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My Mac Is Slow / Spinning Beachball

Why the rainbow circle spins — and the calm, in-order fixes that bring the speed back

Plain-English Mac help from:

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SUMMARY

The 60-Second Version

A slow Mac or a spinning “beachball” almost always means something is asking it to do too much, not that it is broken. First force-quit any frozen app with Command-Option-Esc, then do a full restart — that alone fixes most slowdowns. If it keeps happening, open Activity Monitor to find the program hogging the Mac, free up disk space in System Settings, and trim the apps that launch at startup.

A browser with too many tabs is a common hidden cause. If it stays slow no matter what, it may be a hardware upgrade worth a quick, honest conversation.

1 The Short Version

Your Mac has started dragging its feet. You click something and nothing happens, or the little rainbow-colored circle starts spinning and spinning while you wait. It is one of the most common things people call about, and here is the reassuring part: a slow Mac is almost never a broken Mac. Something is simply asking it to do too much at once, and once you find and quiet that something, the speed comes right back.

This guide walks you through the fixes in the order a professional would try them — the quick ones first, the deeper ones only if you need them. You do not have to understand any of the technical words. Just go down the list until your Mac feels snappy again.

- The spinning circle means your Mac is busy, not broken.
- Start simple: wait a moment, then save your work and restart.
- If it keeps happening, one app or a nearly-full disk is usually the cause.
- When it stays slow no matter what, that is a good moment to call Bill.

TIP

Before you do anything drastic, a simple restart fixes a surprising share of slowdowns. If you only do one thing from this guide, make it that — turn the Mac fully off and on again.

2 What the Spinning Beachball Actually Means

That spinning rainbow circle has a nickname — the "beachball" — and it is not an error. It is your Mac's way of saying "hold on, I'm working on something and I can't get to you just yet." It is the Mac equivalent of a waiter who is buried in the kitchen: not gone, just swamped.

Most of the time the beachball lasts a second or two and vanishes. The problem is when it spins for a long time, because that means one program has gotten stuck or is chewing through more than the Mac can handle. The fix is to find out which program, and give it a nudge.

GOOD TO KNOW

A beachball tied to just one program — say, your web browser — while everything else still works is very different from the whole Mac freezing. The first is a stuck app you can quit; the second usually clears with a restart.

3 The 60-Second First Moves

When the beachball appears and will not go away, resist the urge to click over and over — each extra click just adds to the pile the Mac is already struggling through. Instead, try these calm steps in order.

1. Wait a full 30 seconds without clicking. Many beachballs clear themselves once the Mac finishes the task.

2. If it is stuck on one program, click a different app (or the desktop) to see whether the rest of the Mac still responds.
3. Save your work in any app that is still responding, in case you need to restart.
4. If one app is clearly frozen, force it to quit (next chapter explains exactly how).
5. If the whole Mac is frozen, hold the power button for about ten seconds to force it off, then turn it back on.

> **TIP**
> Holding the power button to force a shutdown is safe when the Mac is truly frozen. You might lose anything you had not saved, but you will not harm the Mac itself.

4 Force Quit a Stuck App

When one program is frozen but the rest of the Mac works, you do not need to restart the whole machine. You can close just the stuck app and reopen it.

1. Hold down three keys together: Command, Option, and Escape (Esc).
2. A small window titled "Force Quit Applications" appears, listing your open programs.
3. Click the one that is misbehaving — it may say "(not responding)" next to its name.
4. Click "Force Quit," then confirm.
5. Reopen the app normally; it almost always behaves after a fresh start.

> **WATCH OUT**
> Force-quitting closes the app instantly without saving, so anything you had not saved in that program is lost. That is unavoidable when it is frozen — but it is why saving often is such a good habit.

5 Restart the Right Way

A restart is the single most effective cure for a sluggish Mac, because it clears out everything the Mac was holding in its short-term memory and lets it start fresh. Many Macs go weeks or months without a true restart, and the slowness creeps in quietly over that time.

1. Save and close your open work first.
2. Click the Apple menu in the top-left corner of the screen.
3. Choose "Restart."
4. Let the Mac fully shut down and come back on its own — do not rush it.
5. Sign back in and see whether the speed has returned.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> If your Mac is set to reopen all your windows when it starts up, you can untick "Reopen windows when logging back in" in the restart box. Starting with a clean slate, rather than reopening a pile of apps, gives you the freshest result.

