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Communication from your computer guy: Viruses and spyware
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Computer viruses and spyware are the most frequent issues that often affect my customers, especially my home customers. The impact of these "infestations" range from mildly annoying to complete loss of your computer and all your data.

Most people believe that if you have good antivirus/anti spyware software installed, you are protected. Unfortunately, that is not the case. Don't let me confuse you: you absolutely should install and run antivirus software. But, there are three main reasons you can still get infected:

1) All over the world, "bad guys" continue to create new viruses. The antivirus vendors, "the good guys", continuously update their software to try and block and remove these viruses. Because of the time gap involved between these two activities, there is always a window of opportunity where a new virus can get into your computer.

2) Most antivirus programs run off of a virus definition database, which must be constantly updated. If you follow my advice and never turn off your computer, then your virus definitions will always be current, typically updated while you sleep. However, if you power off, place in standby, or hibernate your computer, then these updates cannot be performed until after you power your computer back on, and in that time between you beginning to use your computer and the virus definitions being updated, a virus could creep in.

3) You explicitly perform some action on your computer (such as selecting "ok" to install something) that overrides your virus protection.

The following contains more information and is extracted from Microsoft's support website (kb129972):

"What is a computer virus?

A computer virus is a small software program that spreads from one computer to another computer and that interferes with computer operation. A computer virus may corrupt or delete data on a computer, use an e-mail program to spread the virus to other computers, or even delete everything on the hard disk.

Computer viruses are most easily spread by attachments in e-mail messages or by instant messaging messages. Therefore, you must never open an e-mail attachment unless you know who sent the message or unless you are expecting the e-mail attachment. Computer viruses can be disguised as attachments of funny images, greeting cards, or audio and video files. Computer viruses also spread by using downloads on the Internet. Computer viruses can be hidden in pirated software or in other files or programs that you may download.

Symptoms that may be the result of ordinary Windows functions

A computer virus infection may cause the following problems:

Note: These problems may also occur because of ordinary Windows functions or problems in Windows that are not caused by a computer virus.

•   Windows does not start even though you have not made any system changes or even though you have not installed or removed any programs.

•   Windows does not start because certain important system files are missing. Additionally, you receive an error message that lists the missing files.

- The computer sometimes starts as expected. However, at other times, the computer stops responding before the desktop icons and the taskbar appear.

- The computer runs very slowly. Additionally, the computer takes longer than expected to start.

- You receive out-of-memory error messages even though the computer has sufficient RAM.

- New programs are installed incorrectly.

- Windows spontaneously restarts unexpectedly.

- Programs that used to run stop responding frequently. Even if you remove and reinstall the programs, the issue continues to occur.

- A disk utility such as Scandisk reports multiple serious disk errors.

- A partition disappears.

- The computer always stops responding when you try to use Microsoft Office products.

- You cannot start Windows Task Manager.

- Antivirus software indicates that a computer virus is present.

Symptoms of a computer virus

If you suspect or confirm that your computer is infected with a computer virus, obtain the current antivirus software. The following are some primary indicators that a computer may be infected:

- The computer runs slower than usual.

- The computer stops responding, or it locks up frequently.

- The computer crashes, and then it restarts every few minutes.

- The computer restarts on its own. Additionally, the computer does not run as usual.

- Applications on the computer do not work correctly.

- Disks or disk drives are inaccessible.

- You cannot print items correctly.

- You see unusual error messages.

- You see distorted menus and dialog boxes.

- There is a double extension on an attachment that you recently opened, such as a .jpg, .vbs, .gif, or .exe. extension.

- An antivirus program is disabled for no reason. Additionally, the antivirus program cannot be restarted.

- An antivirus program cannot be installed on the computer, or the antivirus program will not run.

- New icons appear on the desktop that you did not put there, or the icons are not associated with any recently installed programs.

- Strange sounds or music plays from the speakers unexpectedly.

- A program disappears from the computer even though you did not intentionally remove the program.

Note These are common signs of infection. However, these signs may also be caused by hardware or software problems that have nothing to do with a computer virus. Unless you run the Microsoft Malicious Software Removal Tool, and then you install industry-standard, up-to-date antivirus software on your computer, you cannot be certain whether a computer is infected with a computer virus or not.

Symptoms of worms and trojan horse viruses in e-mail messages

When a computer virus infects e-mail messages or infects other files on a computer, you may notice the following symptoms:

- The infected file may make copies of itself. This behavior may use up all the free space on the hard disk.

- A copy of the infected file may be sent to all the addresses in an e-mail address list.

- The computer virus may reformat the hard disk. This behavior will delete files and programs.

- The computer virus may install hidden programs, such as pirated software. This pirated software may then be distributed and sold from the computer.

- The computer virus may reduce security. This could enable intruders to remotely access the computer or the network.

- You receive an e-mail message that has a strange attachment. When you open the attachment, dialog boxes appear, or a sudden degradation in system performance occurs.

- Someone tells you that they have recently received e-mail messages from you that contained attached files that you did not send. The files that are attached to the e-mail messages have extensions such as .exe, .bat, .scr, and .vbs extensions.

What is Spyware?

Spyware can install on your computer without your knowledge. These programs can change your computer's configuration or collect advertising data and personal information. Spyware can track internet searching habits and possibly redirect web site activity.

Symptoms of Spyware

When a computer becomes affected by Spyware, the following may result:

- Slow internet connection.

- Changing your web browser's home page.

- Loss of internet connectivity.

- Failure to open some programs, including security software.

- Unable to visit specific websites, which may include redirecting you to another one."

If you suspect your computer is infected, please contact me right away.

As always, I hope you have found this information useful. If you do not wish to receive these emails in the future, let me know.

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