

Computer maintenance

The key to trouble-free computing is to keep your system up to date, and promptly fix any problems. Rosemary Hattersley provides vital maintenance advice

Most of us expect our PCs to just work. It's a reasonable assumption, but an unrealistic one. There are so many variables to Windows and the hardware we use to run it that trouble-free use is a pipe dream. Once you start introducing different file types and installing programs, those variables multiply. In fact, it's usually software in some form that causes PCs to start behaving erratically.

This wouldn't be such a problem if Microsoft hadn't recently ceased active support for the most popular version of Windows, XP Service Pack 2 (SP2).

During the standard lifecycle of a Microsoft operating system (OS), support is provided via automatic or manual updates, meaning that known security issues are patched regularly and incremental upgrades

are applied as you go along. Microsoft routinely issues such patches and hotfixes on the first Tuesday of each month (known as Patch Tuesday). Users with Windows Update set to Automatic will find patches applied and their PC automatically restarting so the changes can take effect. Usually, these updates happen overnight or at some other convenient time so as not to interfere with anything you need to do on your PC.

XP SP2 and Vista SP1 are no more

From 13 July, however, such updates and security patches are no longer being issued for XP SP2. Nor can Vista SP1 users expect updates to their PCs from now on. Both OSes have entered the 'extended support' phase, meaning that only exceptionally critical

updates will be offered for either. Basically, unless not patching your XP SP2 PC will leave it and other PCs around it vulnerable, Microsoft won't actively help ensure it continues to run as you'd expect. From now on, the onus is on you to ensure that your Windows PC keeps on running.

Microsoft is keen not to leave XP and Vista users up the creek now that 'mainstream support' for older versions of the two OSes has ended. The best advice for PC users currently running Vista SP1 and XP SP2 is to upgrade to the latest SP update for each OS.

You can view more detailed information about Microsoft's support policies at tinyurl.com/yebau6h. For even more info on support lifecycles, visit tinyurl.com/mzk62.

In essence, Microsoft's advice is to get the latest SP installed so you can rest easy until 2014, when Windows XP SP3 support will end (Microsoft has no plans as yet to issue any further service packs for XP, but reserves the right to revise that stance further down the line). Windows Vista users upgrading to SP2 are given the same advice, except support for that OS is scheduled to end in 2012.

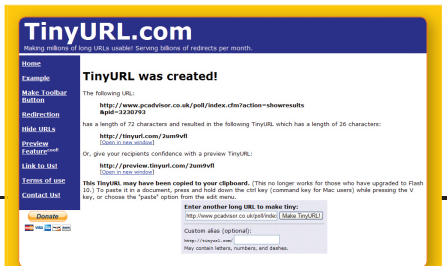
If you haven't got a reliable or sufficiently speedy web connection, you can request a CD or DVD with the relevant service pack on it. Go to tinyurl.com/5m4zwr for XP SP3, or tinyurl.com/n4v6hr for Vista SP2, and click the link to order a DVD. A small charge is made to cover the cost of shipping cost from the US (£5.98).

Tip-top shape

As well as installing the latest service pack, there are a couple of useful tools to help ensure your PC is as glitch-free as can be. First up is Fix it Center, a free download for XP and Vista and a variation of the Action Center in Windows 7 (tinyurl.com/y24ptxz).

As you'll see from the walkthrough on the **previous page**, Fix it Center scans your hard drive for issues and offers to troubleshoot any it finds. Rather than leaving you in the dark about what it intends to do to improve the running of your PC, it provides a breakdown of suggested actions.

Below, we take a look at CCleaner, a free utility that can clean up detritus from old software installations and prevent programs from launching when you fire up Windows. ☒



TINYURL EXPLAINED

You may have noticed that we've been using more and more tinyurl web links in the print edition of *PC Advisor*. These are short-link web addresses that make it easier to get to the websites we suggest. We use them to avoid having to publish - and you having to type in - lengthy URLs.

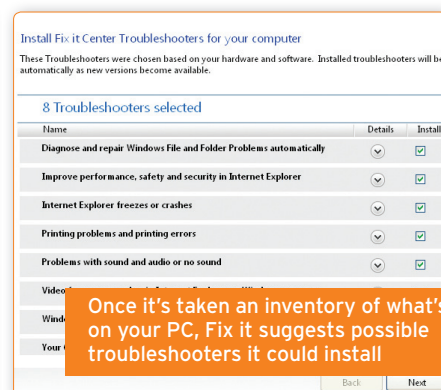
The tinyurl links we print have been created and verified by *PC Advisor*. If you want to be sure of the page that will open if you type in a short link, simply insert **preview**, before tinyurl.com/xxxxxx to see where your browser will be redirected.

