

What is a virus?

Viruses are written by Hackers and Crackers. So, we need to first understand Hackers and Crackers.

Hackers consider themselves to be very good computer programmers. They say that they are very good for the computer industry. They are a big community. They follow guidelines and regulations. They have many meeting places on the Internet. They have conventions throughout the world. Cautiously check out www.defcon.org. Their next convention is at the Riviera Hotel & Casino August 4-6, 2006. It is already sold out for August 5th. Hackers are often focused on sending messages to software vendors like Microsoft to try to coerce them into writing more secure programs. Sometimes they aim at political targets. Sometimes they are just doing what they do because they can.

Crackers are criminals. They are Hackers who write destructive programs or data stealing programs. Some of their viruses, bots, Trojan horses and worms destroy your data. These programs can send your confidential information to the Cracker. Generally Hackers despise Crackers as low life criminals. Crackers are generally very secretive and work in tight-knit groups.

As you can see, this is big and complex. Over the last 18 months, a whole new crime scene is being established. It is called cybercrime using crimeware.

Remember: Hacking and Cracking are illegal and are considered Federal Crimes. Surfing to the wrong web sites could put you on the US Secret Service watch list. Downloading or writing viruses could land you in Jail. Don't try it!

A virus has a "core" or "engine." It is a little computer program that can move around on your computer, jump to other computers and deposit stuff called a "payload." Like a human, animal or plant virus, a computer virus requires a "host." Just like in humans, some computers are more susceptible to viruses and have a more difficult time getting rid of them. Viruses are spread onto your computer in an invisible way. They come to you from surfing the Internet, in e-mail or from another computer in your business or home. One of the biggest outbreaks was the Melissa virus in 1999 causing an estimated \$80,000,000 in damage by infecting 1,200,000 computers.

What can you do to protect yourself?

- 1) Install and properly maintain security software including AntiVirus software
- 2) Keep your computer software programs updated with the latest security patches
- 3) Make sure your computer is configured correctly
- 4) Use complicated passwords – 8 characters at a minimum – keep them a secret
- 5) Only surf to known sites
- 6) Never touch unsolicited e-mail or web site pop-ups
- 7) Review your credit card and bank statements very carefully
- 8) Review your credit history regularly
- 9) Do not store unnecessary personal information on your computer
- 10) Ask for help

We covered viruses in detail this week. Hackers and Crackers also write bots, worms, Trojan horses and spyware. If you are interested in covering any of these in detail, please let us know at questions@compursurgeon.com.

Question for next week: Barbara asks "Why is my word processing document read only when I open it from a CD ROM that I burned?"