Security

Turn Windows into

FORT KNOX

Malware has evolved, and become smarter than ever. It is out to steal your data, and if you are not smart enough, then you may end up losing a lot more than just an email or two. Here's what you need to know to protect your PC from all evil

■ VISHAL MATHUR

We all know April Fools day is a favorite day for pranks. April 2009 edition saw pranks played on millions of PC users across the world as the CONFICKER worm (aka Downup, Downadup and Kido) wriggled its way in, and threatened a mass attack. We were lucky that the creator of this worm did not actually put an attack into action, but this is a major warning sign. Many PCs are completely open to any worm invasion, and a major attack paralyzing our PCs and possibly the Internet is a looming threat.

Malware of new varieties, with varying degrees of vengeance, has its eyes on your data, your email passwords, your bank account details, your credit card numbers, and your identity as a whole. Viruses, spywares, malwares and many other worms creep into your PC through the Internet, through USB drives you may using or even through a network that your PC may be connected to.

If you're using an older version of Windows (Windows XP or older), using pirated versions of Windows, not updating the operating system with the latest updates an patches, then you are high on the target list.

Most popular virus attacks have been designed to strike Windows based PCs. The reasons for this are three pronged: Windows is the most popular operating system in the world, Microsoft finds it difficult to keep up by releasing updates and patches and finally the users themselves are a lot to blame for not securing their PCs at their end. Follow these steps which will help you secure your PC in the best way possible. Trust me, you need this.

Go Genuine

It is prudent to keep your basic operating system genuine. This will help you get the latest security patches via the Automatic Updates route. A pirated OS may already be carrying malware which can constantly send your private data to its master. Go genuine. It will be well worth the expense.

The outside perimeter

Set up a perimeter which will prevent unauthorized access to your PC. A firewall is the best solution. It prevents unauthorized intrusion into your PC and asks you to accept certain traffic which it is not sure about. This prevents malware from entering and stealing data from the hard drive. The Windows Firewall is activated by default, but it is better to get a dedicated firewall to protect the data.

Zone Alarm Pro 2009 is a reliable bet, and it has been a reputed firewall name for so many years. It is available for Rs 1,582 (www.zonealarmstore.com and select region-> India). Get this firewall and keep it active to prevent any unauthorized intrusion into your PC, either from the Internet or from any network.

Amit Nath,
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Q. We have all faced the brunt of a virus attack on our PCs at one point of time or the other. What are the basic steps which need to be taken to reduce the frequency of these attacks?

All computers connected to the Internet are at risk to some degree. The first and most important step one should take to protect his systems from virus attacks is to install an anti-virus software.

Some of the important security steps one should follow are:

1. Always keep your security software working and up-to-date and install products and solutions that protect, whether the user is surfing the Internet or downloading files directly to the computer.
2. Employ the latest technologies, such as Web reputation, which can measure the trustworthiness and safety of a Website.
4. Use a web browser that has a no-script plug-in.
5. Check with your internet service provider to see what kind of protection is offered by their network.
6. If you use the Microsoft Windows operating system, enable the 'Automatic Update' feature and apply new updates as soon as they are available.
7. Always install, update, and maintain firewalls and intrusion detection software, including those that provide malware/spyware security.
8. Always use an anti-spam product for each email address.
9. Beware of unexpected or strange-looking emails, regardless of who the sender is.
10. If you trust the sender of the email, scan their email attachments with a security solution before opening them.
11. Beware of Web pages that require software installation. Scan all programs downloaded from the Internet with an up-to-date security solution.

Q. Apart from the traditional viruses, what are the new age threats which are beginning to threaten the security of the data and the stability of the PC? How can a PC user keep his data safe?

In addition to virus, there are number of malicious software programs such as spyware, adware, trojan horse programs, bots, viruses, or worms, etc. that are installed on the system without the users' knowledge or permission. These programs utilize the Web to spread, hide, update themselves and send stolen data back to criminals. They can also be combined to do the crime. That's why it is extremely important to keep the security software working and up-to-date, especially when the user is using a laptop on an unprotected wireless networks. It is also a good idea to install products and solutions that protect the system, whether the user is surfing the Internet or downloading files directly to the system. The user also should ensure that Web protection software extends beyond email protection to encompass peer-to-peer networks and the entire range of home computing applications and can provide warnings about traffic that is incoming and outgoing from the computer in real-time. It is not a bad idea to employ the latest technologies, such as Web reputation, which can measure the trustworthiness and safety of a Website before one visits it. It is also advisable use a web browser that has a no-script plug-in. As an ongoing exercise it is important to install, update, and maintain firewalls and intrusion detection software, including those that provide malware / spyware / anti virus security.

