

HOW DOES SYSTEM RESTORE WORK

What Is System Restore?

When something goes wrong on your system as a result of a bad piece of software—maybe it's app that you installed, or a driver that broke something important—it can be hard to fix. System Restore lets you restore your Windows installation back to its last working state.

It does this by creating “restore points” every so often. Restore points are snapshots of your Windows system files, certain program files, registry settings, and hardware drivers. You can create a restore point at any time, *though Windows automatically creates a restore point once per week. It also creates a restore point right before a major system event, like installing a new device driver, app, or running Windows update.*

Then, if something goes wrong, you can run System Restore and point it to a recent restore point. It will reinstate those system settings, files, and drivers, returning your underlying Windows system to that earlier state.

Windows Restore can be useful for undoing the damage caused by a misbehaving app or Windows update. Sometimes, apps and updates can cause problems with other apps or even system components and simply uninstalling the app might not reverse the damage. Restoring to a point before the app was installed, however, can often clear up the problem.

How Does Using System Restore Affect Your Personal Files?

When you restore your computer to an earlier restore point, any personal files (e.g., documents, pictures, videos, music) that you installed after that point will be lost. So don't count on System Restore as working like a backup. That isn't what it's intended for. You should always have a good backup procedure in place for all your personal files. Windows 10 File History is a good option!

How Does Using System Restore Affect Your Apps?

When you restore your PC to an earlier restore point, any apps you installed after that point will be uninstalled. Apps that were installed when that restore point was created will still be in place. Apps that you uninstalled after making that restore point will get restored, but with a very big caveat. Since System Restore only restores certain types of files, programs that get restored often won't work—or at least, won't work properly until you re-run their installers.

Windows does let you see exactly what programs (but not personal files) will be affected when you go through the process, but it's a good idea to restore to the most recent restore point possible to minimize problems with apps. It's also a good idea to create manual restore points before you undertake big installations or settings changes so that you know you can revert to a very recent restore point if the need arises.

Can System Restore Remove Viruses or Other Malware?

System Restore is not a good solution for removing viruses or other malware. Since malicious software is typically buried in all kinds of places on a system, you can't rely on System Restore being able to root out all parts of the malware. Instead, you should rely on a quality virus scanner that you keep up to date.

How to Enable System Restore

If you want to be protected by System Restore, you should absolutely make sure that it is turned on for your system drive.

To make sure System Restore is turned on—and to enable it for specific drives: Type “restore” in the Search box and then click “Create a restore point.” This action opens the dialog where you can get to all the System Restore options.

On the “System Protection” tab, in the “Protection Settings” section, you’ll see the available drives on your PC and whether protection is enabled for each drive. To turn on protection, select a drive on the list and click the “Configure” button.

System Restore is already enabled for drive C. If it isn’t on your system, that’s the first drive you’ll probably want to enable.

In the “System Protection” dialog that opens, click the “Turn on system protection” option, adjust the “Max Usage” slider to the amount of hard drive space you want System Restore to be able to use, and then click “OK.”

You can then click “OK” again to exit the System Properties dialog. Just be aware that when Windows creates a restore point (or you create one manually), System Restore will create a restore point on all the drives that have system protection enabled.

How to Create a Restore Point

System Restore automatically creates a restore point each week and whenever a major event like an application or driver installation happens. You can also create a restore point yourself whenever you want. From the Search bar, type “restore,” and

then click “Create a restore point.” On the “System Protection” tab, click the “Create” button.

Type a description for your restore point that will help you remember why you created it and then click “Create.”

It can take 30 seconds or so to create a restore point, and System Restore will let you know when it’s done. Click “Close.”

How to Restore Your System to an Earlier Restore Point

So you have System Restore enabled, and you’ve been diligent about creating restore points whenever you adjust your system. Then, one day, the inevitable happens—something goes wrong with your system, and you want to restore to an earlier restore point.

You’ll start the restore process from the same “System Protection” tab where you configure System Restore options. Press the Search bar, type “restore,” and then click “Create a restore point.” On the “System Protection” tab, click the “System Restore” button.

The welcome page of the System Restore wizard just gives you a brief description of the process. Click “Next” to go on.

The next page shows you the available restore points. By default, the only thing showing will probably be the automatic weekly restore point and any manual restore points you’ve created. Select the “Show more restore points” option to see any automatic restore points created before app or driver installations.

Select the restore point you want—remember, the most recent working restore point is ideal—and then click “Scan for affected programs” to have System Restore detect any programs that will be uninstalled during the process.

System Restore will present you with two lists. The top list shows you programs and drivers that will be deleted if you restore Windows to the selected restore point. The bottom list shows programs and drivers that might be restored by the process. Again, even programs and drivers that get restored might not function properly until you do a full reinstall.

When you’re ready to restore, click the restore point you want to use and then click Next. Note that you can skip the scanning step and just click Next anyway, but it’s always good to see what apps will be affected before you start the process.

Next, you’re asked to confirm the restoration. Make sure you’ve selected the right restore point and click “Finish.” System Restore informs you that once it starts, the restore process cannot be interrupted. Click “Yes” to start.

Windows will restart your PC and begin the restore process. It can take a while for System Restore to reinstate all those files—plan for at least 15 minutes, possibly more—but when your PC comes back up, you’ll be running at your selected restore point. It’s now time to test whether it resolved whatever problems you were having. And remember that System Restore creates an additional restore point right before performing the restore process, so you can always undo your actions by performing this same process and selecting that new restore point.