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Virus Stoppers

Twenty years after the first one appeared, PC viruses are more diabolical than ever. How do you keep them off your system? Read on for the results of our rigorous lab tests of the top antivirus programs.

BY RYAN NARAINÉ

TROJAN HORSES. ROOTKITS. BOTNETS. KEYLOGGERS. These terms might not mean much to the average computer user, but to the average computer they're the equivalent of the bird flu and Ebola viruses. With money serving as the main motive, tech crooks have turned these one-time playthings of mal-adjusted geeks into a serious business.

To see which programs offer today's best protection, we tested eight stand-alone antivirus apps: Alwil's Avast 4 Antivirus Professional Edition, BitDefender's Antivirus 10, Eset's NOD32, Grisoft's AVG 7.5 Anti-Virus Professional Edition, Kaspersky's Anti-Virus 6, Panda's Antivirus 2007, Symantec's Norton AntiVirus 2007, and Trend Micro's Anti-Virus plus AntiSpyware 2007. These apps allow users to pick and choose their other security software (such as firewalls), and they cost less than security suites. All include antispware protection, and many have anti-rootkit components to defend against devious attempts to hide malware deep within a system. To protect against unknown viruses, all of the apps we tested come with some form of proactive protection to supplement more-traditional signature-based approaches, which must match incoming threats against a database of known threats in order to block them.

After rigorous analysis, we awarded Kaspersky's well-designed Anti-Virus 6 the Best Buy. It ended up in a virtual dead heat with the entries from Symantec and BitDefender for best malware detection honors, and it also did the best job of cleaning malware infections. At

\$50, however, it's relatively expensive.

In partnership with security research company AV-Test.org, we tested the programs under Microsoft Vista Ultimate; all eight have a Windows XP version as well. By far the most important tests that AV-Test conducted pitted each app against a "zoo"—a collection of nearly 900,000 viruses, Trojan horses, bots, and other forms of malware. After this, each app had to try to detect current threats using one- and two-month-old signature files to simulate how well it could block unknown malware. Our three best-rated apps were, not surprisingly, those that performed best in these critical tests.

We also rated each program on its design and ease of use, including whether the application installed with an appropriate default configuration. We then factored in performance, support policies, and whether the app had features such as Web-traffic scanning. Finally we rated cost. (For more details on our testing, see find.pcworld.com/57104.)

To choose our contenders, we selected from Vista-ready popular sellers and best-of-breed programs. Alwil and Grisoft offer feature-limited free versions of their programs—but to compare apples to apples, we

selected their paid versions. Wondering why McAfee isn't on the list? The company no longer sells a stand-alone antivirus app (its VirusScan Plus programs include a firewall). Another no-show is F-Secure, whose popular app wasn't Vista-ready in time for inclusion in our testing.

1 Kaspersky

OUR BEST BUY antivirus program, Kaspersky Anti-Virus 6 delivered top-notch success rates for malware detection (96 percent) and disinfection performance (86 percent of all items). It was fastest at producing new signatures, too, with a response time of 0 to 2 hours.

BEST BUY KASPERSKY
Excellent virus detection and speedy signature delivery make it the tops.

You'll pay for



this stellar performance, however. At \$50 for the downloaded product,

Anti-Virus 6 is the most expensive program we tested, though the renewal cost drops to

\$35 per year. In addition, its proactive protection was only middling, catching approximately half of the 200 new malware samples it was exposed to when tested using a one-month-old signature database.

Anti-Virus 6's polished interface makes it easy for users to schedule scans. And clearly labeled, one-click drill-down options make finding and setting up various advanced features a breeze.

In dealing with e-mail and news traffic, the program scans incoming and outgoing data over the POP3, SMTP, IMAP, and

NNTP protocols. It monitors HTTP traffic for Web-borne threats, too. It doesn't set up a default scheduled scan, however—you'll need to set one up yourself.

