[Being Smart About Protecting Your Mobile Devices](https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=111903991)

STEVE INSKEEP, host:

Those smart phones that belong to you or someone you know may not be quite smart enough to ward off viruses or other kinds of electronic attacks. So we've called in MORNING EDITION's technology commentator Mario Armstrong to tell us how worried we should be, if at all. Hi, Mario.

MARIO ARMSTRONG: Hi, Steve. How are you?

INSKEEP: I'm doing fine, thanks. I got to tell you, my wife has been probably hoping for years that this Blackberry that I carry around will be attacked by a virus and destroyed. So this is really sort of a good news story.

(Soundbite of laughter)

INSKEEP: But how worried - how possible is it that something could happen to it?

ARMSTRONG: Very possible. You know, these mobile phones are more readily available. I say that people in America carry three things, and that's your wallet, your keys and a mobile phone. So there's a large enough market for hackers or those to want to attack these devices. So it's just a matter of time before we see some type of major outbreak.

INSKEEP: Well, I've got a spy-ware program on my laptop that I ran just the other day.

ARMSTRONG: That's right, but you don't have that, probably, on your smart phone. Or if you did, you probably wouldn't know really how to use that, or maybe no one's even mentioned to you, hey, have you thought about updating any antivirus software on your cell phone? So we're seeing much more of these devices, and the market for mobile security software has doubled more in 2008, and probably will continue to show some strong growth over the years to come -although I still think we need to see a major outbreak for something to really take off.

INSKEEP: You mean a major outbreak that would really get it in the public consciousness.

ARMSTRONG: That's correct, for having every day people actually talking about or being in fear of their device or thinking about their data being compromised on their devices. Once it hits the kitchen table and people are talking about it, then we'll start to really see a market need for antivirus software on cell phones.

INSKEEP: Are phones a little bit behind in this area because people haven't thought of it before, because it just makes the phone a little cheaper not to worry about it? What?

ARMSTRONG: There's a couple of things. There have been some attacks that have been out there, but they just haven't gone widespread. The PC market just still remains a more profitable target for cyber crooks. And then number two, another reason could be that mobile phones haven't really traditionally stored a lot of sensitive data, and that's what's changing. Now we are starting to use these devices in more complex ways, things for not only just email and getting news but now using them for things like banking and even remote control types of devices.

INSKEEP: So as this device in my hand merges toward being basically a computer, it is going to be just as vulnerable as the computer, which maybe it really wasn't in the past.

ARMSTRONG: That's right, and maybe even more so vulnerable, because I have access to things that I could do. Like, for example, if I was to run some type of hacking software onto your cell phone, I could, potentially, then send a text message to everyone in your address book that could potentially download or click onto something or send them - or redirect them to a Web site that could be false and try to acquire some other personal identification. So I could try to get it from the device itself, or I could try to phish people, and that is to send them into a trap for more personal information.

INSKEEP: Two things that I'm sure are happening somewhere in America right now as we speak, Mario. One, a computer hacker is taking a couple of notes on what you're saying and saying, hmm, very nice idea. I could try that. And the other thing is there must be some company that's getting ready to make some money off this, selling protection.

ARMSTRONG: And that's where we've seen a lot of changes, because we see a lot of market hype in terms of, ooh, let's watch out for our phones. They could be tapped. They could be compromised. And that is true. I don't want to make it seem like it's all hype. But at the same time, it seems that a lot of the hype is coming from anti-virus companies. I mean, I've been reading about one quote that said that one in every 63 smart phones is vulnerable. Well, that report came from a company that sells anti-virus software. I have seen data, though, that does suggest that about 500 mobile viruses have been launched in the last five years, but when you look at PCs, it's over two million viruses in the same timeframe.

So I just don't think that the anti-virus companies yet have a market need. There hasn't been an outbreak to cause that consumer awareness, although recently at the Black Hat conference - which is basically an annual conference that brings together security professionals from all over the world - this was the first year at that conference that several panels and discussions were specifically about mobile security, and, in fact, several different hacks were shown on multiple devices, from the iPhone to Google's Android. So this is a real situation and a real problem.

INSKEEP: Mario Armstrong is host of DIGITAL CAFE on public radio station WYPR in Baltimore. Mario, always good to talk with you.

ARMSTRONG: Thank you, Steve. It's been a pleasure.

INSKEEP: And you could find tips on how to protect your smart phone and get more technology coverage by checking out the new npr.org.