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Windows Safe Mode: How to Start It, Use It, and Exit Safely

Windows Safe Mode starts with a limited set of drivers and services for troubleshooting. Learn three ways to enter it, what each option does, and how to exit safely.

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Safe Mode is a Windows diagnostic startup mode that loads a limited set of drivers, services, and startup components. It helps determine whether a crash, black screen, driver problem, unwanted application, or other fault depends on software that normally starts with Windows.

Safe Mode is temporary troubleshooting, not a faster or more secure everyday operating mode. Graphics, audio, networking, device features, and some security tools may be unavailable.

01 Safe Mode options

Option	What it loads	When to use it
Safe Mode	Minimal Windows interface, drivers, and services.	Driver rollback, uninstalling a faulty application, and basic diagnosis.
Safe Mode with Networking	Safe Mode plus networking drivers and required services.	Accessing a trusted network resource or downloading an essential driver when ordinary Safe Mode is insufficient.
Safe Mode with Command Prompt	Minimal startup with Command Prompt instead of the usual desktop shell.	Advanced repair when the graphical shell does not start.

Use ordinary Safe Mode first. Networking increases the components and exposure active during troubleshooting and is unnecessary for many repairs.

02 Method 1: Start Safe Mode from Windows

1. Save your work.
2. Open **Settings → System → Recovery**.
3. Under **Advanced startup**, choose **Restart now**.
4. In Windows Recovery Environment, select **Troubleshoot → Advanced options → Startup Settings → Restart**.

5. After the next restart, press **4** or **F4** for Safe Mode, **5/F5** for Safe Mode with Networking, or **6/F6** for Command Prompt.

03 Method 2: Use Shift+Restart

1. From the Start menu or sign-in screen, select the power icon.
2. Hold **Shift** while selecting **Restart**.
3. Choose **Troubleshoot → Advanced options → Startup Settings → Restart**.
4. Select the required Safe Mode option.

This method is useful when Windows reaches the sign-in screen but the desktop cannot be used normally.

04 Method 3: When Windows will not start

After repeated failed starts, Windows may open the Recovery Environment automatically. Select **Advanced options → Troubleshoot → Advanced options → Startup Settings**. If recovery does not appear, use recovery media created for the same Windows architecture and choose the repair options rather than starting installation.

A BitLocker-protected device may request its recovery key before advanced startup options become available. Obtain the correct key through the account or organization that manages the device; do not bypass encryption.

05 Using System Configuration carefully

The `msconfig` System Configuration utility can set Windows to use Safe boot:

1. Press **Windows+R**, enter `msconfig`, and open the Boot tab.
2. Select **Safe boot** only when you understand that the setting persists across restarts.
3. After troubleshooting, reopen `msconfig`, clear **Safe boot**, apply the change, and restart.

For a one-time Safe Mode start, the Recovery Environment method is safer because it does not normally leave a persistent boot setting.

06 What to troubleshoot in Safe Mode

- Uninstall or roll back a recently added driver, update, or application.
- Disable a suspicious startup application or nonessential service.
- Check Device Manager and event logs for the component involved in a failure.
- Run an approved security scan when the product supports Safe Mode.
- Copy essential documents before a more invasive repair, while avoiding unknown executables and scripts.
- Test whether the problem disappears with the minimal driver and service set.

07 How to interpret the result

Result	What it suggests
The problem disappears in Safe Mode	A third-party driver, service, startup application, shell extension, or ordinary-mode configuration may be involved.
The problem remains	Core Windows files, storage, memory, firmware, basic drivers, or hardware may require investigation.
Safe Mode cannot start	Boot files, storage, system components, encryption recovery, or hardware may be affected.

Safe Mode narrows the cause; it does not identify it automatically.

08 How to exit Safe Mode

1. Try a normal restart.

2. If Windows returns to Safe Mode, press **Windows+R**, enter `msconfig`, and open the Boot tab.
3. Clear **Safe boot**, select Apply, and restart.
4. If the desktop is unavailable, use the Recovery Environment and Command Prompt only with a verified repair procedure.

09 Safe Mode and malware removal

Some malware does not start in Safe Mode, which can make a file easier to remove. Other threats use services, boot components, firmware, stolen accounts, or remote infrastructure that Safe Mode does not fix. A clean Safe Mode scan does not prove the device is trustworthy, especially after a rootkit or administrator-level compromise.

10 Frequently asked questions

Does Safe Mode delete files?

No. Starting Safe Mode does not intentionally delete personal files. Repair commands, uninstallers, and malware-removal actions used while in Safe Mode can still change data, so maintain backups.

Why is the screen resolution low?

Safe Mode often uses a basic display driver instead of the normal graphics driver. The ordinary resolution should return after a normal restart.

Why is there no internet in Safe Mode?

Ordinary Safe Mode does not load the full networking stack. Choose Safe Mode with Networking only when network access is required and safe for the troubleshooting task.

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