

5 Steps to Help Avoid Instant Message Viruses

Watch out for files sent in IM—they could be viruses in disguise.

Instant messaging, commonly referred to as IM, is a method of online communication like E-Mail. The main difference, as the name suggests, is that IM is instantaneous. Using an IM program—such as MSN Messenger, Windows Messenger, AOL Instant Messenger, Yahoo Messenger, or others—you and a friend can type messages to each other and see the messages almost immediately.

Because IM has become so popular, virus writers are using it to spread malicious programs. Read on to find out how to avoid getting or spreading a virus when you use IM.

Understanding Instant Message Viruses

Like E-Mail viruses, instant message viruses are malicious or annoying programs that are designed to travel through IM. In most cases these viruses are spread when a person opens an infected file that was sent in an instant message that appeared to come from a friend.

The following is an example of what an IM virus sent through an infected file might look like:

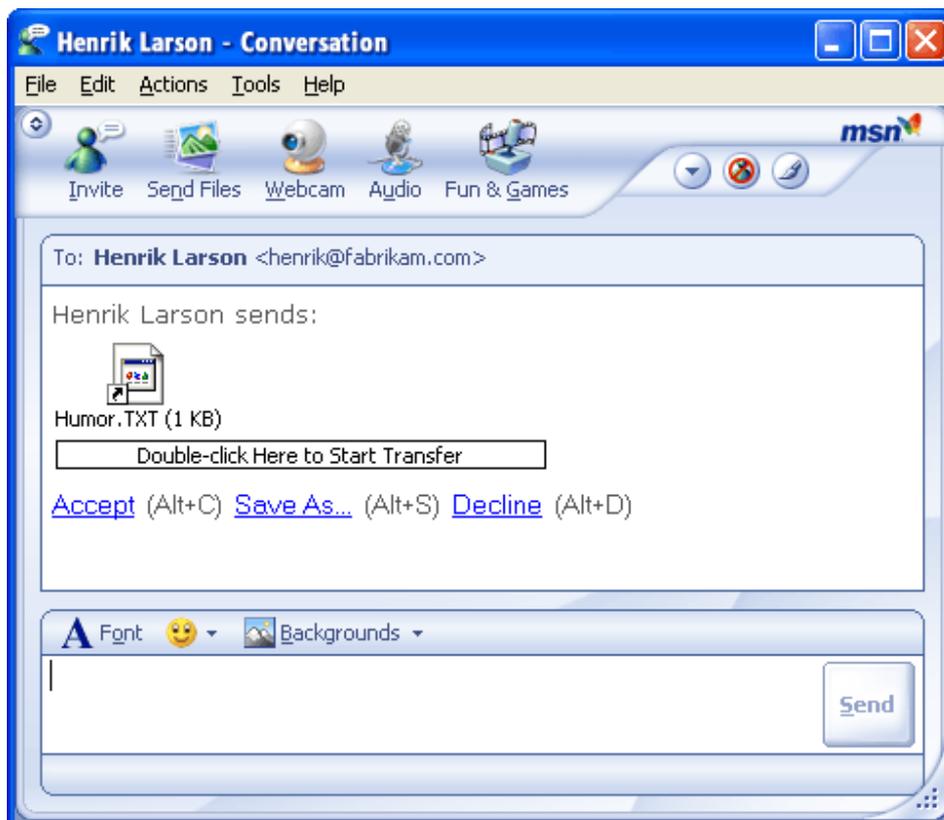


Figure 1. Example of an infected file sent through an instant message.

When unsuspecting people open these files, their computers can become infected with a virus. Because of the virus, their computers may slow down or stop responding, or they may not notice any change at all. However, the virus might have installed a covert program on their computer that could damage software, hardware, or important files, and that may include spyware, which can track information entered on a computer.

A computer infected by a virus may continue to spread the infection by sending copies of the virus to everyone on your IM contact list. A contact list is the collection of IM names (similar to an E-Mail address book) that you can store in your IM program.

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As with most threats on the Internet, you can help keep yourself safe by taking basic precautions. If you know how to avoid viruses, you'll already be familiar with many of these steps.

1. **Be careful downloading files in IM.** Never open, accept, or download a file in IM from someone you don't know. If the file comes from someone you do know, don't open it unless you know what the file is and you were expecting it. Contact the sender by E-Mail, phone, or some other method to confirm that what they sent was not a virus.
2. **Update your Windows software.** Visit Windows Update to scan your computer and install any high-priority updates that are offered to you. If you have Automatic Updates enabled, the updates are delivered to you when they are released, but you have to make sure you install them.
3. **Make sure you're using an updated version of your IM software.** Using the most up-to-date version of your IM software can better protect your computer against viruses and spyware. If you're using MSN Messenger, install the updated version by visiting the MSN Messenger Web site and clicking the **Download Now!** button.
4. **Use antivirus software and keep it updated.** Antivirus software can help to detect and remove IM viruses from your computer, but only if you keep the antivirus software current. If you've purchased a subscription from an antivirus software company, your antivirus software may update itself when you're connected to the Internet.
5. **Use anti-spyware software and keep it updated.** Some IM viruses may install spyware or other unwanted software on your computer. Anti-spyware software can help to protect your computer from spyware and remove any spyware you may already have. If you don't have anti-spyware software, you can download the new Microsoft Windows AntiSpyware (Beta) or another spyware removal tool.