destroyed a computer's files and data forcing people to restore from backups, causing lost time and wages. Today, with everyone connected via high-speed Internet, makers of the malicious code are more interested in what you have on your computer (Think personal "Confidential" information) then just simply destroying it. They want your credit card numbers, bank account information, and even your social security number.

Taking some simple preventative measures can eliminate many of the ways a virus can infect your system. The most important thing you can do is install an antivirus software program. There are many antivirus programs out there. Some of them are free while others you pay for. I recommend going with a well-known name brand pay-for program that you can buy either at retail stores or online.

You also need to make sure the program's virus definitions are up to date. Some software does this automatically, while others you must manually do. Updated definitions ensure that your computer is protected from the "latest" threats.

Now that you have your system protected from the latest threats, you need to still use caution while on the Internet. You should never open suspicious emails and should always have the antivirus software scan all attachments that people send you. You should never install what is called peer-to-peer software like Limewire to get free music, software, or movies. First, it is illegal to download someone else's work without their permission and second, it is a good way to download a virus unknowingly.

Another way of downloading a virus is using search engines. It sounds odd but people have started inserting code into random video files and even pictures that come up in search results. When downloaded to your computer these bad files can cause problems. I am not saying to stop using search engines but be aware of where the search engine is taking you.

The latest way of catching a virus on your computer is via social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook. These sites allow you to "borrow" pieces of code others have written and install them in your profile to do various things. Most are legitimate applications, but some can be very harmful to you and those who click on the application in your profile. Only use well-known applications when on social networking sites to stay safe.

Just like taking precautions to avoid catching a bug, a good antivirus program kept up to date, and a little common sense can go a long way in surfing the Internet and keeping your computer healthy. However, if your computer should catch a virus and your antivirus programs cannot clean it, seek professional help. Your computer will not get better on its own and will get worse as time goes by. Here's to bug-free living!

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