

How not to catch a computer virus and how to cure it if you do.

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By John Watson

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An interview with Danny Burke of PC Magic by John Watson

The casual computer user can afford to play with fire and risk catching a virus but the business user cannot afford to damage his or her business by being careless in this area.

I asked Danny, who sorts out computer problems on a daily basis, what advice he would give to people who are stressed out when their computer is put out of action by a virus or by some similar problem.

He was in a relaxed mood and replied jokingly at first and then got down to business:

"I have a method that will guarantee you never catch a virus or have any problems with your computer."

I played along with this. "What is this amazing method?"

" Don't turn it on! " Danny smiled triumphantly.

He continued: "Computers are inherently insecure and whatever you do, you will, sooner or later, run into problems."

Danny always tells it like it is: "However, there are a number of things you can do on a daily or weekly basis that will considerably reduce your chances of running into trouble. Cut both your hands off or don't pay your electricity bills."

Having had his fun, Danny came up with the goods.

"Follow a two pronged approach to security. There is prevention and there is cure.

Prevention involves avoiding a number of risky actions:

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Avoid sites like gambling and porn sites that might automatically download adware and other malicious code.

Avoid installing internet utilities like speed boosters, wallpaper changes and other utilities that put programs in the start bar or any other utilities such as toolbars that change internet explorer.

Avoid file swapping networks. If you want to download music, whilst we don't condone it, you can use these networks for music files (like mp3) but DO NOT share program files (.exe etc) since you will get infected with a virus that way.

Many file share programs also include advertising mechanisms that will interfere with your system and

secretly download all sorts of rubbish. Avoid porn sites that you have never heard of. Stick to household names."

Danny and I had a good laugh at the idea of household names in the porn industry. Neither of us, incidentally, download porn.

"There are also a number of actions a safe computer user should take:

Install a reputable firewall like Zone Alarm. Many companies do a free version for non commercial use so it doesn't have to cost a lot.

Install anti-virus software. Again there are free ones (www.grisoft.com). Be careful with some of the newer internet security suites as they are large and require top notch hardware to run them properly. If you don't have modern hardware (younger than 12 months) don't install these new suites. They will reduce your machine to a crawl.

Delete email from unknown sources and if you use Outlook Express etc. turn on the security features that filter out attachments. Better still use a more secure internet/mail client like Mozilla or Opera.

If you run XP make sure it is getting the regular updates from Microsoft. This facility can be turned on in Control Panel. XP has a built in firewall so make sure this is turned on. Microsoft released the patch for the Sasser worm a week before it hit but a large proportion of people did not apply the patch.

How do you update from Microsoft? Go to Control Panel; click on System and select Auto Update tab. Select the option that automatically updates your machine.

Prevention is MUCH better than cure but most people forget about prevention and so have to cure the problems when they arrive later on".

Curing the problems

Danny has to specialize in the cure rather than the prevention since few people will call out and pay a

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computer expert to teach them prevention!

"How do you know you are in trouble? This might sound obvious but sometimes a machine can be infected with viruses and malicious code for weeks without you realizing it.

Obvious signs of infection include:

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Sudden slow downs

Strange message boxes and advertising coming up for no apparent reason.

Constant internet access. Viruses etc. need to be connected to the internet as much as possible and so if you are infected they will try to dial-up or connect all the time.

Long start up times.

Constant popups

"OK, I'm up the creek without a working computer what do I do now?"

Again Danny was in a playful mood. Curing computer problems on a daily basis would probably make most of us a little crazy.

"Pick from the following:

Throw your computer out of the window.

Set it on fire.

Kick it

Call a competent computer engineer

.

There are some things you can do yourself but this depends on how bad the troubles have progressed. If your system is having a nervous breakdown it may be better to call a competent computer engineer immediately. DO NOT WAIT. Waiting can be fatal since the virus or worm will spread and may render your system completely inoperative.

Run anti virus tools manually if necessary

Download tools like Stinger from McAfee which can sniff out viruses quickly. Put it on a floppy disk which you can use if you cannot connect with the internet. Stinger will operate in safe mode.

To get into safe mode. Start your computer and keep pushing F8 which activates safe mode at the time that the computer starts (clicks on) You keep pushing F8 so that you will not miss the brief window of

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opportunity to activate safe mode.

Once a system becomes really unstable it is often best just to reformat the hard drive and start again with the manufacturers system restore disks. "

I could see that Danny was warming to his theme and was about to come up with a major pronouncement. He was well into Headmaster mode.

"There is a moral here: **MAKE SURE YOUR IMPORTANT DATA IS BACKED UP.** Get into the habit of storing your most important files in at least two locations. I stopped using CD's for storage and bought a USB hard drive that gets plugged in on a regular basis for all my backups.

It is important to realise that CDR/CDRW disks are magnetic, this means they are susceptible to all sorts of magnetic fields from TV, speakers etc. They are also easily damaged by touch (grease on the fingers) as well as degradation from time.

System restore disks as with most bought software uses a different system to "write" to the disks. The data is physically imprinted onto the plastic so you have to really try before damage will occur.

Your data is 100 times more valuable than the installed software. Many people do not look after the system restore disks. This is very foolish. They are the only cheap way for you to get a working system again. Any other method will cost you a lot.

RECAP

Use your computer; don't mess about with it.

Back up your data on another system/hard disk/cd etc.

Be VERY careful of anything from the internet.

Follow this advice or send me a large cheque to sort out the resulting mess."

Danny allowed himself a little smile.

John Watson is an info publisher on the internet and a martial arts school owner. He taught Religious Studies and Life Skills to teenagers in London schools for about 33 years before retiring in 2000 A.D. His own e-books and those of the English multimillionaire, Stuart Goldsmith, can be found on his site at www.motivationtoday.com

Virus prevention and removal

By Ashish Jain

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A virus is a piece of code that gets loaded onto your computer without your knowledge and runs

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against your wishes. The first known occurrence of viruses goes back to 1987 when the ARPANET was infected by one.

One common misnomer among people is that you can infect your computer just by opening an email and reading its text. That is not possible; it is usually the files attached to the email that contain the virus. The most common file types are ".SCR" ".VBS" ", ".PIF"

Prevention is better than a cure: Here are some tips to make sure that your computer does not get infected.

- * Get a good Anti-Virus software like Norton Anti-Virus, MacAfee, PC Cillin etc.
- * Keep your anti virus software updated by downloading new virus definitions regularly. Most Anti-Virus software comes with the feature of updating virus definitions.
- * Keep your windows operating system updated by regularly downloading new updates from the Internet. Windows O/S's have a lot of security loopholes and bugs that can be easily exploited by worms and viruses.
- * Make sure the anti virus scans the file each time before its opened.
- * Floppy disks and removable media are a good source of viruses; always scan them before accessing files on them.
- * Never open email attachments from sources that are unknown or suspicious.
- * Do not open emails that have questionable subject lines.
- * When in doubt about a file, don't open it.
- * Even with the best of precautions bad things can still happen. Backup all your data and important files.

Even after taking all these precautions if your computer does get infected, then here are a few things that you can do:

Online clearing tools – are a good source of trying to clean out the virus, there are many Anti-Virus websites that offer free online virus detection and removal services.

Removal tools – If you have an Anti-Virus software then you can go to the website of that software and download removal tools designed specifically for the virus. However, you must find out the name of the virus that infects your PC beforehand.

If you have a backup of all your important files, you can also consider formatting your hard disk.

Ashish JainM6.Net

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