



# Computer Disposal Guidelines

Before donating, selling, or discarding your old computer, remove all personal or private information from the hard drive to ensure that it does not become a treasure chest for identity thieves to hack into. If you do not properly remove the information, anyone with minimal skills and a basic software program can easily retrieve the data without your permission and do a lot of damage to your identity and your finances.

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*Remove all personal or private information from the hard drive before donating, selling, or discarding it.*

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Personal and financial information that thieves commonly try to hack from computer hard drives include:

- Passwords and account numbers
- Medical and prescription information
- Tax returns
- Addresses and phone numbers, especially non-public ones
- Files created automatically by browsers and operating system
- License keys or registration numbers for software programs

Removing content from the hard drive is not difficult, but it does require more than just hitting the delete button when you want to discard information from your files. You need to use software to electronically remove the information, also known as “wiping”, “scrubbing”, or “cleaning” the hard drive. If you do not intend to use the computer again, the other option is to take the hard drive out of your computer and physically destroy it with something like a hammer to make it permanently unusable.

## Understand your hard drive

When you save a file on your computer, the information in that file is intentionally scattered around the computer’s hard drive in bits and pieces. When you



open the file, the hard drive gathers the bits and pieces and reconstructs them into a readable format.

When you delete a file, your computer only sets a marker on the hard drive to indicate that the file is no longer available for viewing and the links to reconstruct the file visually disappear. However, the content of the file is still there in bits and pieces, making it possible for thieves to access and retrieve your information. The bits and pieces of deleted files stay on your computer until they are overwritten and even then the bits and pieces can sometimes be retrieved. To permanently remove data from a hard drive, the hard drive needs to be wiped clean with software designed to properly remove the bits and pieces.

## How to clean a hard drive

Before cleaning your hard drive, save the files you want to keep by transferring them to a DVD, USB drive, CD-ROM, external hard drive, or to a new computer. If you are unsure how to externally save data or transfer it to a new computer, check your owner’s manual, the manufacturer’s website, or contact the manufacturer’s customer support service department.

After you have transferred the files that you want to save, clean your hard drive using a utility software program designed to overwrite the remaining files or wipe the hard drive. Utility software programs are

available both online and in stores where computers are sold. The programs are generally inexpensive and some are available on the internet for free. Some utility programs erase the entire hard drive, while others allow you to select specific files or folders to erase. Keep in mind that utility programs vary and it is best to use a program that overwrites or wipes the entire hard drive many times, rather than just once. If the cleaning software only wipes or overwrites the hard drive one time, deleted information can still be retrieved by skilled computer users with advanced software programs.

If you use your home or personal computer for business purposes, check with your employer for guidelines to manage the information on your computer that is business-related. The law requires businesses to follow data security and disposal requirements for certain information that is related to customers.

### **Destroy rather than clean a hard drive**

If you do not intend to ever use the computer again, you can protect the files by physically removing the hard drive from the computer and destroying it beyond repair. Simply use a hammer or other object to make the hard drive unusable by others who may want to put it back into a computer and attempt to retrieve your old files. Remember to wear eye protection while rendering the hard drive unusable.

### **How to dispose of your computer**

#### **Recycle:**

Most computer equipment contains hazardous materials that do not belong in a landfill such as heavy metals that can contaminate the environment. The EPA recommends that you check with your local health and sanitation agencies for ways to dispose of electronics safely.

Many computer manufacturers have programs to recycle computers and components. Check their websites or call their toll-free numbers for more information. E-Cycle Wisconsin is a statewide, manufacturer-funded program that recycles certain electronics used in homes and schools. Individuals and K-12 public schools can use E-Cycle Wisconsin to save on electronics recycling. Others may use the program to find responsible recyclers. Visit the Wisconsin

Department of Natural Resources website at <http://dnr.wi.gov/topic/ecycle> for more information about electronic product recycling programs in your community.

#### **Donate or sell:**

Many organizations collect old computers and donate them to charities, while some people and organizations actually buy old computers. Check online for options available in your area.

#### **Remember**

Remove all personal or private information from the hard drive of your old computer before donating, selling, or discarding it. If you do not, thieves could hack into your finances or steal your identity.

*For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact:*

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