

FTC Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Division of Consumer & Business Education

The Download on Disposing of Your Old Computer

If you want to get rid of your old computer, options include recycling, reselling, and donating. But before you log off for the last time, there are important things to do to prepare it for disposal.

Computers often hold personal and financial information, including passwords, account numbers, license keys or registration numbers for software programs, addresses and phone numbers, medical and prescription information, tax returns, and other personal documents. Before getting rid of your old computer, it's a good idea to use software to "wipe" the hard drive clean. If you don't, consider your old hard drive a 21st century treasure chest for identity thieves and information pirates.

The Federal Trade Commission (FTC), the nation's consumer protection agency, says you can deter identity theft and information piracy by taking a few preventive steps.

Understanding Hard Drives

A computer's hard drive stores data, and maintains an index of files. When you save a file, especially a large one, it is scattered around the hard drive in bits and pieces. Files also are automatically created by browsers and operating systems. When you open a file, the hard drive checks the index, then gathers the bits and pieces and reconstructs them.

When you delete a file, the links between the index and the file disappear, signaling to your system that the file isn't needed any longer and that hard drive space can be overwritten. But the bits and pieces of the deleted file stay on your computer until they're overwritten, and they can be retrieved with a data recovery program. To remove data from your hard drive permanently, it needs to be wiped clean.

Cleaning Hard Drives

Before you clean your hard drive, save the files that are important to you on an external storage device — for example, a USB drive, a CDROM, or an external hard drive — or transfer them to a new computer. Check your owner's manual, the manufacturer's website, or its customer support line for information on how to save data and transfer it to a new computer.

Utility programs to wipe your hard drive are available both online and in stores where computers are sold. They're generally inexpensive; some are available on the Internet for free. Wipe utility programs vary in their capabilities: some erase the entire disk, while others allow you to select files or folders to erase. They also vary in their effectiveness: programs that overwrite or wipe the hard drive many times are very effective; those that overwrite or wipe the drive only once may not prevent information being wiped from being recovered later. If your old computer contains sensitive information that would be valuable to an identity thief, consider using a program that overwrites or wipes the hard drive many times. Or, remove the hard drive, and physically destroy it.

One more thing to keep in mind: If you use your home or personal computer for business purposes, check with your employer about how to manage information on your computer that's business-related. The law requires businesses to follow data security and disposal requirements for certain information that's related to customers.

Disposal Options

Once you have a "clean" computer, here's how to dispose of it:

- **Recycle it.** Many computer manufacturers have programs to recycle computers and components. Check their websites or call their toll-free numbers for more information. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has information on electronic product recycling programs at www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/recycle/ecycling/donate.htm.
- Your local community may have a recycling program. Check with your county or local government, including the local landfill office for regulations.
- **Donate it.** Many organizations collect old computers and donate them to charities.
- **Resell it.** Some people and organizations buy old computers. Check online.

Keep the environment in mind when disposing of your computer. Most computer equipment contains hazardous materials that don't belong in a landfill. For example, many computers have heavy metals that can contaminate the earth. The EPA recommends that you check with your local health and sanitation agencies for ways to dispose of electronics safely.

The FTC works for the consumer to prevent fraudulent, deceptive, and unfair business practices in the marketplace and to provide information to help consumers spot, stop, and avoid them. To file a complaint or to get free information on consumer issues, visit ftc.gov or call toll-free, 1-877-FTC-HELP (1-877-382-4357); TTY: 1-866-653-4261. The FTC enters consumer complaints into the Consumer Sentinel Network, a secure online database and investigative tool used by hundreds of civil and criminal law enforcement agencies in the U.S. and abroad.

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