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6 Find the Hog with Activity Monitor

If restarts help but the slowness keeps returning, it is worth seeing exactly what is working your Mac so hard. The Mac has a built-in tool for this called Activity Monitor — think of it as a dashboard showing which programs are using the engine.

1. Open the Launchpad or the Applications folder, then the Utilities folder, and open Activity Monitor.
2. Click the "CPU" tab at the top — this shows how hard each program is working.

3. Click the "% CPU" column heading to sort, so the busiest programs rise to the top.
4. Note anything sitting very high (well into the double or triple digits) for a long time.
5. If a program you are not even using is near the top, that is your likely culprit — quit it and watch the Mac perk up.

> **TIP**
>
> We have a whole companion guide just on Activity Monitor if you want to understand it in more depth. For now, you only need the CPU tab and the Memory tab — the rest you can safely ignore.

7 Free Up Breathing Room on the Disk

A Mac needs empty space to work in, the way a cook needs clear counter space. When the storage gets close to full, the Mac slows to a crawl because it has nowhere to shuffle things. Giving it room often brings back the speed on its own.

1. Open System Settings from the Apple menu.
2. Click "General," then "Storage."
3. Look at the bar at the top — if it is nearly full, that is very likely part of your problem.
4. Empty the Trash (right-click the Trash in the Dock and choose "Empty Trash").
5. Use the recommendations on that Storage screen to clear large files you no longer need.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> As a rule of thumb, try to keep at least ten to fifteen percent of your storage free. If you are constantly bumping against full, we have separate guides on freeing space and on what that puzzling "System Data" category really is.

8 Too Many Things Opening at Startup

Every program that launches the moment you turn on your Mac is one more thing competing for its attention before you have even started. Over the years, apps quietly add themselves to this startup list, and it can leave your Mac winded from the very first minute.

1. Open System Settings, then click "General," then "Login Items & Extensions."
2. Look at the list of apps set to open at login.
3. Turn off anything you do not need the moment you sit down — you can still open those apps yourself whenever you want.
4. Scroll to the "Allow in the Background" list and switch off helpers for programs you have removed or never use.
5. Restart and notice how much faster the Mac is ready for you.

> **TIP**
> Not sure what something is? Leave it on. We have a dedicated Login Items guide that explains exactly what is safe to switch off and what to leave alone.

9 Close the Browser Tab Avalanche

For a great many people, the real slowdown is not the Mac at all — it is the web browser with two dozen tabs open. Each open tab, especially news sites and anything with video, quietly uses a slice of memory. Twenty tabs can bog down even a healthy Mac.

- Close tabs you are finished with instead of leaving them open "just in case."
- If you want to keep a page, bookmark it rather than leaving the tab running.
- Fully quit the browser now and then (not just close the window) to clear it out.
- Be wary of browser "extensions" or toolbars you did not deliberately add — some slow things down badly.

WATCH OUT

If your browser suddenly sprouted a new toolbar, a different search engine, or constant pop-ups, that is not a normal slowdown — it can be unwanted software that came bundled with a download. That is worth a call rather than a guess.

10 Check for Updates

Out-of-date software is a quiet source of slowness and glitches. Both macOS itself and your individual apps get fixes over time, and a Mac that has fallen behind can stutter in ways a quick update clears up.

1. Open System Settings, then "General," then "Software Update," and install any macOS update offered.
2. Open the App Store, click your name or "Updates," and update your apps.
3. Let updates finish fully before using the Mac heavily — they often do tidy-up work in the background afterward.

GOOD TO KNOW

If a big macOS update is offered, it is usually worth taking — but not in the middle of something important, because it can take a while and will restart the Mac. Pick a time you can leave it alone for an hour.

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11 When One App Is the Culprit

Sometimes the whole Mac is fine and one particular program is the problem — it beachballs every time you open it, or slows everything the moment it runs. When you can point to a single app, the fix is usually about that app, not the Mac.

