

Windows Vista: An FAQ

What to know if you should upgrade to Microsoft's new OS...

Windows Vista, Microsoft's first new major operating system (OS) since the launch of the Windows XP line in 2001, hit stores on January 30, 2007. Vista's launch generated many questions about upgrading, new features, tech support, and whether now is a good time to migrate your computer to this new OS.

To help you make an informed decision about Vista, we've answered a handful of questions that we think you'll be most concerned with.

What are the different versions of Vista?

Windows Vista comes in six versions, each of which has a different combination of features. As you might expect, the more expensive versions of the OS offer a proportionally larger number of features.

Vista's six editions range from a simple version optimized for less-powerful machines to a high-end version that includes every new feature introduced in the Vista line.

The simplest version of Vista is called Starter, which is only available in developing nations such as Thailand and can only run a limited amount of software. The five versions available to the rest of the world — Home Basic, Home Premium, Business, Enterprise, and Ultimate — all provide security enhancements over Microsoft's previous OS's but vary in terms of their other features.

For instance, while the Home Premium version of Vista incorporates Windows Media Center functionality, which allows users to perform tasks such as burn DVDs, record TV, and organize or edit photographs, the Business version omits these features and instead includes a backup feature specifically designed for corporations and organizations.

To learn more about how the different versions of Vista stack up, visit CNET News.com's [Six Versions of Vista](#) comparison chart. Microsoft has also published its own [Vista comparison chart](#), though it omits information on Vista Starter and Enterprise editions.

What are some of Vista's most important new features?

All versions of Vista — including Starter — feature Microsoft's built-in [firewall](#), which now blocks outbound traffic, theoretically preventing an attacker from taking control of your machine if he or she happens to gain access. Microsoft has also added malware protection to all versions of Vista by bundling its [Windows Defender](#) anti-spyware application with Vista. Finally, all versions of Vista include Internet Explorer version 7, which includes security features such as a filter for combating [phishing scams](#).

If you opt for one of the pricier Vista versions, you'll notice that the OS's interface now bears a resemblance to that of a Macintosh. Dubbed Aero, this interface displays thumbnails of all open windows and allows the user to flip through them.

The Home versions of Vista also now include Microsoft Media Center features, which allow users to perform tasks such as burn DVDs, record TV, and organize or edit photographs.

What are Vista's system requirements?

If you're considering upgrading to Vista but currently use an older computer/s, you may be curious as to whether your machine is powerful enough to handle the new OS.

To run one of the more basic versions of Windows Vista, your computers will need to be outfitted with at least an 800-MHz processor, 512 MB of RAM, a CD-ROM drive, and a 20-GB hard drive (with at least 15 GB of free space). However, if you want to upgrade to one of the higher-end versions of Vista — such as Home Premium or Ultimate — you may need a more powerful processor, more RAM, and a fairly advanced video card.

To find out if your computer is currently compatible with Vista, run your machine through the online Vista system requirements tester at Microsoft's Windows [Vista Capable and Premium Ready PCs](#) page.

Which older Microsoft OSs can be upgraded to Vista?

According to information found at Microsoft's [Upgrade Planning for Windows Vista](#) page, your current OS and the Vista Edition you choose will determine whether you need to remove your current OS and install Vista from scratch or whether you can simply install it on top of your current OS (see "If I upgrade to Vista, will I have to perform a clean install?" below for more information).

If I upgrade to Vista, will I have to perform a clean install?

Users who are upgrading to Vista from Windows 2000 or XP Professional x64 computers have no option but to back up all their files and programs, uninstall their OS, reinstall Vista, then port all their data back to the computer.

In some cases, XP Professional, Home, Media Center, and Tablet PC users can simply pop Vista's setup disc into their computer's CD-ROM drive and install the new OS without having to purge their machines. However, depending on what version of Vista your organization has chosen, you may still have to perform a clean install.

Regardless of which situation applies to you, we always recommend backing up your data as an important safety precaution.

How much does Vista cost?

How big of a dent Vista puts in your budget depends on whether you're purchasing the product brand new or upgrading from a previous Microsoft OS. Vista pricing also depends on which version you choose; as you might expect, the more advanced editions of Vista carry larger price tags.

If you're moving to a Microsoft OS for the first time, expect to pay anywhere between \$199 and \$399 for each copy of Vista you're buying depending on the version.

If I upgrade to Vista, will I need to buy new software?

Another factor to consider when determining whether to upgrade to Vista is whether the software that's critical to you will run on the new operating system. While many software vendors have already released Vista-compatible versions of their products, others may still be modifying their programs to make them compliant with Vista.

Keep in mind that, in some cases, upgrading to Vista might also mean that you will have to fork over additional money to upgrade certain applications. For example, it's unlikely that older versions of antivirus software will run on Vista, so you will probably have to pay to upgrade to the new version.

To get an idea of how much of your current software will still work if you upgrade to Vista, you might find it useful to download and install the [Windows Vista Upgrade Advisor](#), a small application developed by Microsoft. The Windows Vista Upgrade Advisor not only tells you whether your computer hardware is capable of running Vista, but it also tests your installed applications to find out which ones may not run properly with the new operating system.

Will Microsoft still provide support for older versions of Windows?

If you're leaning toward skipping a Vista upgrade for the time being, you may be concerned as to whether Microsoft will continue to provide official support and important security updates for its other operating systems. After a certain period of time, Microsoft typically discontinues certain support features for older operating systems.

Currently, Microsoft has discontinued all forms of **support** for Windows 98, ME, and NT/Windows 2000 users who pay for Microsoft's Extended Support features — including security updates — will receive support through 2010. Mainstream Support features, such as complimentary online or phone support, were discontinued in 2005. However I can still find updates for 98, ME and even 95. Updates aren't support, they're simply updates.

Microsoft still offers both Mainstream and Extended Support features for all versions of XP, though the company states that Mainstream Support will end two years after the latest version of the particular OS was released. .

Now that you know a little more about Windows Vista, you should have a better idea of whether you want to upgrade immediately, wait a while, or stick with your current OS for as long as possible. While it can be easy to get caught up in the latest and greatest technology advances, looking before you leap can save you a lot of money, time, and frustration in the long run.