

Introduction

This is the first of a several part article that will address concerns that many home and small business owners have regarding the safety and security of their PCs. Every week we receive phone calls and e-mails asking us about the best way to secure PCs against the ever widening threat of viruses, spyware, malware and intrusion. In this first article we are going to deal with the most common threat to your PC, the virus. In subsequent articles we will deal with firewalls, spam and fishing attacks, and other miscellaneous security concerns.

What is a computer virus?

A computer virus is similar to a biological virus in that it can replicate itself and may or may not cause harm to the files or other programs on your computer. Just like viruses in biological organisms, computer virus can be relatively benign or very destructive. Unlike biological viruses, the computer kinds are relatively easy to prevent and in some case easy to get rid of.

What are the potential issues?

A computer infected with a virus may not display any symptoms of the virus or may not significantly impact the overall usage of the PC. It may sit dormant on the computer for days, weeks, or even months waiting until a specific event or day. Some viruses are relatively benign in that they may simply display a message on your computer or cause your computer to crash periodically for no apparent reason. Some may be so destructive that they wipe out all the files on your computer causing you to lose precious data, such as pictures or files.

We have never seen a virus that actually causes hardware or physical issues. In other words, viruses tend to be software based and can always be removed from the system with either an anti-virus program or by a reformat of the operating system.

Part 1 – Anti-virus

Pay vs. free

So how do you prevent viruses from infecting your computer; good anti-virus software is your best defense. There are dozens of anti-virus programs available. Some are free, some are shareware and some are subscription based. In this article we outline the most popular for pay and free anti-virus programs. Unlike most things in life free is sometimes better.

Pay

List below are the two most popular selling anti-virus programs. For a side by side comparison see the sidebar accompanying this article.

Symantec Corporation has been producing security products since before 1990. Their current protection product is known as Norton 360. There are two versions available, the regular version (\$79.99) and the Premier Edition (\$99.99). These products have a good reputation in the corporate and home market. In my opinion the best feature is the free e-mail, chat or phone support which is very rare for a software company.

McAfee has always been one of the most popular pay for security products for the past two decades. In recent years their popularity has declined somewhat due to the programs lack of ability to detect common viruses and performance issues that cause computers to slow down while scanning. On April 21st, 2010 McAfee inadvertently released a virus definition update that resulted in the removal of a critical Windows XP system file. The removal of this file causes affected machines to lose network access and in some cases enter a reboot loop. McAfee quickly fixed the issues but not before affecting millions of computers worldwide.

Free

In part two of this article we will review the most popular free anti-virus programs and give you our opinions as to which are the best bets for your PC.

Part II

In part one of this article we discussed what a virus is and how it can affect your computer. We also reviewed some of the more popular pay-for virus protection software programs. While pay-for virus protection programs give you lots of features (some of them features that you may never use) the free programs we will be discussing in this month's segment give you just that basics.

The old axiom of "You get what you pay for" is also true in the world of PC software. The main advantage of pay-for antivirus software, in addition to the extra features that you may or may not use, is that you get vendor support included as long as your subscription is up to date. This can be beneficial for novice users or users with limited PC experience. Also, small business owners may feel more comfortable with a pay-for antivirus program because they know someone is standing behind the product and they can always get help if necessary.

That being said, free anti-virus programs have the critical features that most home or small business users will need. If your goal is to simply protect your computer against viruses, spyware, and malware you should investigate these further.

Two of the most popular free anti-virus programs are AVG (Anti-virus guard) <http://www.avg.com> and Microsoft Security Essentials http://www.microsoft.com/security_essentials. Let's take a look at these two programs in more detail.

AVG - Manufactured by AVG this program is probably the most downloaded antivirus program in the world. The company was founded in 1991 with over 110 million active users around the world. The free version of their program includes an anti-virus and anti-spyware scanner. This ensures that you can't get or spread a virus, worm, or Trojan horse. It also includes a Link Scanner to ensure that every web page you visit is safe before you go there. If you purchase the standard version of \$27.99 you get those features along with several others to help enhance your PC's security. The only disadvantage that we have found when using AVG is that it can impact your system's performance when doing its daily scans. This is much less of a factor on newer computers and can be scheduled to run when you are not using your computer, such as in the middle of the night. All-in-all we like AVG a lot and highly recommend it.

Microsoft Security Essentials is a relatively new product only being releasing in September of 2009. It offers real-time protection of your PC and guards against viruses, spyware, and other malicious software. It is available as a free download for your Windows XP, Vista or Windows 7 computers. The only caveat is that your computer must pass a genuine Windows operating system test before installation will proceed. This can be an issue with some cloned machines or machines using illegal operating system files. Other than that, the program is a snap to install. Once installed it will automatically update the virus signatures and scan your computer. The great thing about MSE is that it runs on your computer with very little impact on system resources. I've been using for the past three or four months and it is hardly noticeable.

So remember, when choosing a PC security software suite, you do get what you pay for. However, sometimes the best things in life are free. For more information regarding PC protection software please e-mail me at kbruno@celebrationcomputer.com and I'll be happy to answer any of your questions.

Feature	Symantec	McAfee	AVG	Microsoft SE
Wweb site	www.symantec.com	home.mcafee.com	free.avg.com	microsoft.com/security_essentials
Versions	Norton 360 4.0 Premier & Norton 360 4.0	AntiVirus Plus, Internet Security, Total Protection	Free, Anti-Virus 9.0, Internet Security 9.0	Security Essentials
Pricing	\$99.00 or \$79.99 (Up to 3 household PCs)	\$29.99, \$34.99, \$39.99	Free, \$27.99, \$43.99	Free
Major Features	<p>Automated set and forget protection, blocks viruses, spyware, Trojan horses, worms, bots and rootkits. Firewall. Blocks infected web sites. Blocks phishing web sites. Secures personal passwords. Authenticates popular shopping and banking web sites. Offers automatic online backup. PC Tune-up. Free e-mail, chat or phone support.</p>	<p>Detects, blocks and removes viruses, spyware, adware and rootkits. Firewall. SiteAdvisor to let you know a web site's risk before you click on it. Phishing protection. QuickClean removes junk files that slow down your PC. File shredder destroys files no longer needed. Disk defragmenter speeds up your hard drive.</p>	<p>Protects against viruses, worms, spyware and Trojan horses.</p> <p>Pay Features LinkScanner – ensures every web page is safe before you visit. Online shield – Protects you when downloading or exchanging files. Rootkit protection. Phishing protection. Identity protection. Firewall. Anti-spam</p>	Real-time protection against viruses, spyware and other malicious software.
Support Options	Free one-year e-mail, chat or phone support	Free 30-day phone support and unlimited e-mail and chat assistance	No support for free version. Free support for pay versions	No support beyond user groups and online help
Operating Systems	XP, Vista, Windows 7	XP, Vista, Windows 7	2000, XP, Vista, Windows 7	XP, Vista, Windows 7