

Larry Magid: How to delete what Google knows about you

But be aware that other companies are tracking you as well

[Larry Magid](#) May 26, 2022 at 8:18 a.m.

Like complaining about the weather, a lot of people complain about how Google impacts their privacy but, unlike the weather, there are things you can do about it.



Larry Magid

I'm not suggesting that Google doesn't collect too much information from people nor am I discouraging policymakers from looking into requiring the company to better protect users. But, as a baseline, everyone should know what information Google is collecting about them and what you can do to limit or delete that information.

Also, the information I'm writing about might not be all that Google collects, such as data it collects to display advertisements.

Search history

By default, Google keeps track of your search history when you're logged in. But they also have a page (myactivity.google.com/myactivity) that will report and let you delete your Google activity. When you land on that page, you can see your search history including Google web search and Google News. You can also see other activity in Google products, including Google Calendar, Gmail and use of any Android devices and apps that you've run on your

Android device. If you click on "Other activity," you're taken to a menu where you can also view YouTube activity and settings, location history, Google ad settings and much more, depending on which Google services you use.

For every activity, there is the ability to delete it from Google's history. You can delete just the last hour's activity, the last day, all time or set a custom range. When you delete activity, according to Google, "First, we aim to immediately remove it from view and the data may no longer be used to personalize your Google experience. We then begin a process designed to safely and completely delete the data from our storage systems." Because the process might not be instantaneous, there is a possibility that someone could unearth that data with a legal process such as a warrant, until it's completely gone from Google and its backup systems.

You can also turn off Google's ability to save your searches and other future activities. If you want even more privacy when using Google, you can use your browser's private or incognito mode and make sure you're not logged into your Google account. That will keep both your browser and Google from keeping a record of what you're doing, but it may not prevent websites you visit from tracking you (especially if you're logged in) or protect you from hackers or information collected by your internet service provider or your employer if you're using an employer-owned device or logged into your employer's virtual private network.

Location history can be revealing

Even if you're not concerned about security or privacy, location history can be very interesting because it lets you see a timeline of everywhere you've been if you have Google Maps on your phone. It goes back for years and shows you locations you've visited on a map, even if you didn't use Google Maps to navigate your way there. In April 2017, my wife and I took a driving

tour around Ireland, and I can see a daily breakdown of where we visited, a map of our entire drive and even photographs we took with our phone each day of the trip. I had long forgotten a meal we had at O'Sullivan's Courthouse Pub in Dingle on April 19, but it was one of the many details of that trip that showed up on the timeline. You can delete this information or prevent it from being collected in the first place but, personally, I'm glad it's there because it's not only fun to review my past travels, it can be useful if I'm trying to recall details of a business trip for income tax or reimbursement purposes. Recently, my wife asked me if I could recall a hotel we stayed at years ago, and I was able to find it by locating the city on a map and looking at my activity for that day.

A map of one-days travel around Ireland

Browser history

Like most browsers, Google Chrome keeps a history of sites you've visited. You can view that activity by clicking History from the three-dot menu in the upper right and click on specific sites to delete that record or Clear Browsing Data from the left menu. You might want to uncheck Cookies and Other Site Data, because it will log you out of most sites. If you do decide to delete those cookies (which may be a good idea for privacy reasons), be sure you know your user names and passwords because you'll have to re-enter them.

Android phone data

If you have an Android phone, Google has even more information about you, including what apps you're using and even more location data. Android also has a record of your incoming, outgoing and missed calls though — contrary to some internet rumors — it does not record your actual phone calls, although Google Voice users have the option of pressing 4 to record incoming calls, which will announce to the other caller that the call is being

recorded.

You can delete your call history or a record of any individual call. To delete your entire history, go to the dialer, select Recents, click on the three-dot menu to the right, select call history, click on the three-dot menu again and click Clear call history. To delete the history of all calls to or from a specific number, go to Recents, click on a call from that number, and select History.

iPhone users can learn how to delete calls from their device by Googling "[delete iphone call history](#)."

Removing information about you from Google search

If you do a Google search on your name, your home address or your phone number, there's a chance you'll find pages that reveal personal information that you might not want to be public. In some cases it can be [removed from Google search](#), but not all cases. Data that can be removed from search can include personal info, like ID numbers and private documents, nude or sexually explicit items, content about you on sites with exploitative removal practices, content that should be removed for legal reasons and imagery of an individual currently under the age of 18. This will not remove all information about you — just certain categories — and it will not remove it from the web — just from Google search results. Also, it's not automatic. You request the removal and Google decides if it will be removed based on their criteria.

Google isn't the only company tracking you

These instructions are only about information Google collects from you, but there is plenty of other information about you that you need to think about. Any of your apps, browsers or websites you visit could be collecting information, especially if you are logged in. Some cars (including Tesla) can

track where you've driven and, of course, your phone carrier has a log of your calls which could be unearthed by a warrant.

Disclosure: Larry Magid is CEO of ConnectSafely.org, a non-profit internet safety organization that receives financial support from Google and [other](#) technology companies.