MICROSOFT FIX IT CENTER

Download and install Fix it Center (fixitcenter.support.microsoft.com) and allow it to run a check of what's installed on your PC

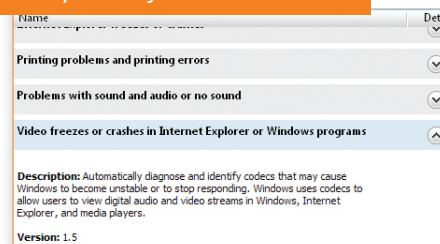


If you do not see a troubleshooter for your problem, click **Go to Microsoft Fix it Center Online** in the bottom of the Fix it Center window.

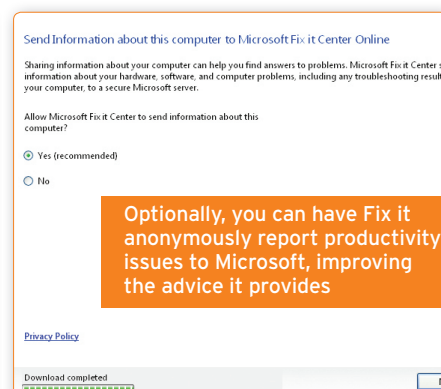


Once it's taken an inventory of what's on your PC, Fix it suggests possible troubleshooters it could install

Click on the arrow next to an item to view more details about the sorts of issues Fix it can address. Install as many or as few as you wish. Deselect items by clearing their tick boxes



Microsoft suggests creating an online account so future issues can be more readily addressed. You'll need a Windows Live ID. This can be based on any current email address

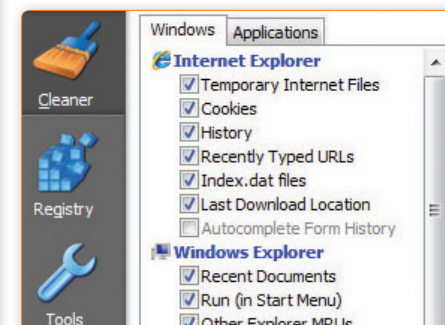
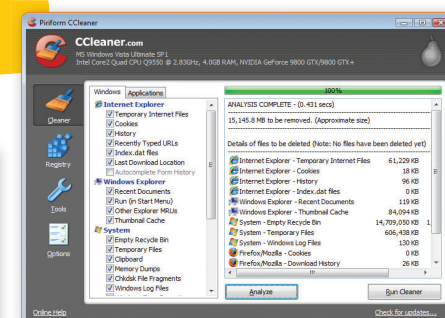


Optionally, you can have Fix it anonymously report productivity issues to Microsoft, improving the advice it provides

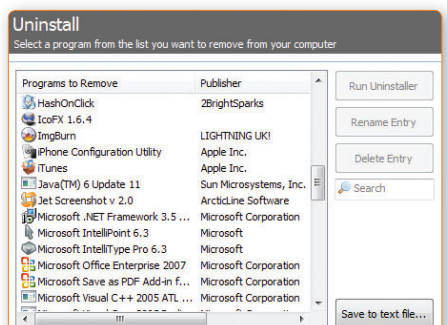
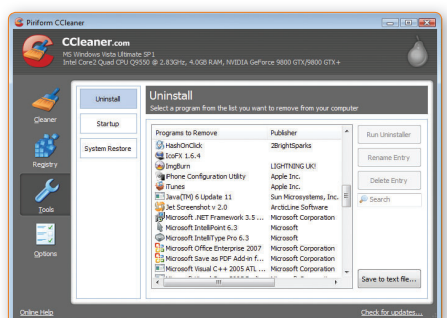
PIRIFORM CCLEANER



Download and install the free CCleaner (tinyurl.com/32mucs3). Allow it to scan your hard drive for rogue files and Registry debris



The Windows tab has a list of processes, temporary files and downloads that CCleaner can delete for you



Click on the Applications tab to view outdated programs that can be removed. It's a good alternative to the Windows Add/Remove Programs utility