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AN EXTENDED GUIDE · NO. 2358

Updated November 2026

"Not Enough Disk Space to Update macOS"

Why the update won't install — and the safe, in-order ways to free the room it needs

Plain-English Mac help from:

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SUMMARY

The 60-Second Version

A “not enough disk space” message just means a macOS update needs more free room to unpack and install — often 25 gigabytes or more for a big yearly upgrade. Start by emptying the Trash, which frees space people forget about, then clear old Downloads and installers and use the Storage screen in System Settings to find the biggest items.

If you use iCloud Photos, “Optimize Mac Storage” frees a lot. A restart usually shrinks “System Data.” If your Mac is simply packed with files you need, an external drive is the lasting fix — best done safely so nothing is lost.

1 The Short Version

You went to update your Mac and it stopped you with a message like "not enough disk space" or "this update needs more free space to install." It is a frustrating wall to hit, but it is a completely ordinary one, and nothing is wrong with your Mac. A macOS update simply needs a good amount of elbow room to unpack and install itself, and your storage is a little too full to give it that room right now.

The fix is to clear some space, and this guide shows you how to do it safely, starting with the easiest wins. You will not have to delete anything precious — there is almost always plenty of clutter to clear first.

- The update is not failing; your Mac just needs more free space to install it.
- Start with the easy wins: empty the Trash, clear Downloads, remove big files you don't need.
- The Storage screen in Settings points you straight at what's taking up room.
- If you can't free enough, an external drive or a visit from Bill sorts it out.

TIP

Empty the Trash first. People forget that deleted files sit in the Trash still taking up space until it is emptied — and that one step alone sometimes frees all the room you need.

2 Why an Update Needs So Much Room

A macOS update is not a small thing. The Mac has to download the new version, unpack it (which temporarily takes even more space than the final result), and then install it while keeping your old system safe until the new one is ready. All of that needs working room, the way repainting a room needs space to move the furniture around.

GOOD TO KNOW

This is why the space an update asks for can seem larger than the update itself. The extra is temporary working space; once the update finishes and tidies up, much of it comes back.

3 How Much Space You Actually Need

There is no single magic number, because it depends on the size of the update. A small security fix needs only a little; a big once-a-year macOS version needs a lot more — often well over twenty gigabytes of free space, sometimes more once you count the temporary working room.

- For a large yearly macOS upgrade, aim for at least 25–35 gigabytes free to be safe.
- For a smaller update, a few gigabytes is usually enough.
- More free space never hurts — your Mac also runs better with room to breathe.

WATCH OUT

You do not have to hit an exact figure. Clear what you comfortably can using the steps ahead, then try the update again. If it still balks, clear a bit more.

4 See What's Using Your Space

Before deleting anything, it helps to see where your space has actually gone. Your Mac has a clear picture built right in.

1. Click the Apple menu in the top-left and open System Settings.
2. Click "General," then "Storage."
3. Look at the colored bar — each color is a category (Apps, Documents, Photos, and so on).
4. Below the bar is a list with recommendations and ways to clear space; this is your starting map.

GOOD TO KNOW

Hover over the colored bands or look at the list to see which categories are largest. Often one or two — Photos, or a big pile of Downloads — account for most of the space, which makes them the obvious place to start.

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5 Empty the Trash — Really

This is the simplest and most-missed step. When you delete a file, it moves to the Trash but does not actually leave your Mac until the Trash is emptied. Years of "deleted" files can sit there quietly taking up gigabytes.

1. Find the Trash can at the end of the Dock.
2. Right-click (or hold Control and click) it and choose "Empty Trash."
3. Confirm. Those files are now truly gone and the space is freed.

> **WATCH OUT**
> Empty the Trash only when you are sure you no longer need anything in it. If you are unsure, open the Trash first and glance through — you can drag anything you want to keep back out before emptying.

6 Use the Storage Recommendations

That same Storage screen in Settings offers safe, built-in ways to reclaim space without you having to hunt through folders. They are a gentle first pass.

- "Empty Trash Automatically" clears items that have been in the Trash for 30 days.
- "Optimize Storage" can remove already-watched movies and shows you can re-download anytime.
- A "Review Files" or similar option lists your largest files so you can decide on each one.

> **TIP**
> These built-in tools are safe because anything they remove can be brought back later (re-downloaded or restored). They are a much better first move than any third-party "cleaner" app, which can do more harm than good.

7 Clear Out Downloads and Big Files

The Downloads folder is where everything you grab from the web lands — and most of it is never needed again. Old installers, PDFs, photos, and zip files pile up there unnoticed and are often the fastest big win.

1. Open a Finder window and click "Downloads" in the sidebar.
2. Click the "Size" column (or switch the view to show sizes) to find the biggest items.

3. Drag anything you no longer need to the Trash — old installers (names ending in ".dmg" or ".pkg") are safe to remove once an app is installed.
4. Empty the Trash afterward to actually reclaim the space.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> An installer file is just the delivery box an app came in. Once the app is installed and working, you can throw the box away — you do not need it to keep using the app.

