

COMPUTERS MADE EASY

SIMPLE GUIDES TO GET THE BEST FROM YOUR COMPUTER

Why has my computer slowed down ?

This is a question I get asked a lot. The truthful answer is, as far as the actual machine is concerned: they don't slow down, usually. Old hard drives can become unreliable, and the computer may have developed a overheating problem (this is more common in laptops), but otherwise, because all the parts inside it either do not move or are highly precision made. Do you know that the average mean time before failure (i.e. how long you can expect something to work until failure) for a computer exceeds that of your refrigerator, Television, washer or car?

The main culprit is the Operating System, which, for the vast majority, means Microsoft Windows. Macs and Linux computers do not suffer from this slowdown anything like as much. System updates, bad “housekeeping”, and a file system which is intrinsically messy and which can be modified by both users and programs- and viruses- all conspire to slowly grind the computer to a halt.

Other Operating systems, like Apple's Mac OS or the Linux Operating systems, do not allow this “meddling” with the system. With Linux, one can destroy one's own user account (the user you create when setting up the computer), but the rest of the system is unscathed.

To be fair to Windows, program makers are also almost equally to blame. Programs install, alter settings and system resources to suit themselves, and consume more memory and Processor (Brain) and Hard Drive space, and then burden the system with startup utilites to apparently make things easier for the user! Of course, they don't, usually. It means you have to wait for your computer to load up (boot, in computer jargon) and then it runs slower.

Even worse, Windows uses a huge database called the “Registry”. Here, Windows stores just about every setting on the computer: user names, which programs open which files, what your desktop background is- just about every of several thousand settings.

When you remove a program (“uninstall”, in computer jargon), that program is supposed to remove itself, any left over files and folders, and also any entries in the “Registry”.

Many, in fact, most do not.

Hence, the Registry becomes more and more bloated, which obviously slows things down, and allows errors to become far more common. In fact, a very common reason for a computer to fail to start up is a corrupted Registry. Many programs claim to clean up the registry, but few do it properly or may even make matters worse.

Disk “fragmentation” is a well known cause of system slowdown, and is a result, once again, of Windows' bad housekeeping. “Fragmentation” is where files become scattered and strewn everywhere, like a Teenager's bedroom floor with clothes. The logical thing to do is to put programs and files in the best order for the hard drive to access and find them as quickly as possible, but Windows is fragmented even just after it has been installed, although not badly.

Popular theory advocates regular (weekly, even) “degmentation” of the Hard Drive. But for most people, this is a waste of time. Only those who regularly move large files around, or install and uninstall programs need do a “defrag”. And even then, monthly is enough. For those who just surf the Internet and do the basics, once every 6 months is enough.

However, it can be counter productive to “defragment” (“defrag”) too much. When defragmenting, the Hard Drive works away, often for hours on end. This no doubt places a greater strain on it than a bit of random “thrashing” whilst loading a program. If your PC's level of Fragmentation is less than 20%, (the built in Windows Defragmenter will tell you), don't bother to defragment the disk.

Viruses are also a major form of slowdown. Many are unobstrusive and are missed by Anti-Virus software, but cause harm to the Registry and system files, in particular. Even if there are no visible obvious signs of viruses, they may still be there, and to be absolutely truthful, few anti-Virus programs remove them completely or undo the damage they have caused.

It is a fact that as time goes by, we tend to ask more of our computers. What was considered to be ample Memory and Hard Drive space when it was new becomes insufficient when it is asked to run newer programs.

However, all is not lost. Registry, virus, system file corruption etc can easily be fixed by a System Re-install. Memory and hard drives can easily and cheaply be upgraded, and even slight slowdown can be fixed by a skilled Computer Technician without any new components.

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