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Mac Won't Turn On / Stuck on the Loading Bar

The calm, in-order steps — and when to stop and protect your files

Plain-English Mac help from:
Bill's Home Tech
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Tech Made Simple. Service Made Personal.

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SUMMARY

The 60-Second Version

A Mac stuck on the loading bar is usually just finishing a slow update — so if the bar moves at all, wait up to an hour with it plugged in before anything else. If it's truly frozen, force it off by holding the power button about ten seconds, then turn it back on. Unplug every accessory in case one is the holdup.

Safe Mode and, if needed, Disk Utility's First Aid in Recovery repair many startup problems without erasing anything. The one firm rule: never let anyone erase or reinstall until your files are backed up. If it won't start or you're unsure your files are safe, that's the moment to call.

1 The Short Version

You pressed the power button and your Mac either won't come on at all, or it starts up and then just sits there — an Apple logo and a loading bar that creeps along and seems to stop. It is a genuinely scary moment, because the Mac is where your photos, letters, and life live. Take a breath: in most cases nothing is lost, and the fix is more ordinary than it feels.

This guide walks through the calm, in-order steps a professional would take, from "is it really getting power?" to the deeper recovery tools — and, just as importantly, when to stop and protect your files rather than keep poking.

- A stuck loading bar is often just a slow update — patience is the first fix.
- Check power and connections before assuming the worst.
- A forced restart and Safe Mode clear many startup problems.
- If it won't budge, protecting your files comes first — and that's a good call to Bill.

TIP

If the loading bar is moving at all, even very slowly, the best thing you can do is wait — sometimes an hour. Many a “dead” Mac was simply finishing a big update that needed time.

2 First, Don't Panic — What the Bar Means

That progress bar under the Apple logo appears when your Mac is doing something substantial as it starts — most often installing an update, or checking and repairing its own drive after it was shut down unexpectedly. A bar that is slow, or seems stuck near the end, is usually working, not frozen.

GOOD TO KNOW

Updates in particular can make the bar sit at the same spot for a long stretch, then suddenly jump ahead. A Mac that looks frozen at 90% is very often just busy. The rule of thumb: if it has not moved at all in well over an hour, then treat it as stuck.

3 Is It Really Getting Power?

When the Mac won't come on at all — no logo, no sound, no light — start with the least dramatic possibility: power. This sounds obvious, but a loose cable or a dead power strip is behind a lot of "dead" Macs.

1. On a laptop, plug in the charger and look for any charging light; let it charge 15 minutes before trying.
2. Try a different outlet, and plug straight into the wall rather than through a power strip.
3. Check the cable is firmly seated at both ends, and inspect it for damage or fraying.
4. On a desktop Mac, make sure the monitor is on and the right input is selected — the Mac may be running while the screen stays dark.

WATCH OUT

A frayed or damaged charging cable is both a failure cause and a safety hazard. If a cable looks worn, chewed, or has exposed wire, stop using it — don't tape it — and replace it with a proper one.

4 The Patience Test

If you see the Apple logo and a loading bar, the most important tool you have is patience. Interrupting an update partway through is one of the few things that can genuinely cause harm, so it is worth waiting it out first.

1. Leave the Mac completely alone for at least an hour — longer if the bar is moving at all.
2. Make sure a laptop is plugged into power so it doesn't run out mid-update.
3. Watch whether the bar creeps forward over time, even slightly.
4. Only if it has truly not moved for well over an hour should you move to a forced restart.

TIP

If you can, note the time when you first see the bar. It helps you judge later whether it is genuinely stuck or just slow — our sense of time stretches when we're anxious.

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5 Force a Clean Restart

If the Mac is truly frozen — no movement for a long time — a forced restart is safe and clears many startup hiccups. It is the Mac equivalent of a firm, fresh start.

1. Press and hold the power button for about ten seconds until the Mac shuts fully off.
2. Wait ten seconds.
3. Press the power button once to turn it back on.
4. Watch whether it starts normally this time.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> On most Macs the power button is the key you'd use to turn it on; on some laptops it is also the Touch ID button in the top corner of the keyboard. Holding it forces the Mac off even when the screen is frozen.

