



11 Ways to Fix Your Laptop

URL: <http://www.laptopmag.com/advice/tips/11-ways-to-fix-your-laptop.aspx>

by Mike Spitalieri on Wednesday, June 20, 2007

Whether you're a frequent flyer or you just take your notebook from room to room at home, your portable gets subjected to a lot more punishment than desktops do. With this in mind, notebook manufacturers construct their systems to stand up to everything from violent jostling to occasional spills.

Despite their relatively hearty constitutions, laptops are often quick to show signs of wear and tear--and not just on the outside. Any one of these issues can cost you time and money in not just lost productivity, but on tech support calls and shipping labels as well. Thankfully, your notebook's ailments can often be cured with a quick fix. To pinpoint the most common problems, we picked the brains of senior technical-support officials at Alienware, Dell, Lenovo, and Toshiba. And we've provided solutions for getting your laptop back up and running with minimal effort.



Overheating

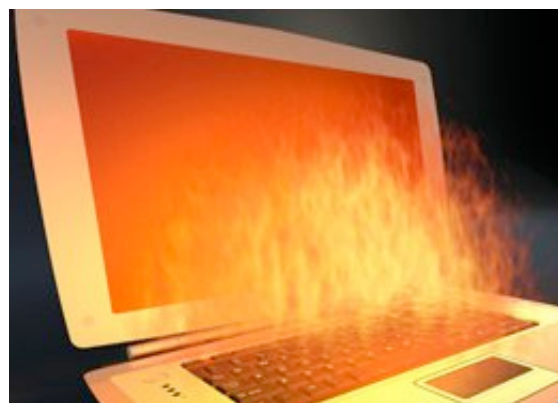
Symptom:

Computer crashes, freezes

Solution:

Clean out air vents, put filtered material over the inhalation vent, or update BIOS

Overheating can rob your laptop of performance and often cause a host of hiccups, such as system crashes and freezing. Every computer generates lots of heat, but laptops are especially susceptible to overheating due to their small size and lack of ventilation. Excessive dust can clog air vents and deprive your system of cold air to cool off the CPU. You can often solve overheating issues simply by cleaning out these air vents with a cloth or keyboard cleaner.



To prevent further dust buildup, place a piece of filtered cloth, say from a Swiffer, over the inhalation vent. Don't place one over the exhaust vent, as that's where hot air is supposed to flow out of the system quickly. If the cloth doesn't work, you may want to update your system's BIOS, which controls the laptop's hardware. Most manufacturers offer an installation file that updates BIOS files automatically, which often address heat management. Just make sure that your notebook is connected to the power supply when updating the BIOS.

Slow Hard Drive

Symptom:

Excessive program load times, slow file transfers

Solution:

Disk defragmentation



Disorganized information on your hard drive can sap performance because the computer requires more time to sift through data fragments and bad sectors on the drive. This problem can be cleared up easily (but not especially quickly; defragging can sometimes take hours) using the built-in Windows tool called Disk Defragmenter. You can access this program through the Programs menu in the Accessories or System Tools folder. Simply click the Analyze button to see if your disk drive requires defragmenting, and then click Defragment to begin.



Other options include the free Power Defragmenter, and Diskeeper 2007 (\$29.95 Home edition, \$49.95 Pro, \$99.95 Pro Premier), which offers more features like complete automation, real-time defragmenting, and InvisiTasking technology, which allows Diskeeper to run in the background without draining resources.

Battery Won't Hold a Charge

Symptom:

Your notebook runs only a few minutes when unplugged

Solution:

Battery replacement

Over their lifespans, lithium-ion batteries can lose the ability to hold a charge. After a few years, some batteries will last only a fraction of the rated runtime. Replacing a battery is relatively simple; most pop out from the bottom or back of the laptop.

