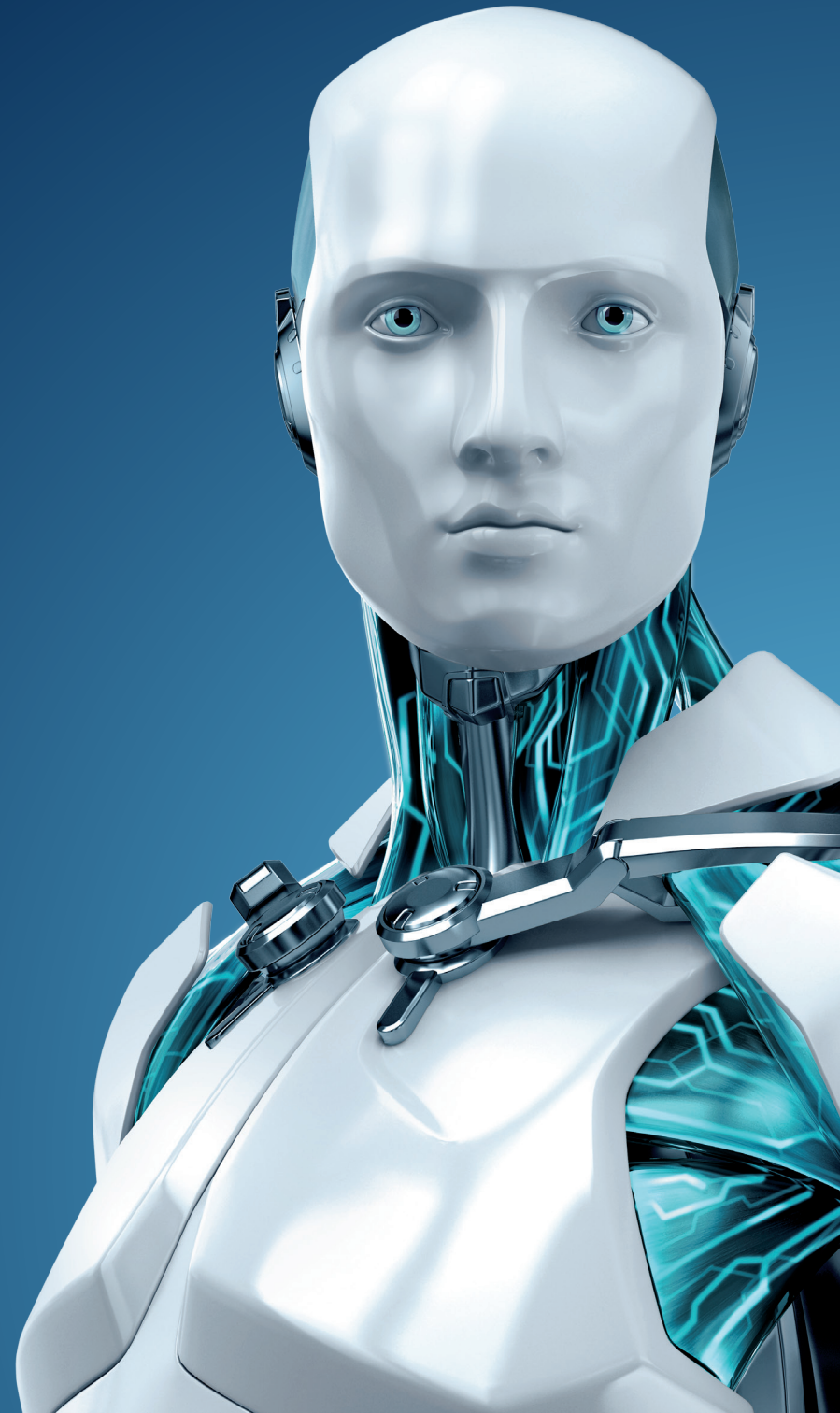


TECH BRIEF

Clean up, speed up:
How to make your
PC run faster



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CLEAN UP, SPEED UP: HOW TO MAKE YOUR PC RUN FASTER

By Rob Waugh, We Live Security

Paranoid people often jump to the conclusion that their PC is infested with Trojans and other malware as soon as it starts running slowly – but they are often wrong.