Norton Antivirus 2009 is available for Rs 1,645 (www.symantecstore.com and select region-> India). It is extremely light on resources and does not slow down the PC at all, which is extremely rare from an antivirus solution. There is also the Norton Antivirus 2009 Gaming Edition which has the dedicated Gaming mode which keeps it silent if it detects that a game is active.

Escan AntiVirus Edition is available for Rs 1,627 (www.mtwi.net and click on shop). This package has the traditional active virus scan feature along with a firewall, mail scanner and the on-demand scanner.

However, there are some free antivirus solutions available as well. You can install **Avast Home Edition** available from www.avast.com or even the **AVG** 8.5 free edition from www.avg.com.

Get another defense shield active

This one is against the pesky irritants called spyware. Antivirus solutions are meant to defend against hardcore virus and malware. However, they will not provide security against spyware, which mostly sneak into your PC when you browse the Internet. They slide through as tracking cookies or as bots. A proper anti-spyware in your PC, regularly updated, and used for regular scanning will keep these pesky creatures at bay.

There is a lot of anti-spyware available in the market. Among the free ones are the popular Spybot (www.safer-networking.org) and Lavasoft's Ad-Aware (www.lavasoft.com). You can download them and follow the proper installation and update process. Microsoft also offer a free software called Windows Defender. You can check that out at Microsoft's website. However, if you want to pay for that extra level of protection then you can get the Lavasoft Ad-Aware Plus for $26.95 (www.lavasoft.com/store). This also has the additional antivirus built-in along with real-time scan capabilities. I would, however, not give up my dedicated antivirus solution even if I do install this.

Install 'close circuit' surveillance

In simpler terms, install an Antivirus solution. A proper antivirus actively scans your PC for any signs of malware in your PC's memory or hard drive. It regularly scans the files for any infection, and keeps the memory clean by preventing any malware from starting up as a system service. Having an antivirus is not high on most people's priority list, but it is worth every penny spent. Install a genuine antivirus and regularly update it with the latest definitions available.

The Military shows up

If you feel that installing multiple solutions for firewall, antivirus and anti-spyware is irritating or confusing or a resource hog or all of the said problems, then help is at hand. You can buy some of the packages mentioned in the box. These provide 'all-in-one' convenience, and require a single install. Monitoring multiple features is easier, and a single scan can help detect all the security issues. Most of these suites also have the backup option, and some even provide space on their online servers for backing up your data. This is a real bonus as even backup of important files is done automatically.

Plug and scan

Most of us carry a lot of data on portable drives these days. These range from the tiny pen drives to the bigger portable hard drives. This has provided increased convenience as we lug our documents and files around, plugging them into PCs, one after the other. But what this has done is, and most people don't recognize this threat, that this has given the viruses an ability to multiply rapidly. As it sits on one PC, it infects the files on a portable drive plugged into it. Thus, now the portable drive becomes the host as well. Now, when this drive is plugged into any other PC, the virus will silently go and sit on that PCs hard drive as well. This is another form of virus mutation. People have started to show off their flash drives with a lot of glee, but most don't have the knowledge or the etiquettes of using them safely. **D**

Norton 360 Rs 3,769 *(1 year; 3 PC license)* at www.symantecstore.com This offers antivirus, antispyware, botnet protection, Firewall, Web Safe, browser protection, network protection, automated backup as well as the complete PC Tune-Up package with 2 GB online backup space.

Trend Micro Internet Security Pro 2009 Rs 2000 (1 year; 3 PC license) at http://store.trendmicro-apac.com.) This offers antivirus, antispyware, firewall, network mapping, secure web surf and anti-phishing.

ZoneAlarm Extreme Security Rs 4,285 (1 year; 3 PC license) at www.zonealarmstore.com and select the region-> India.)

The Extreme Security package has the traditional antivirus, antispyware, secure web browsing, firewall, anti-spam and PC Tune Up.

Escan Internet Security - Rs 3,583 (1 year; 3 PC license) at www.mtwi.net and click on Shop)

The Internet security package has the antivirus, endpoint protection, firewall, application control and parental control.

The best way of using a pen drive is to keep the entire set-up virus free. The PC has to be scanned and cleaned regularly. Secondly, whenever you plug in a flash drive, scan it with an antivirus scanner. Then only transfer any files to and from it. This should be done whenever a flash drive is plugged into any PC. Regularly scan the flash drive itself so that you don't help the virus infect any unsuspecting bloke's computer. The scanners of the antivirus solution we have installed on our PC are more than enough for this. There is no need for any separate solution, a little more common sense will help a lot.