

Virus FAQ

What is a Computer Virus?

A computer virus is a small computer program which makes copies of itself on computer disks. Viruses may (directly or indirectly) copy to (infect), and spread from, executable/program files, or programs in disk sectors, and even some non-executable files which use macros. This parasitic nature that virus programs have is neither an accident, nor a computer glitch. In fact, all viruses are created by people who know how to write computer programs.

Why are they called Viruses?

Experimental self-replicating programs were first produced in the 1960s, confirming theories dating back to 1949. The term virus is more recent, first used in 1984 by Professor Fred Cohen to describe self-replicating programs. The earliest DOS/PC viruses came a bit later, in 1986-7. The name stuck, because like a biological virus, a computer virus is small, makes copies of itself, and cannot exist without a host. (It's also a more catchy name than Parasitic Self-Replicating Program.)

Are all Viruses harmful?

All computer viruses at least take up disk space, and many of them are able to remain in the computer's memory, taking control of some computer functions. Some viruses are poorly written, causing data to be lost, or even causing the computer to halt. Many of them can make computer memory unstable, cause programs to run improperly, or damage/delete files. Even worse, many viruses created in recent years have been deliberately designed to destroy all data on a disk.

Who writes Viruses - and why?

Viruses can be written by anyone with enough programming skill, anywhere in the world. Some are developed by researchers for demonstration purposes. Then there are joke viruses, written by pranksters. Other viruses are written by people learning programming. In many cases, these viruses get passed around, and later can be altered by still other people.

Is the problem getting worse?

The most feared viruses are those which deliberately damage or delete files, or even destroy all data on a disk. The vandals who produce these are concerned only about themselves, not innocent people who will be harmed. These vandals hope to impress their friends, and sometimes compete with them. Some join groups which create new viruses every day.

What are Virus symptoms?

It's important not to assume your computer is infected just because strange things happen. It's true that some viruses do cause strange things to happen. These can include: slower operation, decrease in memory, or a disk drive LED lighting up for no apparent reason. However, legitimate software can also cause these effects. And while some viruses are very obvious, displaying messages, or even playing musical tunes, many give no sign of their presence.

How do Viruses spread?

The risk is relatively small, but it is growing daily. Viruses circulate from one computer to another, most often via diskettes and e-mail. If you're lucky, you'll never encounter one, but a virus could be concealed in the next file you download, or on the next diskette you receive. Diskettes borrowed from friends, school, or work are common sources. But viruses can infect shrink-wrapped diskettes purchased at stores, or through mail-order. Programs downloaded from Bulletin Boards and Internet FTP/WWW sites can be infected, and viruses can travel among networked PCs.

Should I get an anti-virus program?

If you're concerned about the virus threat, the time to obtain anti-virus software is before you get a virus. It's much better to prevent a virus infection than to have to deal with one. If your system is virus-free, anti-virus software can help keep it that way, providing you keep the program updated, and use it to check all newly obtained software and disks before using them the first time.

How can I protect my data?

Viruses are a threat, but data loss can also occur from other factors. If you have software you can't afford to lose, make sure you have more than one copy of it. The best way to do that is to copy hard disk files to disk/tape, with a reliable backup utility program. You should create an Emergency Boot Disk, and keep it with your backup disks/tapes in a safe place, with write-protect tabs secured.