BILL'S HOME TECH

Home & Small Business Tech Solutions

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Google Photos "Out of Storage" — Your Options Explained

Why it happened, and your real choices — clean up, change quality, or pay

Plain-English tech help from:
Bill's Home Tech
Portage County, Ohio

Tech Made Simple. Service Made Personal.

Bill Davis — Bill's Home Tech
(330) 200-8042 · bill@billshometech.com · Atwater, Ohio

Book a visit · billshometech.com/book

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SUMMARY

The 60-Second Version

Google Photos filled up because free unlimited backup ended in 2021, and your photos now count against the 15 gigabytes shared with Gmail and Drive — it is not your fault. Check one.google.com/storage to see whether photos or old Gmail attachments are the real culprit. You have three choices, none of which loses photos: clean up (the free "Free up account storage" tool plus clearing big old emails), switch backup to "Storage saver" so future photos take less room, or pay a little through Google One (about $2 a month for 100 GB).

Then confirm backup resumes on Wi-Fi.

1 The Short Version

Google Photos used to back up your pictures for free without limit, but that ended in 2021. Now your photos count against the 15 gigabytes that comes free with every Google account — and that 15 gigabytes is shared with Gmail and Google Drive, so it fills faster than you would expect.

You have three honest choices, and none of them means losing your photos: clear out what is wasting the shared space, change the quality setting so future photos take less room, or pay a small monthly amount for more. We will walk through each so you can choose.

- Free Google storage is 15 gigabytes, shared across Photos, Gmail, and Drive.
- Free unlimited photo backup ended in 2021 — this is why it filled up.
- Your options: clean up, change the quality setting, or pay a little for more.
- Whatever you choose, your existing photos stay safe.

TIP

See exactly what is using your 15 gigabytes first. On a computer or phone browser, go to one.google.com/storage; it shows how much of your space is taken by Photos, Gmail, and Drive separately, so you know where to act.

2 Why This Happened — It Wasn't You

For years, Google let people back up unlimited photos for free in its "High quality" setting, and millions of us happily did. In June 2021, Google ended that: from then on, newly backed-up photos count against your free 15 gigabytes like everything else. Many people only discover this years later when the space finally runs out.

So if you feel blindsided, that is completely reasonable — the rules changed under you. Nothing is broken and you did nothing wrong. The task now is simply to decide how you want to handle the space going forward.

GOOD TO KNOW

Photos you backed up before June 2021 in the old "High quality" setting generally did not count against your storage and still do not. It is the photos since then that fill the space — which is why long-time users often hit the wall suddenly.

3 See Where Your Space Went

Because the 15 gigabytes is shared, the thing filling it up may not even be photos — it is often years of large email attachments in Gmail. Looking first means you fix the real cause.

This surprises almost everyone. You go looking to deal with your photos and discover that a decade of emails — newsletters, scanned documents, pictures friends sent — has quietly eaten half your space. Spending a few minutes in Gmail can hand back gigabytes and leave your photos untouched, so it is always worth checking before

you do anything drastic.

1. In a web browser, go to one.google.com/storage and sign in if asked.
2. Look at the breakdown showing Google Photos, Gmail, and Google Drive.
3. Note which is largest — that is where to focus.
4. Use the "Free up account storage" tool on that page, which finds safe things to remove.

Taking up space	Common cause
Google Photos	Years of backed-up pictures and video since 2021
Gmail	Old emails with large attachments; big promotions
Google Drive	Files, backups, and shared documents you saved

4 Option 1: Clean Up What You Already Have

The free option is to recover space by clearing waste — and Google has a built-in tool that finds the safe things to remove, like blurry shots, screenshots, and very large videos, plus huge old emails in Gmail.

The beauty of this tool is that it does the judging for you. Rather than scrolling through thousands of photos yourself, you get a tidy list of candidates — the obviously unwanted and the genuinely large — with the amount each would free, and you simply approve the ones you agree with. It is the safest, lowest-effort way to recover real space for nothing.

1. On the storage page, open "Free up account storage."
2. Review its suggestions — large photos and videos, blurry images, screenshots, and oversized emails.
3. Approve the ones you are comfortable removing; nothing goes without your confirmation.

4. In Gmail, search for large emails by typing "larger:10M" in the search box, then delete the ones you do not need and empty the Trash.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> Emptying the Gmail Trash and Spam folders, and clearing years of huge attachments, often frees several gigabytes on its own — enough to get Photos backing up again without paying anything.

5 Option 2: Change the Quality Setting

Google Photos can back up either at "Original quality," which uses your full space, or at "Storage saver" (once called High quality), which makes slightly smaller copies that take far less room. For everyday snapshots, most people cannot tell the difference on a phone screen.

Think of it like the difference between a full-resolution print and a very good photo in an album — for sharing, viewing, and ordinary printing, the smaller version is more than enough, and it lets you store several times as many pictures in the same space. Unless you are a serious photographer who crops and enlarges heavily, "Storage saver" is the sensible choice.

1. Open Google Photos and tap your profile picture, then "Photos settings."
2. Tap "Backup," then "Backup quality."
3. Choose "Storage saver" to make future photos take less space.
4. Leave "Original quality" only if you print large or edit professionally.

> **WATCH OUT**
> Changing the setting only affects photos backed up from now on; it does not shrink ones already backed up. It slows how fast you fill up going forward, but if you are already full, you will still need to clean up or add storage to get moving again.

6 Option 3: Pay a Little for More Room

If photos are the genuine reason you are full — and you do not want to delete memories — a paid plan through Google One is the simplest answer. The smallest paid tier is inexpensive and far larger than the free one.

