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## Review: Free Antivirus Software

From [Mary Landesman](#),  
Your Guide to [Antivirus Software](#).  
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Free antivirus software may be the only option for those on a limited budget. The question, of course, is how well free antivirus software protects your PC, how easy is it to use, and if something goes wrong will you be left out in the cold? The answers may surprise you. This review looks at three free antivirus solutions: [AntiVir PersonalEdition Classic](#), [AVAST 4 Home Edition](#), and [AVG Free Edition](#).

Each of the products tested has been certified ([VB100%](#), [ICSALabs](#), or [Checkmark](#)) to be effective at detecting 100% of in-the-wild viruses. But the list of in-the-wild (ItW) viruses is miniscule in comparison to the number of actual known viruses. The ItW list also omits certain types of threats, including adware and spyware, thus it may not be representative of the actual threats confronting users today.

For this reason, we turned to [AV-Test.org](#), a project of the University of Magdeburg and AV-Test GmbH, Andreas Marx. Each year, Andreas subjects antivirus scanners to a wide range of tests, extending the basic wildlist testing to include a collection of 159322 zoo virus tests, as well as the ability to detect viruses in 37 compressed and archive formats, and any false positives (detection of viruses in non-infected, legitimate files) resulting from these tests. We also performed our own in-house tests to determine whether any of the free products were capable of providing a high level of protection against adware and spyware.

### The Scorecard

To ensure objectivity, we rated each of the free antivirus scanners based on system impact (install size and number of active running processes), detection of zoo viruses, detection of spyware/adware, compressed/archive types handled, number of false positives, product support options, and response times (how quickly the vendor releases updates after a new virus is discovered in-the-wild).

Scan speeds were not included in scoring, as these can vary widely depending on system configuration and whether any infections are present and, in any event, have no bearing on detection or capability of the product. Likewise, though we comment on ease-of-use and cosmetics of the interface, these are subjective opinions that will vary from user to user and thus were not used to score the products.

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As [noted](#), each of the three free antivirus scanners - AntiVir PersonalEdition Classic, AVAST 4 Home Edition, and AVG Free Edition - have proven ability to detect in-the-wild viruses. This is a core, basic functionality of any reputable antivirus scanner and thus serves only as the basis for inclusion in the review, i.e. no points were awarded for meeting this minimum qualification. (Before considering any antivirus solution, you should check their ItW certification by consulting any of the following: [VB100%](#), [ICSALabs](#), or [Checkmark](#)).

#### Zoo Detection

AVAST 4 Home Edition had the highest rate of zoo virus detection (92%), followed by AntiVir PersonalEdition Classic at 85% and AVG Free Edition at 81%.

However, AVAST's higher zoo detection was offset by a correspondingly higher rate of false positives, 9 total compared to AntiVir at only 2. Conversely, AVG scored the lowest in both categories, racking up 11 false positives.

#### Response Times

How nimble your antivirus vendor is can make the difference between an infection and a non-event. To gauge this, we looked at the response times recorded for 26 major outbreaks during a particularly prolific virus period. Vendors who were among the first five to release antivirus updates for one of these 26 threats received points accordingly. AntiVir was one of the top 5 vendors a total of 5 times, AVAST appeared twice, and AVG only once.

#### Compressed/Archive Types

Many virus creators thwart signature-based scanners simply by repackaging a known virus using a different compression or archive type. This not only changes the signature, not all scanners can decompress the resulting files in order to scan them properly. According to tests performed in 2005, AntiVir is capable of scanning 30 different compressed and archive types, compared to AVAST at 28 and AVG at only 17.

#### Adware and Spyware

When it came to adware and spyware, none of the free scanners performed well. The best of the worst was AVAST, which removed 33% of the active components of the adware and spyware installed to our test system. AntiVir PersonalEdition Classic removed 5% and AVG removed none. (Paid versions of these same products proved more capable thus a low score for the free products has no bearing on their paid counterparts).

#### Footprint

Each of the free antivirus scanners was conservative in the amount of disk space used, installing 40Mb or less on our test systems. (The smallest was AVG at only 30Mb). AVG installed four running processes, compared to three for AntiVir and six by AVAST. The footprint on the system can be particularly important for those running older operating systems (i.e. Windows 98/ME) where hard drive space and memory might be at a premium. Fortunately, any one of the three meets those needs.

#### Support Options

If you run into difficulty using the product or trying to remove a stubborn infector, you'll have to resort to an online knowledgebase or self-help forum. AVAST does offer phone support, but there's a per minute charge attached which could likely turn the free solution into an expensive alternative rather quickly.

#### The Final Scores

If we left spyware/adware removal out of the mix and focused only on the scanner's ability to detect traditional virus threats, out of a possible 125.6 points, AntiVir PersonalEdition Classic scored 94, AVAST 4 Home Edition scored 89, and AVG Free Edition scored 66. However, when we included adware/spyware removal in the judging, the results were dismal, with AVAST scoring highest at 66 points, AntiVir following at 58, and AVG with only 30.

Of course, these particular antivirus scanners don't claim to have adware and spyware removal capabilities, so it would be unfair to judge them harshly if they do not. Still, if you are looking for a standalone antivirus scanner that can also offer spyware or adware protection, you'll have to shell out a few dollars to get it.

Next: Individual Product Reviews: [AntiVir PersonalEdition Classic](#) | [AVAST 4 Home Edition](#) | [AVG Free Edition](#)

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