Much modern malware is built to be stealthy – the criminals want it to stay there as long as possible – so it's barely detectable to the user. There are other reasons your PC could be taking so long to start, or so long to open programs.

A recent Sandisk survey found that average PC users lose 5.5 days per year waiting for a computer to load up – and that's just the average.

Using good AV software can ensure your machine isn't being "drained" by some hidden nasty such as a Trojan, but there are a few other tips that can help you (safely) speed up.

Rely on ancient geek wisdom

Today's PCs might be entertainment machines that play films and music and store your photos – but one tip from the old beige-tower days holds true. Dust is the enemy of computers. Pressurized air is the enemy of dust. Buy a can of pressurized air, blast out the interior – this helps the fans cool your PC's processors, and you'll often see a speed boost as a result. It's also great fun.

Perform the diagnosis

Windows Experience is free, and it's built into Windows 7. It's not perfect, but it might offer a hint of what's holding back your machine. Right click on Computer to bring up the menu, then pick Performance. Each component – RAM, processor, etc. – is rated on a scale of 1.0 to 7.9, which can help pinpoint the problem. Anything under six isn't good news – and the problem's often your hard drive.

Update everything

There are sound security reasons for staying updated – cybercriminals often exploit weaknesses in older versions of programs such as Java – but it can also give an old PC a boost. Turn on automatic updates as a matter of course – it's security suicide not to – especially on Windows itself. If your machine is slow, have a spring clean – go through your programs, check for updates, and ensure you're up to speed.

Clean out the software cupboard

If you've had problems with your PC for a while, you might have tried a few freeware programs to clear out space – or speed it up. Ironically, these often slow your machine down. Uninstall. Trial programs? Bin them. Games in particular hog space. Delete ones you don't play – and consider shifting to a "cloud" service such as Steam, where you can re-download games any time, and they're stored online. Anything you don't recognize? Kill. Look at the publisher first, though – some programs you may not recognize, such as Bonjour, are part of a "suite" of programs installed if you use another one, and are necessary for it to function (in this case, Apple's iTunes).

Cleanse your hard drive

One of the great mysteries of life is what exactly it is that hard drives fill up with – and how does it happen so quickly? This is a problem to attack with fire and the sword (not literally). Windows' own Disk Cleanup is a good first stop – it wipes out temporary files and cached files, empties bins, and removes backups of old updates. You'll gain a few gigabytes this way. Then use the Windows Defragment tool to clean up a bit more.

Fly into the cloud

Then have a long hard look at your files – photos and videos eat up space. Is it worth moving them to a cloud storage service such as Dropbox? They're also safer there – and password-protected, should malware get inside your machine. Flickr now lets you store 1TB of photos online, and Amazon Cloud Storage is also a good deal. Music-matching services will also let you get rid of files from your hard drive – iTunes Match is good, and songs bought from Google Play can be downloaded again. Consider switching to a "streamed" service such as Spotify. Shop around – and clean out that hard drive.

Make it start faster

The very worst waits you endure with a PC are the ones where you're waiting for the thing to start up – and programs such as Spotify are real startup hogs, ensuring they're open before you even see your desktop. Steam's also bad for this. If you're plagued by programs opening when all you want to do is get into the browser, go into the program and visit Settings – it will have a box to untick saying "Open on Startup."

Sniff out hard-to-find malware

If your PC is misbehaving, one of the first things you should do is run a free virus scan – there are plenty out there, including ESET's Free Virus Scanner.

But some threats are a little harder to get rid of – and if you've been through every step in this guide and are still having problems, a proper AV suite may be able to kill off the gremlin that some cybercreek has hidden in your hard drive.

The nuclear option

If you are sitting with a machine with a 300GB hard drive, and no idea what it's full of – try programs such as PC Decrapifier, which often helps root out unnecessary software – but you might want to consider pushing the big red button and reinstalling Windows. Better still, upgrade to Windows 8 – it takes a bit of getting used to, but it starts faster and generally IS faster than Windows 7, even on an old machine.