BILL'S HOME TECH

Home & Small Business Tech Solutions

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iCloud Says It's Full but You Think It Shouldn't Be

Find what's really filling iCloud — usually old backups — and clear it safely

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What's Inside

Everything in this guide, with page numbers. Skip to whichever chapter answers your question right now.

The 60-Second Version 3

The Short Version 3

What iCloud Actually Stores 4

Find the Real Culprit First 4

Clear Old Device Backups — the Usual Win 5

Trim What the Current Backup Includes 6

Clear Space Taken by Mail 6

Review iCloud Drive and App Data 7

The Photos Question 8

Decide Whether to Pay for More 8

If It Still Says Full After You Cleared It 9

Keep iCloud From Filling Up Again 10

What Your Current Backup Protects 10

When to Call Bill 11

Everyday Cheat Sheet 12

A Note From Bill 13

Your Visit — and My Promise 14

SUMMARY

The 60-Second Version

An "iCloud full" warning is usually not your current photos — it is old backups of phones you no longer own, a large Mail folder, or app leftovers, all out of sight. Open Settings, your name, iCloud, Manage Account Storage to see the real breakdown. The biggest safe win is deleting backups of devices you no longer use (never the one for your current phone).

Clear big emails and empty Mail's Trash and Junk too. If Photos is the genuine cause, do not delete memories — the 50-gigabyte plan is about a dollar a month and keeps everything safe.

1 The Short Version

The iCloud "storage full" warning rarely means what people assume. The space is almost never your current photos alone — it is usually a pile of old device backups, a large Mail folder, or leftovers from apps, all of which are easy to overlook because iCloud never shows them to you day to day.

The good news is that iCloud keeps a clear, honest breakdown of what is using the space, and several of the biggest items are safe to clear. We will find the real culprit first, then clear it, and finally decide whether a cheap larger plan is worth it.

- iCloud's free tier is only 5 gigabytes, which fills quickly.
- The space is usually old backups and Mail, not just your photos.
- Backups of phones you no longer own are safe to delete.
- If you still need more, the 50-gigabyte plan is about a dollar a month.

> **TIP**
>
> Start by seeing the honest breakdown. On an iPhone, open Settings, tap your name at the top, tap iCloud, then tap "Manage Account Storage" (or "Manage Storage"). The colored bar shows exactly what is filling iCloud, biggest first.

2 What iCloud Actually Stores

iCloud is Apple's online locker. It holds a safety copy of your photos, your device backups, your iCloud Drive files, and — if you use Apple's Mail — your email. Everyone gets 5 gigabytes free, which was generous years ago but is tiny today, so most people fill it without doing anything unusual.

Because all of this lives online and out of sight, it is easy to be filling iCloud without realizing it. A single old phone backup can be several gigabytes, and if you have upgraded phones a few times, those old backups may still be sitting there, quietly taking up most of your space.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> iCloud storage is completely separate from the storage on your phone itself. You can have a nearly empty phone and a full iCloud, or the reverse. This guide is about the online iCloud locker; freeing space on the phone is a different, separate task.

3 Find the Real Culprit First

Before changing anything, look at the breakdown so you fix the right thing. iCloud ranks everything by size, which usually makes the culprit obvious within seconds.

This matters because the instinct, when iCloud says it is full, is to start deleting photos — the one thing you most want to keep. Nine times out of ten the photos are not the problem at all, and a glance at this screen points you at the real hog so you never have to touch a single picture.

1. Open Settings and tap your name at the very top.
2. Tap iCloud.
3. Tap "Manage Account Storage" (or "Manage Storage").

4. Read the list, which is sorted biggest first — Backups, Photos, Mail, and Drive are the usual top items.

You see...	What it means
Backups	Saved copies of your devices — old ones are safe to delete.
Photos	Your photo library — keep it, but it may need a bigger plan.
Mail	Emails and their attachments — clearing big or old mail helps.
Drive / Docs	Files you saved to iCloud — remove ones you no longer need.