6 Unplug Everything Extra

Occasionally a startup problem is caused not by the Mac but by something plugged into it — a printer, an external drive, a hub, even a particular cable. The Mac can hang while waiting on a confused accessory.

1. Shut the Mac down.
2. Unplug everything except the power cable — printers, drives, hubs, extra screens, USB gadgets.
3. Turn the Mac on and see whether it starts normally now.
4. If it does, plug accessories back one at a time to find the troublemaker.

> **TIP**
>
> If the Mac starts fine with everything unplugged, you've learned something valuable — the Mac is healthy, and one accessory is the issue. That's a far easier (and cheaper) problem than a broken Mac.

7 Try Safe Mode

Safe Mode is a special way of starting your Mac that loads only the bare essentials and does some automatic housekeeping along the way. It is a gentle, built-in repair tool, and starting in it sometimes clears a problem all by itself.

How you enter Safe Mode depends on which kind of Mac you have, which the next chapter helps you tell. In short: on a newer Mac you hold the power button at startup to reach a startup-options screen, then hold Shift; on an older Mac you simply hold the Shift key as it starts.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> If the Mac starts successfully in Safe Mode, that alone often repairs what was wrong. You can then simply restart normally and see whether the trouble is gone.

8 Which Mac Do You Have?

Macs come in two broad families now, and the recovery steps differ slightly between them. Knowing which you have makes the next steps clear.

1. Click the Apple menu (when the Mac is working) and choose "About This Mac."
2. Look for the chip or processor line.
3. If it mentions "Apple" and an “M” chip (like M1, M2, M3, and so on), you have a newer Apple-chip Mac.
4. If it mentions "Intel," you have an older Intel Mac.

- Newer (Apple chip): to reach recovery or startup options, press and HOLD the power button until “Loading startup options” appears.
- Older (Intel): hold Command and R together right after powering on to reach recovery; hold Shift to reach Safe Mode.

WATCH OUT

If you're not sure which you have and the Mac won't start to check, don't worry — this is exactly the kind of detail I confirm in seconds on a visit. It doesn't change whether your files are safe.

9 Recovery Mode and Disk First Aid

If a forced restart and Safe Mode don't do it, your Mac has a built-in rescue area called Recovery. From there you can run "First Aid," a safe tool that checks and repairs the Mac's drive — a common cause of a Mac that hangs on startup.

1. Enter Recovery using the method for your Mac (hold the power button on a newer Mac; Command-R on an Intel Mac).
2. In the menu that appears, choose "Disk Utility."
3. Select your main drive (often called “Macintosh HD”) and click "First Aid," then "Run."
4. Let it finish, then quit and restart.

WATCH OUT

Disk Utility's “First Aid” is safe and does not erase anything. But other items in the Recovery menu — especially anything that mentions “Erase” or “Reinstall” — can affect your files. If you reach this screen and feel unsure, stop here and call before choosing anything else.

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10 Reinstalling macOS Without Erasing

If First Aid doesn't fix it, the next tool is reinstalling macOS. Done correctly, reinstalling the system does NOT erase your files — it lays a fresh copy of the operating system over the top while leaving your photos and documents in place. But the wording on screen matters enormously, which is why this is a careful step.

From the same Recovery menu there is a "Reinstall macOS" option. Choosing that, and following the prompts to install onto your existing drive, keeps your files. What you must avoid is any option that erases the drive first.

> **WATCH OUT**
> This is the step where a wrong choice can cost you your files, so it is the natural place to bring me in. I make sure your files are safe first, then reinstall the right way. If you're nervous here, that instinct is correct — pause and call.

11 Black Screen vs. Loading Bar

It helps to notice exactly what you're seeing, because the two most common symptoms point in different directions.

