

Nation-backed hackers tune attacks to COVID-19 fears: Google

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Google on Wednesday warned that nation-backed hackers are exploiting the coronavirus pandemic to target health care organizations and those working to fight the pandemic.

A security team tasked with defending against government-backed cyberattacks on Google and its users said it identified more than a dozen state-sponsored groups using COVID-19 themes as bait in phishing and malware traps.

Early this month, Google reported that it was detecting about 18 million pandemic-themed malware or phishing messages per day and some 240 million COVID-linked [spam messages](#).

"Hackers frequently look at crises as an opportunity, and COVID-19 is no different," Shane Huntley of Google Threat Analysis Group said in a blog post.

Examples of ploys included bogus solicitations for charities; messages crafted to appear as though sent from remote workers, and websites impersonating pages of governments or public health agencies.

Huntley noted that one [hacker](#) campaign sent messages to US government workers with phony offers of free meals or delivery options available from fast food franchises because of the pandemic.

Clicking on the emails led to online pages designed to trick people into providing user names and passwords to Google accounts, according to the security team.

Most of the messages were automatically filtered as spam, and steps were taken to block access to deceptive websites asking for credentials, according to Huntley.

"We're not aware of any user having their account compromised by this campaign, but as usual, we notify all targeted users with a 'government-backed attacker' warning," Huntley said.

"We've also seen attackers try to trick people into downloading malware by impersonating health organizations."

Some COVID-19 themed targeting of international health organizations discovered by Google was deemed the work of an Iran-linked group referred to as "Charming Kitten."

Hackers allied under a "Packrat" banner traced to South America were said to have been behind emails linking to a fake World Health Organization website log-in page, according to Huntley.

Google is tightening security at more than 50,000 accounts thought to be in the crosshairs of state-sponsored hackers, according to the California-based internet firm.

"Generally, we're not seeing an overall rise in phishing attacks by government-backed groups; this is just a change in tactics," Huntley said.

US and British security agencies earlier this month issued similar warnings, saying some 2,500 web addresses were linked to various fraud schemes.

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