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Your Mac Says the Disk Is Almost Full — What's Safe to Delete

Reclaim real space on a Mac the safe way, and know what to never touch

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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 "Disk Almost Full" Means 4

Use Apple's Built-In Recommendations First 4

Empty the Trash — the Most Missed Step 5

Clear Out the Downloads Folder 6

Tackle Photos the Safe Way 6

Clear Mail's Downloaded Attachments 7

Find the Big Files Hiding Elsewhere 8

Where the Space Usually Hides on a Mac 8

If the Mac Is Still Slow After Cleaning 9

What You Should Never Delete 9

Set the Mac to Manage Its Own Space 10

When to Call Bill 10

Everyday Cheat Sheet 12

A Note From Bill 13

Your Visit — and My Promise 14

SUMMARY

The 60-Second Version

A nearly full Mac is not broken — it has piled up large files, old downloads, and years of clutter. Start at the Apple menu, System Settings, General, Storage, and use the built-in "Recommendations," which clear space safely. The biggest wins are emptying the Trash, clearing old installers from Downloads, and letting iCloud hold your photo originals with "Optimize Mac Storage."

Empty Mail's Trash too. Never delete the System or Library folders, "System Data," or files you do not recognize, and skip third-party "cleaner" apps. Restart afterward to recount free space.

1 The Short Version

A nearly full Mac is not a broken Mac. It has simply accumulated large files, old downloads, duplicate photos, and years of clutter in places you rarely look. Apple even builds in a set of recommendations that clear space safely, and most people never notice them.

We will start with Apple's own built-in tools, move through the safe manual cleanups, and finish by telling you plainly what you should never delete. Stop whenever the warning clears.

- The Mac has a built-in Storage screen with safe, one-click recommendations.
- The biggest wins are usually large files, Downloads, Trash, and photos.
- Some folders look like clutter but are the Mac's own system — leave them.
- A few settings let the Mac keep its own space clear from now on.

TIP

Start by opening the Storage screen: click the Apple menu in the top-left corner, choose System Settings, then General, then Storage. The colored bar and the list beneath show exactly where your space went, and the "Recommendations" at the top are Apple's own safe cleanups.

2 What "Disk Almost Full" Means

Your Mac stores everything — the system, your apps, your documents, and your photos — on one built-in drive. When that drive runs low, the Mac warns you, because it needs some free room to work smoothly, install updates, and keep things running. A Mac with almost no free space feels slow and can misbehave, which is the system's way of asking for a little room.

None of this means anything is damaged. It is simply a full drive, and the cure is to clear what you do not need and, for big libraries like photos, let iCloud hold the full copies while the Mac keeps lighter ones.

GOOD TO KNOW

Aim to leave a comfortable amount of free space — roughly a tenth of the drive, and at least several gigabytes — so the Mac has room to breathe. Running right at the edge is the number-one cause of a Mac that feels sluggish for no obvious reason.

3 Use Apple's Built-In Recommendations First

The safest cleanups are the ones Apple built in. The Storage screen offers a short list of recommendations that free space without risk — this is always the right place to start.

The reason to begin here, rather than hunting through folders yourself, is that Apple's tools know exactly which files are safe to move or clear and which are part of the

system. You get the space without the worry of deleting something you should not, and everything these tools touch can be undone or recovered through your iCloud account.

1. Apple menu, System Settings, General, Storage.
2. Look at "Recommendations" near the top.
3. Consider "Empty Trash Automatically," which clears items in the Trash after 30 days.
4. Consider "Store in iCloud" to move files and photos off the Mac while keeping them available.
5. Use "Review Files" (or the category list) to find the largest items safely.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> Below the recommendations, each category — Applications, Documents, Photos, and so on — can be opened to see the biggest items. This built-in review is the safest way to find space, because it never touches the parts of the system you should not.

4 Empty the Trash — the Most Missed Step

Dragging files to the Trash does not free any space; the files sit in the Trash, still taking up room, until you empty it. This is the single most common reason a Mac does not free up after someone has deleted plenty.

1. Click the Trash icon at the end of the Dock to see what is in it.
2. If you are sure you do not need anything there, right-click the Trash and choose "Empty Trash."
3. Remember that Photos and Mail have their own separate trash, covered below.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> Once you empty the Trash, those files are gone for good without special recovery. Take one quick look before emptying to be sure nothing important wandered in — then empty with confidence.

5 Clear Out the Downloads Folder

The Downloads folder is where everything you save from the web or email lands, and it quietly grows into one of the biggest space users on the Mac — old installers, PDFs, photos, and zip files you opened once and forgot.

Most people are genuinely surprised by what is in there, because downloading something and forgetting it is so easy to do. Years of receipts, attachments, software installers, and pictures pile up in one place you almost never open. Clearing it out is one of the quickest and safest wins on the whole Mac.

1. Open Finder and click "Downloads" in the sidebar.
2. Click "Size" at the top (or use List view) to sort biggest first.
3. Delete installers (files ending in.dmg or.pkg), old zip files, and documents you no longer need.
4. Empty the Trash afterward to actually reclaim the space.

> **TIP**
>
> Installer files ending in.dmg are safe to delete after you have installed the app — the app itself lives in your Applications folder and does not need the installer. These are often the single biggest easy win in Downloads.

6 Tackle Photos the Safe Way

On many Macs, the Photos library is the largest single item. The safe way to shrink it is to let iCloud hold your full-resolution originals while the Mac keeps smaller versions — you still see every photo, but it weighs far less on the drive.

This has the same happy side effect it does on an iPhone: once your photos live in iCloud, they are protected against the Mac ever failing. You free space and gain a backup in a single step. Every photo stays visible in the Photos app exactly as before — the Mac simply fetches the full-size version from iCloud the moment you open one.