Many retailers, however, charge hundreds of dollars for a new battery. Sites like batteries.com specialize in discount laptop batteries and can save you money on a brand new battery for your laptop. For example, a Dell Latitude D620 Li-ion battery costs \$139 on Dell's Web site and \$83.99 on batteries.com, as of press time. (The company even offers a two-year warranty and 45-day money-back guarantee on all laptop-battery orders.)



Need More Memory

Symptom:

Sluggish performance when using multiple applications, hangups, excessive bootup time

Solution:

Upgrade your RAM, try a ReadyBoost-enabled USB drive

If your laptop takes a long time to boot up, you may want to conduct an audit of your startup programs. To do this, place your cursor over the icons in the taskbar at the bottom right of the screen. If you rarely use any of these programs, right-click and disable them. To take more control over what programs load when you boot up, download System Suite 7 Professional (\$59.95), which includes, among 60 powerful tools, a startup manager and optimizer.



Should you need to purchase a new memory chip, Kingston (www.kingston.com) and Crucial (www.crucial.com) offer tools on their Web sites for determining which products are compatible with your notebook. You can also try www.4allmemory.com. Vista users can use the new Memory Diagnostics tool in Windows Vista; just type "memory" into the search bar, and the OS will scan your physical memory for problems and advise replacement, if necessary.

Vista users might also want to pick up a ReadyBoost-enabled USB drive from the likes of Corsair, Kingston, Lexar, or SanDisk. These devices can improve some programs' startup times by using free space on the USB drive as a temporary memory cache.

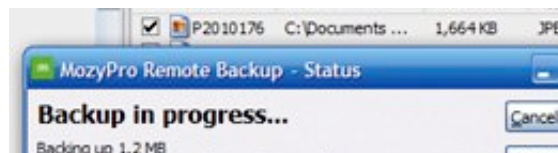
Hard Drive Failure

Symptom:

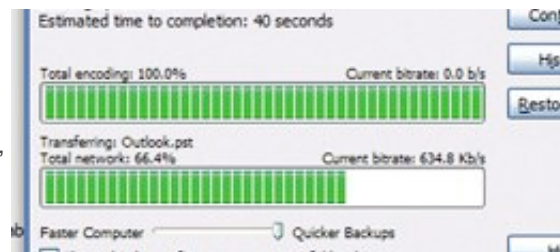
Loud clicking sounds whenever the computer accesses data from the hard drive

Solution:

Online backup sites, replace hard drive



Obviously, the best defense against a hard drive crash is a good backup solution. These days, plenty of options abound, but among software solutions, we like Norton Save & Restore 2.0 (\$49) for its ease of use. If you're going to back up your data online, go with Mozy.com (free for 2GB, and \$4.95 per month unlimited), which backs up your system automatically and tracks changes in the background without hogging precious system resources.



Even if you go the online route, a hard drive failure will bring your notebook to its knees. Fortunately, a number of tools can test your drive for problems. Hitachi offers some in the support section of its Web site (www.hitachi.com). If hard drive replacement becomes necessary, be sure to back up as much data as possible and then switch out the hard drive. You can find step-by-step directions for the replacement procedure on most manufacturers' support sites. For instance, Lenovo goes the extra mile with videos showing the replacement process; type "replacement movie" on www.lenovo.com to check it out.

If you want to preserve the data on your old drive and make switching to a new one as painless as possible, we recommend Apricorn's EZ Upgrade Universal & Hard Drive Upgrade Bundle. Available in 40GB, 80GB, 100GB, and 120GB capacities, and ranging in price from \$109 to \$149, this kit enables you to upgrade your hard drive in three steps. The package includes cloning and backup software, and it lets you use your old hard drive for backup purposes--assuming it still works.

Bad Keyboard

Symptom:

Missing or Loose Keys

Solution:

Replace keyboard

Keyboards get the brunt of abuse on any laptop, either from typing or spilled coffee. As a result, keys can often become dislodged or worn out. Thankfully, laptop makers provide quick online guides for replacing keyboards on their support pages; simply type "keyboard replacement" into the search bar or check the manufacturer's knowledge base.