Built-in antiphishing protection can block scam e-mail, and Kaspersky's "proactive defense" module looks for the hidden processes and Registry changes that can signal malware hidden with a rootkit.

If you buy this program, do so online—the download costs \$10 less than the retail box. If you want to get the Vista-compatible

flavor, you'll have to download the program anyway. Just be sure to download the right version; it's easy to click the wrong link among the many offered on the downloads page.

You get free phone and e-mail support during business hours from Monday through Friday, though the phone number isn't toll-free. Kaspersky says that its Moscow office will answer support calls placed after hours on weekdays and throughout the weekend, on what it calls a "best-effort" basis.

FEATURES COMPARISON

TEST Center

Top Antivirus Performers

KASPERSKY'S FIRST-RATE but pricey program offers a smooth, easy-to-use design and excellent protection against malware.

	ANTIVIRUS SOFTWARE	PCW Rating	Design and ease of use	Malware-detection rate ¹	Proactive detection of unknown threats ²	False-positive detections ³	System slowdown ⁴	Outbreak-response time (hours) ⁵	Bottom line
1	Kaspersky Anti-Virus 6 Best \$50 (\$35 renewal) BUY find.pcworld.com/57009	85 Very Good	Superior	96%	51%	6	10%	0 to 2	This effective but expensive program has solid malware detection and the fastest outbreak-response time among currently tested competitors.
2	Symantec Norton AntiVirus 2007 \$40 (\$39 renewal) find.pcworld.com/57010	84 Very Good	Superior	96%	49%	3	10%	10 to 12	Symantec's solid program wins top marks for antivirus detection and cleanup, but its renewal and support costs are high.
3	BitDefender Antivirus 10 \$30 (\$22 renewal) find.pcworld.com/57011	84 Very Good	Superior	96%	61%	14	124%	4 to 6	BitDefender has excellent malware detection and a good price, but it causes a noticeable (though not show-stopping) system slowdown.
4	Eset NOD32 \$39 (\$27 renewal) find.pcworld.com/57012	84 Very Good	Very Good	90%	79%	6	5%	4 to 6	NOD32 provides the best proactive protection by far, but its overall malware detection is second-tier, and it has an overly technical interface.
5	Panda Antivirus 2007 \$30 (\$30 renewal) find.pcworld.com/57013	79 Good	Very Good	90%	56%	3	4%	6 to 8	This competitively priced option offers good proactive protection, average overall malware detection, and a poor disinfection rate.
6	Alwil Avast 4 Antivirus Professional Edition \$40 (\$28 renewal) find.pcworld.com/57014	78 Good	Good	92%	37%	5	4%	6 to 8	This program has decent overall malware detection, but poor proactive protection, and an awkward design. It also lacks U.S. phone support.
7	Grisoft AVG 7.5 Anti-Virus Professional Edition \$30 (\$15 renewal) find.pcworld.com/57015	77 Good	Good	91%	34%	1	2%	6 to 8	The least-expensive program we tested, AVG has average overall malware detection, the worst proactive protection, and a clunky interface.
8	Trend Micro AntiVirus plus AntiSpyware 2007 \$40 (\$40 renewal) find.pcworld.com/57016	71 Good	Very Good	82%	43%	0	9%	6 to 8	Trend Micro's poor performance at detecting malicious software (overall and proactive) put it at the bottom of the barrel in our ranking.

FOOTNOTES: ¹ Tests conducted using AV-Test.org's collection of 884,164 malware samples. ² Tested using one-month-old signature files. ³ The number of harmless files incorrectly identified as suspect, out of 20,000. ⁴ The amount of slowdown seen on a computer running Microsoft Office with the antivirus software installed, compared to the same computer without the software. ⁵ The number of hours, on average, that the company took to deliver signatures for new malware during the first part of 2007. **CHART NOTES:** Street prices are as of 3/31/07. The PCW Rating is based on the program's malware detection rate (overall and proactive), performance (including scan speed and system slowdown tests), price, specs, and product design. For further testing details, see find.pcworld.com/57104.