1. Quit the app fully and reopen it.
2. Check the App Store or the app's own menu for an update.
3. If it still misbehaves, remove it and reinstall a fresh copy from the maker.
4. See whether the Mac is quick again with that app closed — that confirms it was the cause.

WATCH OUT

If the troublesome app is one you rely on every day, do not wrestle with reinstalling it alone — a wrong move can lose its settings. That is an easy thing for me to sort out cleanly on a visit.

12 Memory Pressure, Explained Simply

You may hear the word "memory" and worry you need to buy more. Usually you do not. Your Mac is very good at juggling memory, and a brief squeeze is normal. The thing to watch is the "Memory Pressure" graph in Activity Monitor's Memory tab.

- A green graph means your Mac has memory to spare — all is well.
- Yellow means it is working to keep up, often just because too much is open.
- Red, sitting there constantly, suggests the Mac is genuinely short on memory for what you ask of it.
- Closing a few apps and browser tabs usually turns yellow or red back to green.

GOOD TO KNOW

If the graph lives in the red even with little open, and the Mac is several years old, more memory (or a newer Mac) may genuinely help. That is a hardware conversation worth having before spending money, which I am glad to walk through with you.

13 Heat, Dust, and a Tired Battery

A Mac that gets hot will deliberately slow itself down to protect its insides — this is normal and self-protective, not a fault. If your Mac runs hot and the fan roars, the slowness may simply be heat.

- Use the Mac on a hard, flat surface, not a soft bed or couch that blocks the vents.
- Keep the vents and any fan openings free of dust.
- Give it room to breathe; do not box it into a tight cubby.
- On a laptop, a battery that is worn out can also cause the Mac to throttle down.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> Opening a Mac to clean it inside, or replacing a worn laptop battery, is genuine hands-on work best left to a pro with the right tools. If heat is your issue, that is squarely the kind of thing I handle.

14 Is It Time for Hardware Help?

If you have worked through everything above and the Mac is still slow, the issue may be the hardware itself — most often an older Mac with a traditional spinning hard drive, or one that is simply past its comfortable years for today's software.

The good news is that an older Mac with a slow hard drive can often be transformed by a modern solid-state drive, and many Macs can take more memory. Before you assume you need a whole new machine, it is worth finding out whether a modest upgrade would give you several more good years — and sometimes it is time for a new Mac, which is fine to know too.

WATCH OUT

I can tell you honestly whether your Mac is worth upgrading or whether your money is better spent on a newer one. There is no upsell — just a straight answer about what will actually make your Mac fast again.

15 Set It Up So It Stays Fast

Once your Mac is quick again, a few gentle habits keep it that way without any fuss.

- Restart once a week or so, rather than only when something goes wrong.
- Keep ten to fifteen percent of your storage free.
- Close browser tabs and quit apps you are done with.
- Install updates when they are offered, at a convenient time.
- Keep the startup (login items) list short.

TIP

None of this has to become a chore. If you would like, I can set your Mac up once so it stays tidy on its own — and leave you a simple one-page note of the few habits that matter.

16 When to Call Bill

You should feel free to work down this list as far as you are comfortable, and most people get their speed back within the first few chapters. But there is no prize for struggling, and some steps — reinstalling a vital app, judging whether a hardware upgrade is worth it, clearing out unwanted software — are calmer with a steady hand beside you.

- The Mac stays slow no matter what you try.
- You suspect unwanted software, a strange toolbar, or pop-ups.
- You are weighing an upgrade versus a new Mac and want an honest read.
- You would simply rather have it handled correctly the first time.

I come to you here in Portage County, find what is really slowing your Mac down, fix it, and leave it running the way it should — along with a plain note on keeping it that way.

CHEAT SHEET

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Keep this by the Mac. Work down the list; stop as soon as it feels fast again.

I want to...	Do this...
Clear a frozen app	Press Command + Option + Esc, pick the stuck app, Force Quit
Give it a fresh start	Apple menu Restart (untick “reopen windows”)
See what's working it hard	Open Activity Monitor CPU tab sort by % CPU
Free up room	System Settings General Storage; empty the Trash
Trim startup apps	System Settings General Login Items & Extensions
Tame the browser	Close extra tabs; fully quit the browser now and then
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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