

12 Steps to Virus Protection

Computer viruses, worms, and Trojan horses are becoming more prevalent, more insidious, and more destructive. One of the most serious causes for concern in this area is the frequent changes in virus behavior. What was once “common knowledge” about virus exposure is now seriously out of date.

The following 12 steps reflect the state of the virus writers’ art as of today, which is considerably different from virus behavior a few years ago. To minimize your likelihood of virus infection, the traditional, old advice applies, but with many new twists, which are summarized here:

1. Make regular backups of your important data files, preferably to an off-site backup service such as Carbonite or Mozy.
2. Never open an e-mail attachment from someone you don’t know, regardless of the file type.
3. Never open an attachment from someone you do know, unless you first verify with them that they did actually send you that attachment.
4. If they did send you the attachment, verify that they are the original source of the attachment – if they just forwarded something they thought was entertaining, it still could contain a virus, worm, Trojan horse, or other malicious code.
5. Run a well-known Antivirus program, update your virus definitions daily, and have the program automatically scan all incoming and outgoing e-mail and attachments. It also should automatically scan any links in web sites, social media, or Instant Messenger messages.
6. Perform a Windows Update regularly, applying all Critical Updates and Important Updates as soon as they are available.
7. Be sure that your Windows Update settings include checking all Microsoft products for updates, not just Windows itself.
8. Automatically apply all updates to ancillary programs, such as Adobe Air, Flash, Reader and Shockwave; Java, QuickTime, Real Player, etc.
9. If feasible, uninstall Java from your computer; alternatively, disable Java in your browser.
10. Change the default options in Windows Explorer so that you can see all viruses (and all attachments) by their full name. In Control Panel, Folder Options, the View tab, make the following changes: Display the contents of system folders; Show hidden files and folders; do not Hide file extensions for known file types; and do not hide protected operating system files.
11. Exercise some restraint in forwarding jokes, cartoons, petitions, and other “cute” or sexy messages, and encourage your friends, associates, and correspondents to do the same.
12. If you e-mail anything to a list of recipients, place your address in the To: field and put their addresses in the Bcc: field of the address instead of Cc:. This simple step will slow the spread of viruses that are distributed via e-mail and will help protect the privacy of your correspondents.

These are the most important steps you can take to maximize your protection against viruses, short of enterprise-level security and firewalls. Any computer that is connected to the Internet should have at least a software firewall installed and running full-time. Most users would also benefit from a full Internet Security Suite of software, Group Policies, and extra security settings in your gateway/router and your browser for additional protection.