

Reinstalling FAQs

Answers For Some Basic Questions

In the dark ages of PCs—like, say, 1997—computer users looked forward to reinstalling their operating systems as much as they anticipated invasive dental work. The good news is that reinstalling operating systems has become far easier in recent years, but many users have questions about how the process works.

Read on for answers to many of the most common questions about reinstalling an operating system—and see the rest of this issue for detailed instructions on how to make your reinstallation as painless as possible.

Q Why would I want to reinstall my operating system?

A The most common reason to reinstall an OS (operating system) is that a computer has stopped working right, and attempts to fix it have failed. Perhaps the computer has a virus (a self-replicating program that causes problems) or even more common, an abundance of spyware (programs that surreptitiously track a computer's use and thereby slow down the system). While security tools have greatly advanced in the past three or so years, some malware (the blanket term for unwelcome programs like spyware and viruses) is difficult or impossible to remove, and reinstallation of the operating system becomes the only option.

Users that frequently install and uninstall programs may find that their operating systems slow down over time, seemingly of their own volition. Part of the problem is that

some programs do not adequately uninstall themselves, exacerbating the problem. Regularly using utilities such as disk defragmenters can help slow down this process. Reinstalling the operating system can be the best answer to this creeping slowness.

Also, you may reinstall an operating system for testing reasons—starting from a clean operating system makes for a better test, as there are fewer variables to account for (such as other programs getting in the way of the operation of the system).

Q My computer is running slower than it has been. Based on what you have said so far, does this mean that should I reinstall the operating system?

A Not necessarily. First make sure that you don't have unwanted programs hogging your memory. Do thorough spyware and antivirus scans, and then uninstall any unnecessary programs. Check your system tray. Are there a lot of programs running? Disable anything that you don't actually need, then see if your system performance improves.

If all these fixes don't help, and it's been at least a year since you got your computer or you reinstalled the OS, then your PC may be a good candidate for reinstalling the OS.

Q My computer has a virus or spyware that I can't get rid of. Should I reinstall the operating system?

A If you have the latest version of a good antivirus program (such as Norton Antivirus, www.symantec.com; or eTrust Antivirus, www.ca.com), and you can't get rid of a virus after doing a complete scan according to the antivirus program's instructions, then reinstalling the operating system is an option.

There are particularly noxious forms of malware called rootkits, which are programs that install themselves in the depths of the operating system and are notoriously difficult to exterminate. If you have a rootkit and you don't have access to a utility specifically designed to erase it, you should do a clean reinstall of the OS.

Also, keep in mind that you may be able to get rid of a virus, but the fix may hurt your computer in other ways by deleting corrupted files or changing important settings. In that case, reinstalling the OS may be an option.

Q Should I reinstall my operating system every so often just to be safe?

A No. You should not have to reinstall your operating system unless it is experiencing symptoms of slowness or other problems, or if you want



to do it for other reasons. You can keep your system running smoothly if you run antispymware and antivirus utilities. Even with older operating systems, such as Windows 95, that are particularly known for slowing on their own with time, you shouldn't reinstall until you start to see symptoms of sluggishness.

Q My operating system has a "system restore" feature. Can I just use that instead of reinstalling?

A The system restore feature built into some operating systems can be very useful, allowing you to undo changes that you've made to an operating system. (Don't confuse this with using restore disks, which we talk about below.) If you have the earliest system restore when you did the initial install (or from when you first got your PC), you may be able to restore to that version and have most of the benefits of reinstallation without all the work. Always back up your files first, before using any restore functionality.

Doing a repair from Windows installation disks is yet a different approach, in which Windows attempts to reinstall damaged files. This can be useful for getting a PC running again.

Keep in mind that certain kinds of malware (particularly rootkits) cannot always be eliminated through system restore features. In terms of security, there is no substitute for doing a clean installation—you have a much higher degree of certainty that you will be getting rid of all malignant programs from your PC.

Q I need to permanently get rid of some files on my PC. Should I reinstall?

A If you just have a couple of files that you want to permanently delete, then a deletion utility like Eraser (www.heidi.ie/eraser) should do the trick.

If you're giving away your PC to a school or other charity, you should delete the entire disk using Active@KillDisk (www.lsoft.net) or a similar utility. Then, you can reinstall your OS. Doing this kind of deletion is a good way of making sure that any sensitive information hidden on your hard drive doesn't become public.

Q What is reformatting? If I'm doing a clean reinstall, should I reformat my hard drive first?

A Formatting is the process by which your PC's hard drive is made readable (and writable) by your operating system. If you reformat a drive, you effectively erase the entire drive and start from scratch. (This is not to say that information on the disk before the reformat is permanently deleted as data can often be recovered with sophisticated utility programs.) If you want to do a truly clean reinstallation, then you should reformat your hard drive.

Q I have recovery disks from my PC's manufacturer. What kind of reinstallations can I do?

A Many people look at the recovery disks as a poor substitute for "real" or generic Windows installation CDs. Why? Because the only kind of reinstallation you can do is to recover the system to its original status with all the original drivers for the PC automatically installed. However, for the vast majority of users, using recovery disks actually saves time over using a generic Windows installation package, since reinstalling the drivers can be a long and taxing experience. In general, unless you are a computing expert and prefer to use one of the alternate methods described elsewhere in this issue, you're better off using the recovery disks from a manufacturer than you are installing Windows on your own and then manually reinstalling the drivers.

Q My recovery disks installed a bunch of useless programs on my PC. Can I do a clean installation with my recovery disks instead?

A Generally, if you have system recovery disks, you'll need to get retail disks in order to do the "clean" installation. The single biggest problem with recovery disks is that much of the time they install proprietary utilities from the manufacturer that are of dubious use. Worse yet, the utilities tend to run every time you start Windows. Read the documentation for your PC and find out what programs are useful. Those that aren't useful should be uninstalled or disabled so that they don't start up every time. Even with some of the "shovelware" that gets installed from your recovery disks, most of the time you are still better off doing the recovery than you are doing an install from a generic installation disk since you can avoid manually installing your hardware drivers.

Q My computer didn't come with any operating system disks or with recovery disks. Am I missing something?

A Unfortunately, some manufacturers cut corners by not including recovery disks. In those cases, users are either instructed to purchase recovery disks from the manufacturer or to burn their own recovery disks from an included utility. In either case, make it a priority to obtain or burn recovery disks.

When buying a PC, make sure that the PC includes recovery disks. If it doesn't, include the cost of buying or making your own recovery disks in your decision-making process. **RS**

BY SHAWN MUMMERT

[EDITOR'S NOTE: For answers to more questions about reinstalling operating systems, go to www.smartcomputing.com/r1006/reinstallingfaqs.]