It's all Geek to Me!!

Protecting against computer viruses!

As more and more people get computers and hook into the Internet, there is an increased exposure to computer viruses. In 2003 alone there were thousands of new viruses that were created. The damage caused by these viruses adds up into the billions of dollars. One of the more recent viruses, labeled MyDoom, alone has caused an estimated $19 billion dollars worth of damage. People often ask what are viruses and where do they come from?

Computer Viruses are programs that have been written by someone and duplicate themselves to other computers. Much the same as a virus that is spread between people, these computer viruses pass along from contact with infected computers. This contact can be done in many ways, one of the most common is by e-mail. Some other methods include hiding the program in what people think is a useful tool (referred to as a Trojan Horse), or infecting files on web pages or your computer and diskettes.

The reasons for creating viruses are known only to the individuals that create them. Some do it for the challenge, others for the thrill that they get from hearing about their creation on the news. Some use a virus as a tool to get even with a company for something they feel they were mistreated about. No matter what the reason, viruses are part of everyday computing life.

The programmer (or creator) of the virus determines what kind of damage will be done and how the virus can replicate itself. Damages can be as simple as a recurring message or as major as wiping out the permanent storage on your computer (your hard drive). Viruses like MyDoom also targeted company web sites for Distributed Denial of Service attacks. This means that it tried to block access to/from specific companies through the internet. This is done by using infected computers and using them to repeatedly send information to these companies through the internet and by having so many people do this it stops the company from sending/receiving any data over these channels.

So, how does someone prevent these viruses from infecting their computers? It is recommended that you take 3 steps.

1. Install a reliable Antivirus software package. These can be purchased at most stores that sell computer equipment. Almost as important as having it, is keeping it up-to-date. There are automatic methods of downloading updates via the internet built into the software. Since new viruses come out every day, the software companies send out regular updates that can be downloaded and installed. This should be done weekly at a minimum.

2. Install a firewall on your computer. A firewall is a program that blocks access from outside the computer. The attacks generated by viruses use specific ports of access to contact other computers. A firewall blocks ports that are not in use, which protects your computer.

3. Use Windows Update. Microsoft Windows is a complex program and as with any complex item, there are flaws. These flaws can allow viruses to take over your computer and use it for their own purposes. When a new flaw is discovered in Windows, Microsoft posts a patch to fix it. To get to Windows Update, click Start – Windows Update (in Windows 98 or Millennium Edition) or Start – All Programs – Windows Update (in Windows XP). You can also open Internet Explorer and type www.windowsupdate.com in the address bar.

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