Plan	About	Good for
15 GB	Free	Light users, few photos and emails
100 GB	~$2 / month	Most people — a good step up
200 GB	~$3 / month	Larger photo libraries
2 TB	~$10 / month	Big libraries, video, sharing with family

GOOD TO KNOW

These are rough US prices in late 2026, and Google has been rebranding some tiers around its newer services, so check the current price on the storage page before you buy. A plan can usually be shared with family, which improves the value.

Rather not do this yourself? I'll come to your home and set it up for you — a flat $99 first visit across Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities. Outside the area? I also help remotely by phone or screen-share. Book at billshometech.com/book or call (330) 200-8042.

7 Which Option Is Right for You?

There is no single right answer — it depends on how many photos you take and whether the waste is really in Gmail. A little honesty about your habits points to the choice.

- Take few photos and your space is full of old emails? Clean up Gmail — free.
- Take lots of photos and want them all kept? A small paid plan is the calm choice.
- Somewhere in between? Switch to "Storage saver" and do a one-time cleanup.
- Not sure? Start with the free cleanup tool and see how much that recovers.

> *You are not choosing between your photos and your money — for most people a one-time cleanup, or a couple of dollars a month, settles it for good.*

8 Get Backup Running Again

Once you have freed space or added a plan, make sure backup actually turns back on, so your recent photos are protected and your phone can free its own space. It is easy to assume it resumed on its own, but a quick check saves you from a nasty surprise later.

1. Open Google Photos and tap your profile picture.
2. Check that it says backup is on and complete, not paused.
3. If it is paused for space, the cleanup or new plan should let it resume.
4. Wait on Wi-Fi for it to catch up — a big backlog can take a while.

TIP

Backup only runs when the phone has internet, and by default often only on Wi-Fi to save your data plan. If it seems stuck, make sure you are on Wi-Fi and the phone is charging, and give it time to work through the backlog.

9 A Word of Caution About Deleting

When you are short on space it is tempting to delete fast, but Google Photos has one trap worth knowing: on an Android phone, deleting a photo in the Google Photos app usually deletes it from both the phone and the online backup at once. That is the opposite of what people expect, and it is how precious photos get lost in a hurry to free room.

WATCH OUT

Before you delete photos to save space, be sure they are the ones you truly do not want — deleting in Google Photos can remove them everywhere, not just from the phone. To free phone space while keeping photos online, use the "Free up space" option instead, which only removes the backed-up copies from the phone.

10 Get Future Photos Under Control

Once you are backing up again, a couple of settings keep you from hitting the wall a second time. The idea is to slow how fast you fill the space and to keep an eye on it before it becomes urgent.

- Switch backup quality to "Storage saver" so future photos take far less room.
- Clear out your Gmail now and then — old attachments are the quiet hog.
- Check one.google.com/storage a couple of times a year so nothing sneaks up.
- If you take a lot of photos, a small plan is calmer than a recurring crisis.

TIP

"Storage saver" quality is the setting most worth changing for everyday snapshots. The copies are slightly smaller but look the same on a phone or computer screen, and you will fill your space several times more slowly going forward.

11 A Caution About "Free Storage" Offers

When your storage is full, you may see ads or apps promising free or cheap unlimited photo storage. A few are legitimate, but many are not, and your family photos are too important to trust to a service that might vanish or hold them hostage.

> **WATCH OUT**
> Be wary of unfamiliar apps promising unlimited free photo storage. Some fill up and then demand payment to get your photos back, and others simply disappear. Stick to the well-known names — Apple, Google, Amazon, Microsoft — for something as irreplaceable as your photos.

If a deal seems too good to be true for storing a lifetime of pictures, it usually is. The established services cost a little, but they are far more likely to still be there, and to still have your photos, years from now.

12 When to Call Bill

Most people can pick an option and get their photos backing up again with the steps here. But the shared-storage idea trips up almost everyone, and it is easy to delete the wrong thing or to pay for more than you need — there is no reason to guess with your family photos.

I come to you, show you exactly where your space went, recover the free room hiding in old emails, set the quality and backup so it behaves going forward, and help you decide honestly whether a small plan is worth it for you. Your photos keep flowing safely and nothing important is lost.

- You are not sure whether the space is photos or old emails.
- You are worried about deleting a photo everywhere by mistake.
- Backup will not resume even after you free space.
- You want honest advice on whether to pay, and for how much.

CHEAT SHEET

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Keep this handy. Your 15 GB is shared with Gmail and Drive.

I want to...	Do this...
See where space went	Browser one.google.com/storage
Free space for nothing	"Free up account storage"; delete big old Gmail attachments
Slow future filling	Photos settings Backup quality "Storage saver"
Keep every photo	Add a Google One plan (~$2/month for 100 GB)
Free phone space safely	Use "Free up space" (not Delete) in Google Photos
Restart backup	Profile picture confirm backup is on, wait on Wi-Fi
Get help	Call Bill: (330) 200-8042

BEFORE YOU GO

A Note From Bill

A quick note from Bill. I write these guides to make home tech a little less frustrating, and I do my best to keep every step accurate and up to date. Still, every home, device, and setup is a bit different, so I can't promise a guide will match yours exactly or fix your particular problem. These guides are for general information only — they're not professional, legal, or financial advice, and they don't replace your device's own manual or the manufacturer's instructions. Please go slow, use your own good judgment, and use everything here at your own risk. If a step involves electrical wiring, a gas appliance, a water heater, plumbing, or climbing a ladder — or if anything just doesn't feel safe — please stop and call a licensed professional (or give me a call at 330-200-8042). Bill's Home Tech and Bill Davis can't be responsible for any damage, data loss, or injury that results.

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GOOD TO KNOW

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