8 Photos and iCloud: Offload the Weight

For many people, photos and videos are the single biggest use of space — years of pictures and especially videos add up fast. You do not have to delete your memories to free room; you can let the full-size versions live in iCloud while keeping smaller copies on the Mac.

1. Open the Photos app, then its settings (Photos menu Settings).
2. Look at the iCloud section and, if you use iCloud Photos, turn on "Optimize Mac Storage."
3. This keeps lightweight versions on the Mac and the full ones safely in iCloud, freeing space.
4. Also empty the "Recently Deleted" album inside Photos — deleted photos linger there for 30 days.

> **WATCH OUT**
> "Optimize Mac Storage" keeps your originals in iCloud, so it only helps if you actually use iCloud Photos and have enough iCloud space. If you are unsure whether your photos are safely backed up, do not delete anything — that is worth checking together first.

9 Mail, Messages, and Other Hidden Space

A few quieter corners can hold a surprising amount of space, especially years of email attachments and photos sent in Messages.

- Mail: large attachments you have already saved elsewhere can be removed from old messages.
- Messages: turn on a setting to keep messages for a year rather than forever, and clear large attachments.
- Old backups of an iPhone or iPad stored on the Mac can be very large — remove ones you no longer need.

GOOD TO KNOW

These corners can be fiddly, and it is easy to delete the wrong thing. They are optional — if the earlier steps freed enough room, you can skip them entirely.

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10 The "System Data" Mystery

When you look at the Storage screen, you may see a large category called "System Data" and wonder what on earth it is. It is a catch-all for caches, logs, temporary files, and behind-the-scenes bits that do not fit the other categories — and it is normal for it to be several gigabytes.

The reassuring news is that your Mac manages most of it automatically, and a simple restart often shrinks it. If System Data is genuinely huge and crowding out your update, we have a whole companion guide devoted to understanding and safely trimming it.

WATCH OUT

Do not go hunting for hidden system folders to delete by hand. That is where people get into trouble. A restart first, then the companion guide, is the safe path.

11 Delete the Half-Downloaded Installer and Retry

Sometimes a stalled update leaves a partly-downloaded installer sitting on your Mac, taking up space and getting in the way. Clearing it and starting fresh can be exactly what is needed once you have freed some room.

1. After freeing space, open System Settings General Software Update.
2. If an update appears stuck, let it sit a moment, or restart the Mac and return to this screen.
3. If a large "Install macOS..." file is sitting in your Applications folder from a failed try, you can move it to the Trash and let the update re-download cleanly.
4. Start the update again now that there is room.

GOOD TO KNOW

Updates download more smoothly on a solid internet connection and when the Mac is plugged into power. Starting the update at a time you can leave the Mac alone for an hour avoids most hiccups.

12 If You Still Can't Free Enough

Occasionally a Mac is so full of things you genuinely want to keep — a large photo library, important documents — that there simply is not enough to safely clear. That is not a failure; it just means the real answer is more room, not more deleting.

- An external drive can hold your photos or large files, freeing the Mac's built-in storage.
- A larger iCloud plan can keep your photos in the cloud with smaller copies on the Mac.

- On some older Macs, the built-in storage can be upgraded to a larger one.

> **WATCH OUT**
> Moving a photo library or important files to an external drive has to be done carefully so nothing is lost. This is a very common and very safe job for me — I make sure everything is backed up first, then set it up so your Mac has room to breathe.

13 An External Drive as a Pressure Valve

If your Mac is simply too small for everything you own, an external drive is an inexpensive, lasting fix. It plugs in with a single cable and gives you a safe place to park large files and keep a backup at the same time.

- Choose a drive at least as large as the storage inside your Mac — bigger is better.
- A solid-state external drive is faster and sturdier than an older spinning one.
- The same drive can also run Time Machine backups (we have a guide on that).

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> If you are buying a drive mainly to free space, it is worth a two-minute conversation first so you get the right size and type — and so your files move over safely rather than by trial and error.

14 When to Call Bill

Freeing space for a macOS update is usually a matter of emptying the Trash and clearing a few big files, and this guide gets most people there. But if your Mac is genuinely packed with things you need, or you are nervous about deleting the wrong thing, you do not have to risk it.

- You can't free enough space without touching files you want to keep.
- Your photos or documents may not be backed up and you don't want to lose them.
- "System Data" is enormous and you're unsure what's safe to remove.
- You'd rather have the update, and the cleanup, handled correctly in one visit.

I come to you, free the space safely, make sure your photos and files are backed up, and get your Mac updated — then set it up so it does not crowd itself again.

CHEAT SHEET

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Keep this by the Mac. Clear space top to bottom, then try the update again.

I want to…	Do this…
See where space went	System Settings General Storage
Reclaim the easy space	Empty the Trash; clear old Downloads and installers
Use built-in cleanup	Storage screen Optimize Storage / Review Files
Free up photo space	Photos Settings Optimize Mac Storage (if you use iCloud)
Shrink “System Data”	Restart first; see our System Data guide if still large
Still not enough?	Move big files to an external drive (done safely)
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

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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.

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