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Do a clean sweep of your computer

How to safely remove software and files from your PC

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Like many mothers, Andrea Grace will sit down at her PC to check e-mail, only to find that her kids, Jason, 8, and Rachel, 10, have installed some new programs. "Between those CD-ROM games found in cereal boxes and downloaded Neopets, there are now icons all over the place," says Grace. "And of course they don't play half the games. If I ran out of space I wouldn't know how to delete them," she admits.

Grace isn't alone—it's not uncommon to fill space on a hard drive with games, productivity programs, or files, such as music, digital photos, and video clips. Some technology analysts believe that we use less than 10 percent of the programs installed on our computer.

So, considering you're likely to do some spring cleaning in the coming months by removing old and unwanted clutter from your closets and garage, why not tidy up your computer as well?

While deleting programs is relatively easy, many novice computer users believe they can be removed by simply deleting their icon on the desktop. This does not work as it's only a shortcut to the real program, which consists of many files. And keep in mind that you can do damage to your PC's performance by deleting an entire program folder that you don't think you need from your hard drive.

The following is a look at how to safely—and easily—remove old or unused programs from your [Microsoft Windows XP](#)-based computer. Much of the advice is also applicable to older versions of Windows.



Decide which programs to purge

The first step is to decide which programs you no longer need. Try to keep only the programs you use regularly as it's easy to become a digital packrat. If it helps, make a list of programs you want to keep and others you can do away with.

Has it been a year since your child touched that action game? Chances are you still have the original CDs anyway (should you want to reinstall it in the future), so perhaps it's time to wipe it off the hard drive.

Have your music tastes changed since you went through that Country & Western "stage" in 2002? You can easily delete downloaded MP3 files—or at least burn them to a CD to free up space on your PC.

If you're unsure about a program that's on your hard drive, you can always do a search at your favorite search engine (e.g., [MSN Search](#)) to see what it is. For example, if you don't plan on buying a camcorder, remove any preinstalled video-editing software that may have come bundled on your PC.

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Ready, set, "Start"

The easiest way to remove a program from your hard drive is to look for an uninstall or remove option from within its program group. You will find this by clicking the **Start** menu, then **All Programs** (or **Program Files**), and then choosing the program you want to uninstall.

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Once inside this program group, you will usually see an icon to launch the program, a ReadMe file (documentation that tells you how to use the program), and, for our purposes, an option that enables you to remove or uninstall the program. Click this and follow the onscreen wizard to safely remove the program from your PC. You may be asked to reboot your computer. Only click to do so once you've saved everything that's open at that time.

Quick tip:

If you want to free up even more room on your hard drive, go to **My Computer** or **Windows Explorer** and right-click on the letter associated with your hard drive (usually C:). Click **Properties**, then click **Disk Cleanup**. Check off the desired boxes and it will tell you how much space it can free up.

When uninstalling a program, you may also get a message that says the program can remove a file that may be shared by another program. To be safe, keep these suggested files on your PC (they shouldn't take up much room on your hard drive, anyway). Similarly, when you uninstall a game, the program may ask if you want to keep saved game files (i.e. a bookmark of your progress). If you think that you will reinstall and play this game again, you can choose to keep these files.

Sometimes the program group may be the company's name. Move your mouse over the name and it will reveal which program(s) are inside.

Quick tip:

If you download a .zip or .exe file from the Web and then install the program to the hard drive, you can delete the original file once it's successfully installed.

Keep in mind that your PC automatically creates restore points while you're using your computer. That way, if you accidentally delete a program that you want to keep, you can revert your PC back to an earlier time. To do so, click the **Start** menu, then **All Programs** (or **Program Files**), then **Accessories**, and then **System Tools**. Click **System Restore** and the program will guide you through the steps.

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Take "Control"

Some programs do not give you the option to uninstall them from a program group. No problem. You'll need to go to the **Start** menu, select **Control Panel**, and then **Add or Remove Programs**.

It may take a few seconds for this page to load but once it is finished, it will display a long alphabetical list of installed programs. Once you see the name of a program you no longer want on your hard drive, click it, then click the tab to the right of it, which will say **Remove** or **Change/Remove**, and follow the prompts. A progress bar will show you how long it will take to safely remove the program. When it's finished, you will see the list once again.

Go through the list, but leave those programs that you are unsure of. Remember—you may use [Microsoft Word](#) all the time so do not uninstall [Microsoft Office](#) as Word is part of it. Some programs may not be familiar to you, but are required for another to run—a rule of thumb is to ignore it, especially if it doesn't take up too much space on your hard drive (you will see how many megabytes on the right-hand side of the program name). If the program is spyware or adware (such as SuperShopper Toolbar), then you may want to leave this for your spyware/adware program to sniff out and safely remove. Two good free programs are Ad-Aware and SpyBot, both of which are available at [Download.com](#). You can also download the free new [Microsoft Windows AntiSpyware \(Beta\)](#).

Quick tip:

This article focuses on uninstalling entire programs, but it's even easier to delete individual files. Once you're inside My Computer or Windows Explorer, simply highlight the files you no longer want on your hard drive and tap the delete button or right-click and select **Delete**. This will send all unwanted files to the Recycle Bin for safekeeping—until you're sure that you no longer want them.

Article written by Marc Saltzman and adapted from an original piece from [Microsoft Home Magazine](#).

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