

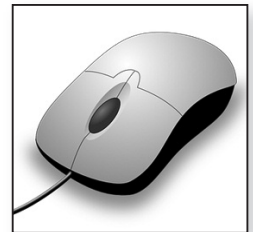
Discover Mouse Alternatives and Useful Tricks to Take the Pain Out of the Pointer

This article shows you how to:

- Use a different pointing device to relieve discomfort
- Make the mouse easier to use – or avoid it entirely!
- Find solutions for common mouse-related annoyances

The pointer is an inescapable part of Windows. An awful lot of what you want to do involves getting that little arrow to precisely the right part of the screen and then clicking. Most of us don't think twice about it, but for some users, controlling the pointer can be awkward or even painful.

If you're among those who struggle, don't despair! You may simply need a change of mouse, or perhaps you can take advantage of the Windows features that make it easier to control the pointer. Read on to discover how you can make the mouse less of a pain to use.



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Struggling with the Mouse? Try Something Different

Mouse use can be surprisingly painful!

I've been using computers daily for about 30 years, and before I took up writing most of my work involved heavy use of the mouse. Writing, of course, is largely a keyboard-driven activity. How peculiar, then, that about a few years ago I started getting pain through my right arm whenever I used the mouse for an extended period – a heavy bout of picture-editing, for instance, or dragging files around. Clearly my mouse arm feels it's had all it wants of this!

I'm not looking for sympathy – it's obviously my own silly fault. And given the number of ways one could be injured in the line of work, to do it while sitting at a computer does seem particularly daft.

RSI, arthritis and more cause difficulties

I simply mention this by way of explaining that I know exactly how painful it can be to use a mouse. Repetitive strain injury (RSI) of this sort can be caused by all sorts of things besides mouse use, but using a mouse can cause it to flare up. Likewise, arthritis and many other ailments can cause instant pain just reaching for the mouse, gripping it or trying to click a button.

Small changes can help...

If you suffer in this way, there are simple, practical things you can try which could make a difference, such as placing your mouse in a different position on your desk or raising or lowering your seat. But one thing that may not be helping matters is your mouse itself, especially if it's the mouse that came bundled with your PC.

... but perhaps you need a better mouse

Many of these bundled mice are small, flattish and completely symmetrical. Their small size requires you to squeeze your fingers inwards to grip them; being flat means there's no support for your hand, so your wrist and arm are taking the strain; and although a symmetrical shape should theoretically work for both

left- and right-handed users, in practice it works badly for everyone.

Along with these potentially pain-inducing flaws, there may be other irritations. Perhaps the mouse has a cord that's too short, or perhaps you're still using an old-style 'mechanical' mouse with a ball in its base which gathers up dust and hairs and causes the pointer to skip and judder. Leaving aside considerations of shape and size for the moment, choosing a wireless optical mouse can ease a lot of frustrations!



If you suspect that your mouse itself may not be doing you any favours, my suggestion is to consider replacing it. That's an easy job, since almost any mouse (or mouse-like device) you buy will plug into a USB socket, so it's usually just a matter of unplugging the old one and plugging in the new. In most cases, Windows will recognise the new device automatically and have it set-up and working within a few seconds. (Nevertheless, read any instructions that come with the new device: it may be supplied with software – known as a 'driver' – which has to be installed before you plug it in.)

Usually easy to replace

Indeed, there's nothing to stop you having two mice (or two mouse-like devices) connected at the same time and switching back and forth between them.

So, what options do you have for controlling that on-screen pointer in a more comfortable way?

- **Ergonomic mouse:** in fact, apart from those dreadful mice that often come supplied with a new PC, most mice could now be described as 'ergonomic', in that they're sized and shaped to fit the contours of the hand and provide support. I can't offer any solid recommendations of make and model since there are all sorts of different ideas about which shapes

A mouse that's sculpted to your hand

and sizes work best, and some will obviously work better for your own hand than others. Computer shops like PC World will probably have a good selection on display for you to try out yourself.

A mouse for left-handed use



- **Left-handed mouse:** since it's widely recognised that a mouse should be a sculpted shape that fits the hand, the same shape clearly won't work for both the left and the right hand! If you're left-handed, look for a left-handed mouse.

You may not be able to find left-handed mice and other specialised items in a shop to try-before-you-buy. Therefore, you'll often have to rely on online research and user reviews to guess at the suitability of a particular device and then buy it from a store that has a reasonable returns policy such as Amazon (www.amazon.co.uk).

A non-traditional shape

- **Vertical mouse:** this is the solution I settled on myself – specifically the 'Anker Wireless Vertical Mouse' pictured to the right, although there are various other takes on the same idea from other manufacturers. It's rather like a traditional mouse turned on its side, placing the hand in a more natural position that puts less stress on the wrist.



