What's a browser cache? How do you clear it? Why would you want to?

Even when following instructions to empty the cache, many people aren't clear on what this piece of magic really is, or why clearing the cache does anything at all.

The browser cache

The cache exists because of a basic assumption made by browser designers: the Internet is slow. More accurately, your internet *connection* is slower than your computer.

What that means is that it's faster to get something from your hard disk than it is to get it from the Internet.

Browser designers noticed that most web sites had many of the same elements on multiple pages. For example, if you look at a Web page, you may see a logo at the top. It may be at the top of *every* page on the site. So the thinking was, why download the same logo for every page? Why not just download it once and then keep it so we can use it again?

That's what the browser cache is for. The cache is nothing more than a place on your hard disk where the browser keeps things that it downloaded once in case they're needed again.

When you first visit a page on a Website, the browser downloads the logo into the cache, and then displays it on the page you're viewing. For each additional page you visit on that Website, the logo doesn't need to be downloaded again; as long as the same logo is displayed, it's already on your hard disk.

The cache has a size limit, which you can usually configure. When the cache gets full, the items in it that haven't been used in a while are discarded to make more space.

And it's all happening silently and transparently to you. Until something breaks, of course.

Clearing the cache

Clearing the cache just means emptying it, so that the next time you display a web page everything must be downloaded anew.

The cache sometimes gets confused. This seems to happen to all browsers and at random and inexplicable times. What you'll see are partially loaded or badly formatted web pages, incomplete pictures, or, in some cases, the wrong picture in the wrong place.

It's not always a caching problem, but because it happens often enough, "clear your browser cache" is often one of the first diagnostic steps you'll hear from techs.

Here's how to empty the cache.

CLEARING EDGE'S CACHE

Select the **...** icon in the top right corner of the browser window to get to the settings menu.

In the settings menu, towards the bottom, click on **Choose what to clear**.

Select **Cookies and saved website data** and **Cached data and files**. After the two are marked click on **clear**.

CLEARING INTERNET EXPLORER'S CACHE

Click the **Tools** menu (or click the gear icon in the upper right of the Internet Explorer window), and then the **Internet Options** menu item. In the resulting dialog box, under **Browsing History**, click the **Delete…** button.

In the resulting Delete Browsing History dialog, it's the **Temporary Internet files and website files** item that specifically refers to the browser cache, so check it. You can select or deselect other items as you see fit.

Once you've done so, click the **Delete** button. Your browser cache is now empty.

CLEARING FIREFOX'S CACHE

Click on the "hamburger menu" in the upper right, and then click on History.

In the resulting pop-up, click on the **Clear Recent History…** item.

In the resulting dialog box, change the "Time range to clear" to be **Everything**, and then make sure that only "Cache" is checked.

If you like, you can check other items to be cleared at the same time, but this focus is on the cache.

Click **Clear Now**. Your browser cache is now empty.

CLEARING CHROME'S CACHE

Click the hamburger menu icon at the top right of Chrome, and then click **Settings**.

On the resulting page, click on **Show advanced settings…** at the bottom of the page, and then, under Privacy, click on **Clear browsing data.**

In the resulting dialog, ensure that **Cached images and files** is selected (others are optional, but the focus here is on only the cache).

Also make sure that the "Obliterate the following items from:" drop-down menu is set to **the beginning of time** to clear the entire cache.

Click **Clear browsing data**.

Your browser cache is now empty.

AN EMPTY BROWSER CACHE

Your browser cache is empty. An empty cache means there's no confusion. As you visit webpages hereafter, the browser will download fresh copies of everything you see on each page. You have simply forced your browser to rebuild its cache from scratch as it loads or re-loads web pages. Any cache-related issues should be cleared up.