- Apple logo with a loading bar: the Mac is starting and doing work — patience first, then the restart and Safe Mode steps.
- Completely black screen, no logo, no sound: lean on the power and connection checks, and the forced restart.
- A question-mark folder, prohibitory circle, or an error screen: the Mac can't find a healthy system — that's a Recovery and First Aid situation.
- Screen is on but stuck on the login/password screen: a different issue — usually a frozen login, cleared by a forced restart.

GOOD TO KNOW

Telling me which of these you see, word for word, lets me know almost immediately how serious it is and what to bring. A photo of the screen with your phone is even better.

12 Protect Your Files Before Anything Drastic

Here is the most important principle in this whole guide: before anyone does anything that could erase the Mac, your files should be safe. If your Mac has been backing up to Time Machine or iCloud, you already have that safety net. If it hasn't, that net needs to come first.

- If you have a Time Machine backup, your files are safe no matter what happens next.
- If you don't, there are ways to copy your files off even a Mac that won't fully start — but they must be done carefully.
- Never let anyone talk you into erasing or reinstalling before you're certain your files are backed up.

WATCH OUT

Rescuing files off a Mac that won't start is one of the most valuable things I do, and it has to happen before any erase or reinstall. If your Mac is sick and you're not sure your files are backed up, that is the moment to call — not after.

13 When It's a Hardware Problem

If none of the software steps work, the cause may be the hardware itself — a failing drive, a bad power component, or on a laptop, a swollen or dead battery. These aren't things to fix at the kitchen table, and some (like a swollen battery) are safety matters to handle promptly.

- Repeated failures to start even after Recovery suggest a hardware fault.

- A laptop that is hot, bulging, or won't hold any charge needs prompt, careful attention.
- Unusual noises, burning smells, or a trackpad that won't click flat can signal a swelling battery — stop using it and get help.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> Hardware faults need the right tools and, sometimes, the right person to say honestly whether a repair is worth it. I'll give you a straight answer — and if it's a safety issue like a swollen battery, I'll tell you plainly what to do right now.

14 When to Call Bill

A Mac that won't start is one of the most stressful tech moments there is, and you do not have to face it alone or risk your files by guessing. Many cases clear with patience and a restart — but the moment the steps turn to erasing, reinstalling, or rescuing files, a steady, experienced hand is exactly what you want.

- The Mac still won't start after patience, a forced restart, and Safe Mode.
- You see a question mark, error screen, or prohibitory symbol.
- You're being asked to erase or reinstall and you're not sure your files are safe.
- The Mac is hot, swollen, or won't charge — a possible safety issue.

I come to you right here in Portage County, protect your files first, and get your Mac starting again — or tell you honestly if it's time for a repair or replacement. Either way, your photos and documents come first.

CHEAT SHEET

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Keep this where you can reach it. Work down calmly; stop before anything that erases.

I want to...	Do this...
Loading bar seems stuck	Wait an hour first (plugged in) — it's often a slow update
Nothing happens at all	Check power, try the wall outlet, use a different cable
Force a fresh start	Hold the power button ~10 seconds, wait, turn back on
Rule out accessories	Unplug everything but power; start; re-add one at a time
Gentle auto-repair	Start in Safe Mode (hold Shift / startup options)
Check the drive	Recovery Disk Utility First Aid (safe, no erasing)
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.

HOW I CAN HELP

Your Visit — and My Promise

You don't have to remember all of it — just that a friendly, patient person is one call away, whenever you'd rather have a hand.

KEY SPECS

In your home — $99 flat for the first visit, no contracts and no surprises, with a 30-day come-back-free follow-up. In-home visits cover Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities.
Outside the area? Remotely — $49 for a screen-share session (free for Support Plan members, $39/mo), refundable if I can't fix it — and credited toward a visit if you'd rather have me in person. Book either at billshometech.com/book.

GOOD TO KNOW

My promise — If you're not 100% satisfied with your visit, I'll come back at no charge, or refund the full $99. No questions, no awkwardness. That's how I'd want to be treated.

Whenever you're ready, I'll come to your home anywhere in Portage County, Ohio and nearby communities, at your pace. Too far for a house call? I also help remotely. Book at billshometech.com/book or call (330) 200-8042. — Bill

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