

Pros and Cons of Leaving Your Computer Turned On All the Time

It has been one of the most long-running discussions (arguments) in computing: Is it better to leave your PC turned on when you're not using it, or should you always turn it off?

There are actually some pretty solid arguments for either approach, meaning the answer depends on how, and how much, you use the computer. Let's take a look at some of the pros and cons.

Why You Should Leave Your Computer on All the Time

There are several good reasons why you should always leave your computer on. It's not just about being quicker to get started, but it can enhance the functionality of your PC too.

It's More Convenient

The main reason why you'd want to leave your computer on is for convenience. Rather than having to wait for it to boot, it's always ready to go.

A typical system will take around 30 seconds to a minute to boot into the operating system — depending on the specifications, of course. If you have a large number of programs that are set to launch on boot it'll be another minute or two before you can actually get to work.

Leaving the computer on bypasses this problem. Awakening your PC from Sleep mode will take just a few seconds, and all your previously launched apps will also still be running.

That said, the benefits are dependent on your computer's hardware. A PC with a solid state drive will have a significantly shorter boot time than an equivalent machine with a traditional hard drive. Depending on how your machine is configured, you may decide that booting is no great inconvenience.

Your Computer Will Stay up to Date

There are numerous tasks that are essential to maintaining your computer and data. Almost all of them are better off being performed overnight.

Installing operating system updates, creating backups, running virus scans, or uploading large amounts of data such as moving your music or photo collection to the cloud, all take some time and use varying amounts of system resources and bandwidth.

Leaving them to run while you're away from your computer, or even scheduling them to happen at night will keep you fully up to date without interfering with any other work you are doing.

You'll Always Have Access to It

Having your computer turned on all the time enables you to run certain pieces of software that would otherwise be off limits.

This includes remote access software, such as Remote Desktop in Windows, or a third party tool like LogMeIn. You'll never have to experience the frustration of leaving an important file on your desktop at home. You can just log in remotely on your phone or tablet and grab whatever you need.

Why You Shouldn't Leave Your Computer on All the Time

You probably turn all of your other electrical devices off when you've finished using them. And there are good reasons why you should do the same with your PC too.

Every Component Has a Limited Lifespan

It's a simple fact that every piece of hardware has a finite lifespan.

A monitor's backlight is typically rated for a lifespan in the tens of thousands of hours, the capacity of a laptop battery will noticeably be shorter with as few as 300 charge cycles; a solid-state drive is good for around 3000 program/erase cycles.

In reality, you will have upgraded your computer long before you hit any of these limits. But by leaving your computer on, you are putting it under a constant stress, albeit a small one. It's also generating heat, and that is one of the biggest factors in reducing the life of hardware.

It Wastes Power

It goes without saying that leaving something turned on when you aren't using it is a waste of energy. But how much?

There is a massive difference between the power consumption of a computer that is active, idle, or sleeping. Turning the monitor off saves a large amount of power, and putting it into Sleep mode saves even more. However, in Sleep mode you'll lose many of the benefits of leaving the computer on, such as being able to access it remotely.

It Won't Be at Risk from Power Surges and Cuts

Power surges and power cuts are a relatively rare but very easy way of damaging a computer.

Power surges are most often thought of as relating to lightning strikes, but can also be caused by high-power household appliances such as fridges. If the surge is great enough it can cause damage to any electrical items, not least the sensitive components in a computer.

You can guard against this by plugging the PC into a surge protector. These are recommended for general use anyway, but even more so if you plan to leave your computer on all the time.

Power cuts are harder to protect against. It's possible to buy an uninterruptible power supply (UPS), but these aren't really intended for consumer use. The hard drive is most prone to damage from a power cut, as this can cause a head crash where the disk is physically damaged. It'll only happen if the disk is in use at the time, so is a relatively minor risk. But a risk all the same.

Reboots Improve Performance

Back in the day, regular reboots were an integral part of the life of a computer user, just to stop the machine from grinding to a halt.

This is no longer the case. Modern operating systems are very adept at managing resources, and if you choose to never turn the PC off, you won't notice too much degradation of performance.

However, the reboot is still the most effective way of solving many of the day-to-day errors that you'll encounter. Whether it is an app that is crashing, or a printer that has mysteriously stopped working, a quick restart will often fix it.

Turning your computer off at the end of the day flushes the system and ensures you will start fresh and, hopefully, bug-free the following morning.

It's Quieter

Finally, and depending on where you keep your computer, you might want to turn it off simply because it is quieter. You can silence the alerts and notifications easily enough, but you'll still have the ambient noise from the fan, and the clicking hard drive to contend with.

Naturally, this won't be an issue with a modern, fanless laptop sporting low-power CPU and SSD. But for a more traditional desktop system, switching it off is the way to a peaceful life.

Wrap-up

There's no point turning your computer on and off several times a day, and there's certainly no harm in leaving it on overnight while you're running a full virus scan.

A computer will also benefit from being rebooted from time to time, and in the height of summer, it's a good idea to give it chance to cool down properly.

So, should you leave it on or turn it off? Ultimately, it depends on your needs. If you're going a few days without using it, then by all means power it down. But if you need it to be up and ready to go at all times, there's really little harm in leaving it on for as long as you need it.