For instance, Toshiba's "Ask Iris" document database provides hardware-replacement guides. To remove the old keyboard, you'll typically just have to remove some screws from the bottom of the laptop and unlock the keyboard with a button or snap mechanism, which secures it to the frame. Replacement keyboards are usually covered under warranty or can be purchased relatively cheaply. Dell, for example, sells them for \$15 to \$25. The company also offers plastic keyboard protectors for \$10 to \$15 on its Web site. CompuCover offers keyboard protectors for a variety of other laptops.

Can't Connect to Wireless Network

Symptom:

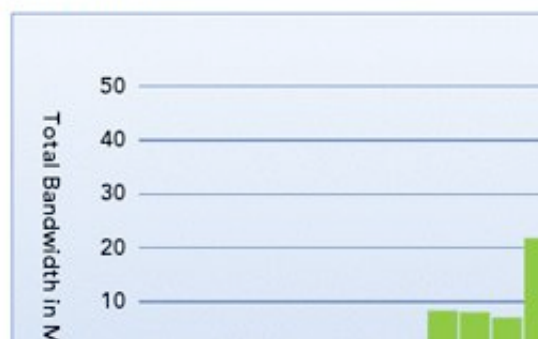
No Internet connection, frequent time-outs while Web browsing

Solution:

Make sure wireless is turned on, smarter software tools, make sure router is broadcasting network name (SSID)

Part of taking your laptop everywhere on the go is expecting to be able to connect to any wireless network, whether in an airport, coffee shop, or hotel. But wireless networks, by their very nature, are finicky beasts. Some laptops come with an external button or switch, separate from the software settings, to enable wireless connectivity. Always make sure this wireless toggle is switched on. Also make sure that the network you're connecting to is broadcasting its network name or SSID.

Network Traffic



If you'd rather steer clear of networking issues altogether, or want a tool to help you troubleshoot without having to learn any lingo, download an all-in-one utility like Network Magic (free, or purchase the Premium edition starting at \$29.99). It helps you easily set up and secure your network, complete with a comprehensive network map, as well as repair broken wireless Internet connections. Road warriors should consider JiWire's Hotspot Helper (\$24.95 per year), which will not only show where you can log on via Wi-Fi but also will protect your privacy while you surf the Web wirelessly. In addition, this utility offers secure e-mail delivery, just like you get back in the office.

Stuck Pixels

Symptom:

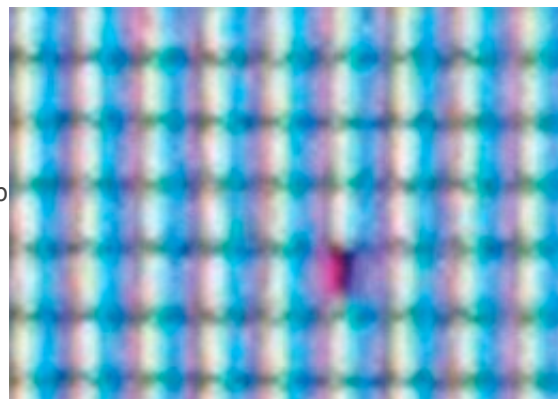
Green or red dots on your notebook's screen

Solution:

Massage away dead pixels

Nonconforming or stuck pixels can be a nuisance on an otherwise functional laptop LCD. The pixels usually remain green or red without lighting up properly with the other pixels on the display. Unfortunately, manufacturers will not replace an LCD for just one or two stuck pixels; in fact, some require as many as 10 to 18 dead pixels before they'll take action.

There is a solution, though. Take a soft material, like a felt cloth, and gently rub in a circular motion around the stuck pixel. Performing this trick will usually get the pixel to light up properly. Once you find the right location and pressure to illuminate the pixel, hold your finger there for up to two minutes, and voila, no more stuck pixel.



