



Keeping your computer virus-free

Regardless of your level of computer comfort, expertise or preference, one area you need to be concerned about is security. Just as in the real world, there are people out there with nothing better to do than think up ways to trip you up.

Computer viruses are not a thing of the past as I had hoped they'd be now; they never seem to go away.

The most common way you're likely to get a virus is by clicking on an attached (infected) file that someone sent you via e-mail. In fact, they might not even know that they sent it to you since it might have been sent automatically without their knowledge. (These viruses are tricky and well thought out.)

Downloading an affected file off the Internet can also infect your PC.

Luckily, even beginners can protect themselves.

Your first step should be to buy and install a solid anti-virus program from a known brand (McAfee, Norton, Panda and NetKeys are examples). Newer PCs usually come with a free trial version.

Some sites such as www.memoryoptimizer.com and www.DownloadSuperstore.com let you download an anti-virus program (from about \$39).

But it's not over once you install the program. New viruses appear all the time, so to be continually effective, you need update your program once a month or so. It's easy – just visit the program maker's Web page, and follow the directions to download the latest updates.

Most anti-virus programs monitor your computer constantly and do automatic scans every time you boot or log on.

How can you protect your family computer before it becomes infected? Don't open attachments on e-mails unless you're certain they're safe – even if they're from someone you know. Think twice before opening attachments with .exe endings or double extensions, such as "Funny.jpg.exe." Don't accept e-mail files or programs during online chat sessions.

And of course you need to back up your hard drive regularly. That way if all else fails, and you lose everything on your system, you can automatically restore it.

You need to think of scanning and backing up the same way you think of changing your oil – a necessary nuisance. If you don't do it, you'll regret it in the long run, even if you're a computer expert.

Print out these rules and review them with your kids (you'll actually look like you know what you're talking about!).

Virus protection is like adding a security system to your home. Do something now before it's too late.

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Elizabeth Kemper has shared family computing tips on radio, TV and print across the nation. You can reach her at iActiveFamily@aol.com.

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