4 Clear Old Device Backups — the Usual Win

This is the fix for most people. If you have had more than one iPhone or iPad, iCloud may still be holding backups of devices you no longer use. Those old backups are pure dead weight — deleting them is safe and often frees most of your space at once.

People are often amazed at what is in this list: a phone from three upgrades ago, a tablet a grandchild used once, a work phone long since returned. Each of those can be holding several gigabytes of a backup that protects a device that no longer exists. Clearing them is one of the most satisfying wins in all of home tech, because the space comes back immediately and nothing you still use is affected.

1. In "Manage Account Storage," tap "Backups."
2. You will see a list of devices — look for ones you no longer own or use.
3. Tap an old device and choose "Delete" (or "Turn Off and Delete").
4. Leave the backup for the phone you use now switched on.

WATCH OUT

Delete backups only for devices you truly no longer use. Do not delete the backup for the phone or iPad you use today — that is your safety net if the device is ever lost or damaged. If you are unsure which is which, the current device's backup is usually dated most recently.

5 Trim What the Current Backup Includes

Your current phone's backup can be slimmed down too, because it may be backing up large apps you do not need protected. You keep the backup itself; you just stop it including the heaviest, least important apps.

1. In "Manage Account Storage," tap "Backups," then tap your current device.
2. Look at the list of apps and how much each adds to the backup.
3. Turn off backup for large apps whose data does not matter to you (a game, a streaming app).
4. Leave important things — like Messages and Photos — backing up.

GOOD TO KNOW

Turning off an app in the backup does not delete the app or its data from your phone; it only stops that app's data being copied into the iCloud backup. It is a safe way to shrink a bloated backup.

6 Clear Space Taken by Mail

If you use Apple's Mail with an iCloud email address, years of messages — especially ones with large attachments — can take up a surprising amount of your iCloud storage. Clearing the big and the junk is safe and helps.

The usual offenders are not your personal letters, which are tiny, but the bulky attachments: photos relatives emailed you, scanned documents, and the endless stream of promotional messages crammed with images. Years of those add up, and

clearing them frees real space without losing any correspondence that matters to you.

- Delete large emails with heavy attachments you no longer need.
- Empty the Trash and Junk folders in Mail, which hold space until emptied.
- Sort your mailbox by size or attachments if your device offers it, to find the heavy ones.

> **TIP**
> If an attachment matters, save it to your Files or Photos first, then delete the email. That keeps the document safely on your device while removing the heavy copy from your iCloud mailbox.

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 Review iCloud Drive and App Data

iCloud Drive holds files you or your apps have saved to the cloud, and some apps quietly store large amounts there. A quick review often turns up folders of documents or app data you forgot about.

1. Open the Files app and tap "iCloud Drive."
2. Look for large folders or old documents you no longer need and delete them.
3. Back in "Manage Account Storage," check which apps list large amounts and clear data from ones that do not matter.
4. Empty the "Recently Deleted" area in Files afterward.

GOOD TO KNOW

Some apps store their entire library in iCloud — voice recorders, scanning apps, and note apps are common examples. If one of these shows up as large, opening it and deleting old items you do not need clears that space.

8 The Photos Question

For many people, once the old backups are gone, Photos is the one thing legitimately using the space — and that is the one thing you do not want to delete. Your photos are worth keeping in iCloud, where they are safe from a lost or broken phone.

So if Photos is the real reason iCloud is full, the honest answer is usually not to delete memories but to move to a slightly larger plan. The jump from the free 5 gigabytes to 50 gigabytes costs about a dollar a month and covers most people comfortably.

> *Deleting photos to fit a free tier is a false economy. A dollar a month keeps every memory safe — that is the right trade for most people.*

9 Decide Whether to Pay for More

Once you have cleared the old backups and junk, you will see a true picture of what you actually use. If that still exceeds the free 5 gigabytes — usually because of photos — a small paid plan is often the sensible, low-cost answer rather than a constant battle.

