

I run anti-virus software. Why do I still get viruses?

That's a very good question that we get asked daily. Most people believe that they're totally protected because they have an anti-virus program. Unfortunately, that's simply not true. The answer is partly the nature of anti-malware software and partly the nature of "the race".

We use that term – “the race” – on purpose. Combating viruses is a four-way race:

- In the lead are malware writers looking for vulnerabilities and writing malware to exploit them.
- Coming in second are the anti-malware software vendors looking for ways to detect new malware as it appears as well as figure out the correct way to eradicate it when found.
- Next are the software vendors looking to plug the security holes that the malware exploited in the first place.
- Lastly are folks like you and me, hopefully keeping our systems up-to-date with the latest updates to both our anti-malware products as well as the systems and software that have vulnerabilities.

As you can see, virus writers are almost always in the lead. Sadly, the computer user is last. No matter what anti-virus program you run you can't count on it to catch everything. All malware is not created equal, which is why there are so many different terms to describe the variations. Some exist merely to propagate. Others exist to do damage. Some exist to silently send spam. Some travel by email, others travel by downloaded applications.

No anti-virus tool can protect you from yourself. For example, if you open an email attachment that you don't recognize and run it, you may install a virus before your anti-virus software has a chance to act. When downloading a file, if you choose to ignore a warning that your anti-virus displays, you're telling the software that you know better than it does what is or is not safe.

Why is it like this? It's hard to say. Ask 10 people and you'll get 10 different answers: hackers with too much free time, operating systems that aren't robust enough, success in the marketplace that makes for a bigger target, there's more money to be made by infecting large numbers of machines with spam-sending bot software, and more. Of course, it shouldn't be like this. For whatever reason, it is like this and will be for the foreseeable future.