System Crash

Symptom:

Notebook won't boot up

Solution:

Remove the hard drive and place it into an external enclosure. Run Checkdisk.

Most people go into panic mode when their computers refuse to boot up. More often than not, however, the problem is as simple as a missing system file or a bad sector on the hard drive. To determine if that's the case, you can remove your hard drive using the instructions from the manufacturer and place the drive into a USB enclosure--these are external housings for internal hardware. You can find them at most retailers like Best Buy, Staples, or Newegg, for less than \$40.

Next, connect the enclosure's USB cable to an open USB port on a working PC. If the file system is still intact, the hard drive should show up as an external drive and allow you to transfer data to and from the drive. Next, try running Checkdisk on the drive by opening a DOS prompt (Start/Programs/Accessories/Command Prompt) and typing in X: where X is the letter of your external drive. Then hit Enter. Now type "chkdsk /f." Your system may ask you to dismount the drive; this is okay, so type Y and then hit Enter.

Your notebook will now display some information about your drive (file system type and serial number) and then scan the drive, fixing any errors it encounters. An error report will print out, so you can see what changes were made to the drive. If all went well, you'll be good to go once you plug the hard drive back into the crashed notebook and power it on.



Virus or Spyware Infestation

Symptom:

Excessive pop ups, slow downloads

Solution:

Install antispyware programs, use free virus scans

Nothing can cripple your system like malware. The first line of defense is always prevention. It's best to have a subscription to a service like [Norton 360](#) (\$79 per year). Norton impressed us with this unobtrusive security suite that offers stellar antivirus and spyware protection, file backups, and performance tuning without a complex user interface. The Norton suite also offers a firewall option that will silently block most threats while alerting the user to friendly programs requesting Web access.



If you don't want to spend any money, you can bolster your defenses with free tools like Ad-Aware and Spybot: Search and Destroy. While both are excellent tools, each has its own strengths and weaknesses--Spybot is better at tracking down malicious

code like pop-ups, while Ad-Aware does a better job removing cookies (text files that advertisers copy to a user's computer to track surfing habits). We recommend scheduling periodic scans with both of these tools, just to be safe.

If these tools fail to locate a virus, you may want to try Trend Micro's free House Call at housecall.trendmicro.com, which is sometimes more adept at identifying viruses than other programs. Trend Micro also offers a free database of viruses and manual removal tips, if automated solutions fail.

Outdated Video Drivers

Symptom:

Garbled or distorted video

Solution:

Download the latest drivers

Video issues are a common complaint among notebook users. The trouble often stems from newer games and software that require the latest video card drivers to work. Even though most laptops ship with the latest driver files, some systems will be outdated by the time the machine is sold. That's why it's critical to update your video card's drivers frequently--sometimes the audio and network drivers may need to be updated as well.

Many notebook manufacturers offer installation packs that will give you the latest drivers and offer automated tools to update the rest of your notebook. Lenovo, for example, hosts its driver files at lenovo.com/support. Alienware tests new drivers for all its machines and hosts them in the support area of its Web site. However, if you fail to find drivers at your notebook manufacturer's site, you can try the video card's manufacturer, usually ATI or Nvidia. If your system comes with an integrated graphics chip from Intel, your best bet is the laptop manufacturer's Web site, although you can also try Intel's support and downloads page.



Suggested Stories:

[Tech Support Showdown 2007](#)

Can you get help when you need it? We went undercover to see which major notebook vendors' technical support makes the grade.

[Ten Quality Cameras You Can Afford](#)

Want good-looking pictures without breaking the bank? We put the latest crop of digicams under \$150 to the test.

[Six Vista Notebooks Under \\$1500](#)

Get the most out of Microsoft's new OS with these feature-packed notebooks under \$1,500.

URL: <http://www.laptopmag.com/advice/tips/11-ways-to-fix-your-laptop.aspx>