It is worth being honest with yourself about the trade here. Spending an hour every couple of months deleting things you half-want to keep, and still living on the edge of full, is a poor bargain compared with a dollar a month that makes the problem simply go away. For most people with a camera full of grandchildren, the small plan is the

calmer and kinder choice.

Plan	About	Good for
5 GB	Free	Very light users with few photos
50 GB	~$0.99 / month	Most people — photos plus backups
200 GB	~$2.99 / month	Larger photo libraries, sharing with family
2 TB	~$9.99 / month	Big libraries, multiple people, lots of video

GOOD TO KNOW

These are the US prices as of late 2026; Apple can change them. The 200-gigabyte and 2-terabyte plans can also be shared with family through Family Sharing, which often makes them better value than they first appear.

10 If It Still Says Full After You Cleared It

Sometimes you delete the old backups and clear the junk, and iCloud still insists it is full for a little while. This is usually just the system catching up with itself, not a sign that your cleanup failed.

1. Give it a few minutes — iCloud can take time to recount after big deletions.
2. Make sure the device is on Wi-Fi so it can sync the changes.
3. Open "Manage Account Storage" again and confirm the deleted items are truly gone.
4. Restart the device, which often prompts it to recalculate the free space.

GOOD TO KNOW

If the number genuinely has not moved after an hour on Wi-Fi, check that the deletions actually took — occasionally a tap does not register, and an old backup you thought you removed is still sitting in the list.

11 Keep iCloud From Filling Up Again

Once you are clear, a few habits keep you from being back here in a few months. The goal is to let iCloud hold what matters — your photos and your current backup — without the dead weight piling up again.

- Delete an old device's backup promptly whenever you upgrade phones.
- Keep Mail tidy — empty Trash and Junk now and then, and clear huge attachments.
- Right-size your plan: if photos genuinely need it, the cheap plan ends the battle.
- Check "Manage Account Storage" once or twice a year so nothing creeps up unseen.

TIP

The single most effective habit is deleting the old backup each time you get a new phone. That one step prevents the most common cause of a mysteriously full iCloud — a stack of backups for phones you no longer own.

12 What Your Current Backup Protects

It is worth remembering why you keep the current device's backup at all, because it is the one thing in iCloud you should never delete. That backup is a complete safety copy of your phone — your messages, your settings, your app data — ready to restore if the phone is ever lost, stolen, or damaged.

So while the old backups are dead weight, the current one is precious. If your phone fell in a lake tomorrow, that backup is what would let a new phone come back to life looking exactly like the old one. Keeping it is the whole point of having iCloud in the

first place.

> *Old backups are clutter; your current backup is a lifeline. Clear the first without ever touching the second.*

13 When to Call Bill

Most people can clear the old backups and junk themselves with the steps here, and you can stop as soon as the warnings go away. But iCloud's screens confuse almost everyone, and the fear of deleting the wrong backup is real — there is no need to guess when a safety copy is involved.

I come to you, show you exactly what is filling iCloud, safely remove the dead weight without ever touching the backup that protects your current phone, and help you decide, honestly, whether a cheap larger plan is worth it. You end up with the warnings gone and your memories safe.

- You are not sure which backup is safe to delete.
- iCloud fills up again soon after you clear it.
- Photos is the real cause and you want advice on a plan.
- The screens do not match what this guide describes and you would rather not guess.

CHEAT SHEET

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Keep this handy. Find the culprit first; old backups are usually it.

I want to...	Do this...
See what's filling iCloud	Settings your name iCloud Manage Account Storage
Free the most room	Delete backups of devices you no longer own
Slim your current backup	Backups your device turn off big unneeded apps
Clear Mail space	Delete big emails; empty Mail's Trash and Junk
Tidy iCloud Drive	Files iCloud Drive remove old large files
Keep photos safe	Don't delete them — the 50 GB plan is about $1/month
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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