

Viruses and Spyware

virus A *virus* is a program that was created to load onto a computer and then run or reproduce itself without the user's knowledge. Computer viruses have varying effects and may or may not cause harm. Some viruses display annoying messages, fill up the memory, send e-mail messages, or erase the contents of the hard drive.

Viruses are usually attached to another program or file, and the virus infects the computer when the user willingly opens or runs the program or file. A program or file that has a virus attached is called a malicious program. Most viruses are spread by users unknowingly sharing infected files or sending e-mails with infected attachments.

worm A *worm* is a type of virus that can reproduce itself but is not attached to other programs. Worms can spread between computers without a user's help because worms are created to use the file transfer systems on computers to move. Typically a worm sends out copies of itself to all the e-mail addresses on the user's computer. The recipient's computers are then infected with the worm and all of the recipient's e-mail addresses receive a copy of the worm. The mass e-mailings bog down the computers, networks, and the Internet, thus causing harm. More malicious worms have been created to allow other users access to the infected computer.

antivirus software Antivirus software should be installed to protect against viruses. *Antivirus software* detects many types of viruses by scanning incoming e-mail messages and other downloads. If a virus is detected, the software will display a warning and try to remove the virus. Most antivirus software titles have a corresponding website where new virus definitions can be downloaded on a daily or weekly basis. Virus definitions keep the antivirus software up-to-date by adding the latest virus information to look for when scanning.

spyware *Spyware* is not a virus, but is software that runs in the background and sends information about the user to others through the Internet. The spyware is usually installed without the user's knowledge when other software is downloaded from a website by the user and installed. Spyware is usually used to gather Internet use information for marketing purposes, but it can also be used to gather passwords and credit card numbers, record keystrokes, look for files, and install other programs. Spyware can change the browser's default home page, and make other changes to the user's computer as well.

antispyware To protect against spyware, *antispyware* software should be installed. Similar to antivirus software, antispyware software detects spyware and deletes it. The software should be kept up-to-date by downloading the latest information from the company that published the antispyware software.