

How to Use Safe Mode to Fix Your Windows PC

How to Use Safe Mode to Fix Your Windows PC (and When You Should)

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Windows' Safe Mode is an essential tool. On computers infected with malware or crashing because of buggy drivers, Safe Mode may be the only way to start the computer.

Safe Mode starts your PC with a minimal set of drivers and services. No third-party software or drivers get loaded, and even the built-in Windows stuff is limited to just what's necessary. Safe Mode is a great way to remove problem-causing software—like malware—without that software getting in the way. It also provides an environment where you may find it easier to roll back drivers, and use certain troubleshooting tools.

When Safe Mode Can Help

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When Windows starts normally, it launches startup programs, fires up all the services configured to start, and loads the hardware drivers you have installed. If you start in Safe Mode, Windows uses a very low screen resolution with generic video drivers, doesn't initialize much hardware support, starts only the necessary services, and avoids loading third-party startup programs.

Sometimes, you can start Windows in Safe Mode when you can't start Windows normally, making it a good place to start troubleshooting potential problems. If your computer is infected with malware or has unstable hardware drivers that cause blue screens, Safe Mode can help you fix it because those things aren't loaded the way they are when Windows starts normally.

How to Start Windows In Safe Mode

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Your Windows PC should automatically start up in Safe Mode if it crashes more than once while trying to start normally. However, you can also boot into Safe Mode manually:

- **Windows 7 and earlier:** Press the F8 key while the computer is booting (after the initial BIOS screen, but before the Windows loading screen), and then select Safe Mode in the menu that appears.
- **Windows 8:** Hold Shift while clicking Restart on the power menu on either the login screen

or through the Charms bar menu to begin the process.

- **Windows 10:** Hold Shift while clicking Restart on the “Power Options” submenu of the Start Menu. Click Troubleshoot > Advanced Options > Startup Settings > Restart. Press the “4” key when you see the Startup Settings screen.

How to Fix Your PC in Safe Mode

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After starting Windows in Safe Mode, you can perform most of the regular system maintenance and troubleshooting tasks to fix your computer:

- **Scan for Malware:** Use your antivirus application to scan for malware and remove it in Safe Mode. Malware that may be impossible to remove in normal mode—because it’s running in the background and interfering with the antivirus—may be removable in Safe Mode. If you don’t have an antivirus installed, you should be able to download and install one in Safe Mode. Of course, if you’re using Windows Defender in Windows 10, you might be better off performing an offline malware scan.
- **Run System Restore:** If your computer was recently working fine but it’s now unstable, you can use System Restore to restore its system state to the earlier, known-good configuration. Assuming your computer is unstable and crashing, it may be possible to run System Restore without crashing from Safe Mode.
- **Uninstall Recently Installed Software:** If you recently installed software (such as a hardware driver or a program that includes a driver) and it’s causing your computer to blue-screen, you can uninstall that software from the Control Panel. Your computer should hopefully start normally after you’ve uninstalled the interfering software.
- **Update Hardware Drivers:** Assuming your hardware drivers are causing system instability, you may want to download and install updated drivers from your manufacturer’s website and install them in Safe Mode. If your computer is unstable, you’ll have to do this from Safe Mode—the hardware drivers won’t interfere and make your computer unstable in Safe Mode.
- **See Whether a Crash Occurs:** If your computer is unstable normally but works fine in Safe Mode, it’s likely that there’s a software problem causing your computer to crash. However, if the computer continues to crash in Safe Mode, this is often a sign that there’s a hardware problem with your computer. (Note that stability in Safe Mode doesn’t necessarily mean it’s a hardware problem. For example, your graphics card may be faulty and causing crashes under load. However, it may be stable in Safe Mode because your computer isn’t performing demanding operations with it.)

Beyond Safe Mode: Reinstalling Windows

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If you are having computer problems, it's often not a good use of your time to spend hours isolating and fixing them. It may be much faster to reinstall Windows and start over with a fresh system.

- Windows 7 and earlier: Check out our guide to reinstalling Windows from a Windows disc or your computer's recovery partition.
- Windows 8 or Windows 10: Use the Refresh or Reset your PC feature to restore Windows back to a clean state.

Of course, reinstalling Windows will cause you to lose your personal files, so be sure you have a backup. On Windows 8 or 10, Refreshing your PC will preserve your personal files while replacing the system software.

If your computer continues to be unstable after a full Windows reinstall, your computer's hardware may be faulty. A complete Windows reinstall rules out any software problems, unless there's a faulty hardware driver that needs to be updated.

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