1. Open Photos, then from the Photos menu choose Settings, and open the iCloud tab.
2. Turn on iCloud Photos if it is off.
3. Choose "Optimize Mac Storage" so originals live in iCloud and the Mac keeps lighter copies.
4. In Photos, open "Recently Deleted" and empty it to clear photos you already removed.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> This only shrinks the library if you have enough iCloud room for it; everyone gets 5 gigabytes free, and larger plans start around a dollar a month. Our "do I need to pay" guide helps you decide, but the "Recently Deleted" cleanup frees space either way.

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 Clear Mail's Downloaded Attachments

If you use the Mail app, it can quietly store a copy of every attachment anyone ever sent you. Over years that becomes gigabytes. The messages stay on your email server, so clearing the local attachments is safe — Mail re-downloads one if you open it again.

- The Storage screen often lists "Mail" as a large category when this is the cause.
- Mail also has its own Trash and Junk folders that hold space until emptied.
- Emptying Mail's Trash and Junk is safe and frees room.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> Trimming Mail's hidden attachment store the right way, without losing anything you need, is a little fiddly on some setups. If Mail is showing as a big chunk of your disk and you would rather not poke around, that is a quick one for me to handle on a visit.

8 Find the Big Files Hiding Elsewhere

Sometimes a few enormous files — old videos, disk images, a forgotten backup — account for most of the problem. The Storage screen's review tools find these without you having to hunt.

1. In the Storage screen, open a category like Documents and sort by size.
2. Look for unusually large single files you recognize and no longer need.
3. Check for old device backups or large video files you have already saved elsewhere.
4. Delete only files you recognize and are sure about; empty the Trash afterward.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> If you see a file you do not recognize, leave it. Deleting unknown files to save space is how people accidentally remove something important. Stick to the large items you clearly recognize, and let the system handle the rest.

9 Where the Space Usually Hides on a Mac

If you are not sure where to begin, it helps to know the usual suspects. On most Macs, the same few places hold nearly all the recoverable room, and every one of them is safe to clear using the built-in tools.

Hiding spot	Why it fills up — and the fix
Photos library	Years of pictures and video — turn on iCloud "Optimize Mac Storage."
Downloads folder	Old installers and attachments — clear the big items, especially.dmg files.
Trash	Deleted files not yet removed — empty it (Photos and Mail have their own).

Mail attachments	A copy of everything ever emailed to you — empty Mail's Trash and Junk.
Old large files	Forgotten videos and disk images — find them in the Storage review tools.

Working down this short list recovers the great majority of space on a typical Mac. There is rarely any need to dig into system folders, which is also where people get into trouble by removing something they should not.

10 If the Mac Is Still Slow After Cleaning

Freeing space often makes a crowded Mac feel quicker, because it finally has room to work. But if the Mac is still sluggish once there is healthy free space, slowness and storage are two separate problems, and the cause is usually elsewhere.

- Too many programs opening at login — covered in our startup-programs guide.
- A browser with many tabs and extensions running at once.
- A macOS update waiting to be installed.
- A much older Mac that is simply near the end of its comfortable life.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> If the Mac is clean and up to date but still slow, I can tell you honestly whether a simple fix will help or whether the machine is near the end of its useful life — so you do not spend money chasing a problem that will not go away.

11 What You Should Never Delete

This is the part that keeps you safe. A few folders look like clutter but are the Mac's own machinery, and removing them can break the system or lose your settings. If you see these, leave them alone.

- The System and Library folders — these are the Mac's operating system.

- Anything labeled "System Data" in the Storage bar — the Mac manages this itself.
- Files whose names you do not recognize, especially outside your own Documents and Downloads.
- Application support files, unless you are deliberately removing an app you no longer use.

> **WATCH OUT**
> Be wary of "Mac cleaner" apps that pop up promising to speed things up or remove junk. Many are useless at best and scams at worst. Apple's own built-in Storage tools do everything a cleaner claims to, safely — you do not need to install anything.

12 Set the Mac to Manage Its Own Space

A few one-time settings keep the drive from filling up again, so you are not back here in a few months. These are the switches a pro would leave on for you.

- Turn on "Empty Trash Automatically" in the Storage recommendations.
- Keep iCloud Photos on with "Optimize Mac Storage."
- Make a habit of clearing Downloads and the Trash now and then.
- Restart the Mac occasionally — it clears temporary files and recounts free space.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> After a cleanup, a restart often shows more free space than you expected, because the Mac clears its own working files and the "System Data" figure settles down once it has a moment.

13 When to Call Bill

The steps here recover plenty of room safely, and you can stop as soon as the warning clears. But if the disk fills up again, if "System Data" or "Mail" is eating most of the space and you would rather not dig into it, or if you are simply not sure what is safe to remove, there is no need to risk it.

I come to you, clear the space safely without ever touching the parts that matter, make sure your photos and documents are backed up, and set the Mac up so it keeps its own space clear. You get a faster Mac and the certainty that nothing important was lost.

- The disk keeps filling up no matter what you clear.
- "System Data" or "Mail" is huge and you do not want to guess.
- You are unsure what is safe to delete and want a steady hand.
- A "cleaner" app is nagging you and you want to know if it is safe.

CHEAT SHEET

Everyday Cheat Sheet

Keep this by the Mac. Start with Apple's built-in tools; stop when the warning clears.

I want to...	Do this...
See where space went	Apple menu System Settings General Storage
Safe one-click wins	Use the "Recommendations" at the top of Storage
Free the obvious room	Empty the Trash; clear old installers from Downloads
Shrink Photos safely	Photos Settings iCloud Optimize Mac Storage
Clear Mail clutter	Empty Mail's Trash and Junk folders
Never delete	System, Library, "System Data," or unknown files
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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