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How To Guides

PC Cleanup Pays Off in Performance

By Gabriel Goldberg

Some experts believe that, in addition to [physically cleaning your computer](#) (which many people pay to have done), PC operating systems, hard drives, applications, and data files should occasionally be scrubbed to improve PC performance, reliability, and system life.

But the medical adage "First, do no harm" applies here. PC tinkering can cause problems, so if you're unsure or uncomfortable performing any of these tasks, do research, check with a buddy or user group, or consult [AARP's Computers and Technology Message Board](#). This article describes steps applicable to Windows XP; other Windows versions are similar.

Before performing any PC chores, back up data files. Also, before you start, take note of the amount of free space on your hard drive. To do this, open Windows Explorer, right-click your hard drive (usually identified as "Local Disk"), and click on Properties in the context menu. This will give you some information to compare against after your clean up is completed.

The first and most simple step you can take to clean up your PC is using Windows' built-in disk cleaning service. To begin, close all applications, then, from the lower-left corner of your Windows desktop, left-click on the following: Start, All Programs, Accessories, System Tools, Disk Cleanup, then select the drive to clean, most likely your local disk, or C. Choose what you want to clean. Default selections are usually correct. For extra credit, delete old System Restore points by clicking More Options and Clean Up System Restore, confirm your choice, and click OK. **Caution:** While this choice frees large amounts of hard drive space, it removes the ability to restore your system to a state before you cleaned it. Do this only on PCs that are operating well.

Next, delete temporary files stored by your Web browser. If you are using Internet Explorer, from the menu bar click on Tools, then Internet Options, then Delete Files under the General tab. Other Web browsers offer similar clean up options, although they may use the term "cache" to refer to the collection of temporary files.

Now it's time to scrub outdated and unused personal files. First, protect those files you value by backing them up or archiving them to CD, whichever you prefer. Unless you've changed the default directory within a particular application, most Microsoft Office programs store files in the My Documents folder. To clean out these files, use Windows Explorer to open the

My Documents folder, as well as any customized file folders you may have created, and begin to delete. If you collect photos, music and such, this is also a good time to delete those you no longer want or need. Sorting files by size or date will help you find deletion candidates.

If you use a PC-based e-mail application, it's a good idea to purge the contents of the Sent and Trash folders, or at least those older than a specific date. Also, look for a Compact Folders option. This option removes unused space from e-mail folders. This is also a good time to take inventory and weed out software that is no longer used or useful. You can uninstall applications you no longer need or want by using Window's Control Panel Add/Remove Software tool.

For better PC performance, you may also want to limit the amount of software that starts up when you PC boots up. To review which applications start with your PC, left-click on the following: Start, All Programs, and Startup. Additionally, if your System Tray, located in the lower-right corner of your Window's desktop, contains more than a few icons, it may be worth pruning out some of them since each application residing in the System Tray is also taking up some portion of your PC's RAM (Random Access Memory, the memory used to run applications). Mouse over each icon to identify each application represented. With many of the System Tray icons, you can double- or right-click on the icon to access the options, including starting at boot. **Caution:** be careful to not remove software that's used to protect your computer while it's running, such as firewall or anti-virus software.

After deleting files and removing software, the Recycle Bin, which preserves erased files for recovery until it's emptied, has no doubt grown in content and size. Emptying the Recycle Bin is a necessary task when cleaning up your PC. To empty the Recycle Bin, right-click on its icon located on the Window's desktop and click on Empty Recycle Bin. **Caution:** [once you delete files from the Recycle Bin](#), they are not easily recovered. Also note that programs such as Norton Utilities may offer other cleanup options for the Recycle Bin and other Windows components. While a complete PC cleanup requires that you pursue all cleanup options, remember that safety is more important than neatness, and you should only clean up and erase what you understand. If in doubt, get advice.

A good final step to take when cleaning up your PC, after removing all the unnecessary or unused files and software, is to defrag your hard drive. When saving files to your hard drive, Windows usually places bits and pieces of each file in the next available open space on the hard drive. Although Windows keeps track of all the pieces and knows how to recover and reassemble them, having many files fragmented in this fashion slows the performance of your PC and your ability to access the files. Additionally, when you delete files, they are only marked for deletion and the space occupied by the file is not relinquished until it is overwritten, usually by another fragmented file. So, to get all the file pieces back together, you defrag the hard drive. To do this, left-click on the following: Start, All Programs, Accessories, System Tools, Disk Defragmenter, select a drive, click on Defragment, then sit back and watch this utility perform.

Once you've completed all this clean up, if you took note of the amount of free space on your hard drive before you began your PC cleanup, you may want to check it again to see what your cleaning efforts accomplished.

A detailed handbook for keeping your PC humming is "Cleaning Windows XP for Dummies." Its conversational and entertaining style provides motivation, high-level

guidance, and nitty-gritty details for more than PC cleaning. It also covers buying PCs and dealing with Windows Update. It's slightly repetitious but progresses from an overview to useful action checklists. Best of all, it targets people from novice to expert skill levels.

[Industry expert Fred Langa](#) campaigns for neat PCs. [Searching his site](#) for the word "clean" will locate additional helpful articles and tools for cleaning your PC.

Just as you clean out dust bunnies and pitch expired foods, PC cleaning is never finished. Fortunately, it's really not too overwhelming.

Specifications

Title: Cleaning Windows XP for Dummies

Author: Allen Wyatt

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URL: "[Cleaning Windows XP for Dummies](#)" at Barnes & Noble

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