

PERSONAL TECH

Protecting Your Computer with Free Software

Tech Tip

By J. D. BIERSDORFER JULY 12, 2017

Q. *Are those free PC antivirus programs safe to use?*

A. The web is full of choices, but if you are looking for free protection for your computer, go with a program from an established security software company. You can find roundups and reviews online and the AV-Test.org site has a list of well-known software creators. Programs that pepper your screen with pop-ups or try to convince you that your computer is full of worms and viruses are often spyware or scams themselves.

Several companies offer free basic versions of their more complete security suites to home users — including Avast, AVG, Bitdefender, Sophos and ZoneAlarm. As the range of malicious software has expanded to other computing platforms, some companies now offer free tools for the Mac and mobile platforms as well; Malwarebytes Anti-Malware for Mac is among the options. Free apps that

specifically protect against ransomware (like Bitdefender's Anti-Ransomware Tool for Windows) can also be found.

When browsing for software, make sure you are actually getting a copy of the company's free antivirus tool — and not just the free trial version of a more comprehensive paid program. Depending on the program, you may be asked to share user data for research or see ads and upgrade offers within the free software. Paid versions typically provide more comprehensive protections, like network or game scanning.

Microsoft makes its own antivirus software for its Windows systems. If it is not already installed, Windows 7 users can download the Microsoft Security Essentials program from the company's site. The current version of Windows 10 comes with the Windows Defender Security Center for blocking viruses and other threats; go to the Settings app and open the Update & Security icon to check your coverage. (Apple builds in protective features like app-screening and anti-phishing alerts into its Mac OS software, but a third-party program goes further.)

Security software can help block malicious code from invading your computer, but be on guard for more socially engineered attacks from email and other online sources. StaySafeOnline.org has a guide to spam and phishing lures, and other threats to avoid.

Personal Tech invites questions about computer-based technology to techtip@nytimes.com. This column will answer questions of general interest, but letters cannot be answered individually.