Try a mouse alternative: a graphics tablet...

- **Touchpad or graphics tablet:** you're probably familiar with the touchpad in notebook computers – a rectangular, touch-sensitive plastic area with which you control the pointer by swiping a finger. You can buy these as separate items that plug into a USB socket for use with any computer. As stand-alone items like this, they're usually known as 'graphics

tablets' rather than 'touchpads', and they're available at all sorts of different sizes. If you find a mouse truly uncomfortable, a graphics tablet may be a good solution. I suggest choosing one that's at least six inches square.

- **Trackball:** this used to be described as an 'upside-down mouse' back in the days when mice had a ball in their base. A trackball sits in one place on your desk, thus taking up a lot less space, and has a ball on top. Rolling the ball moves the on-screen pointer, and that takes much less wrist movement. Companies like Kensington (www.kensington.com) offer a good selection, such as the Orbit® Optical Trackball (pictured), and you should find the odd example to try in computer shops and plenty more in online stores.



... or a trackball

- **Touchscreen monitor:** the touch-sensitive screen is no longer just the preserve of the tablet PC and mobile phone – you can buy full-size monitors with touchscreens too, and for as little as £200. Here, of course, you're not just replacing your mouse but your monitor too (although, if you have the space and a reasonably-recent PC, you may well be able to plug this in alongside your existing monitor and have double the screen area). I suspect, too, that a touchscreen couldn't completely replace a mouse for most of us, since some tasks require finer control than a finger can manage, but it may make your choice of mouse less significant as you shouldn't have to use it as often.

A touchscreen could mean you need the mouse less often

In all the suggestions above, I've assumed you're using a desktop PC with its traditional reliance on a mouse. But perhaps you're using a notebook



and you can't get along with its touchpad, or you're using a tablet and you struggle to get things done on its touch-sensitive screen. In either case, you could certainly connect a mouse, trackball or graphics tablet if you need to: all you need is a spare USB socket.

Left Handed? Swap the Mouse Buttons Over!

The buttons are the wrong way round

Windows is set up for right-handed users, and that becomes apparent when you're using the mouse. The 'primary mouse button', used for clicking things, is the button on the left, and the 'secondary button', for right-clicking, is the button on the right.

For right-handers, that's ideal: the primary button naturally sits under the strong index finger, and the secondary button under the middle finger.

Swap them over for left-handed use

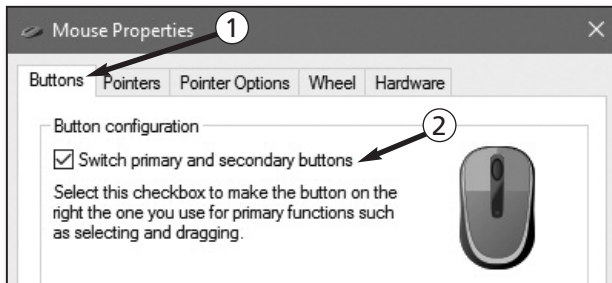
But if you're using a mouse with your left hand, those fingers are reversed: you'll 'click' with your middle finger and 'right-click' with your index finger. That's far from perfect, and fortunately you don't have to put up with it. You can tell Windows to swap the buttons over so that the 'primary button' becomes the one on the right, sitting under the index finger of your left hand. Here's how to do that:



1. Start by opening the Control Panel:
 - **Windows 10 or 8.1:** press the **Win** key, type the word **control** and click the link to **Control Panel** that appears.
 - **Windows 7:** open the Start menu and click **Control Panel**.
2. In the Control Panel window, click the large heading **Hardware and Sound**. Then, below the 'Devices and

Printers' heading on the next page, click the smaller word **Mouse**.

3. This opens the 'Mouse Properties' dialog pictured below. In this dialog, switch to the **Buttons** tab ① (if that tab isn't already selected for you). *Go to the Buttons tab*
4. Using the left mouse button, click on **Switch primary and secondary buttons** ② to tick the checkbox beside it. *Switch the buttons over*



5. As soon as you do this, Windows switches your mouse buttons over: to 'click' something from now on you'll use the mouse's right button (the one under your index finger if you're using the mouse with your left hand). With this in mind, click the **OK** button at the bottom of this dialog, and then close the Control Panel window by clicking the x in its top-right corner. *The change is immediate!*

Mouse Keys: Pointer Control from the Keyboard

I mentioned earlier that there are all sorts of alternatives to the traditional mouse. But perhaps you can't get on with any of them, or perhaps – since trying any of them probably involves spending money – you'd rather try a free alternative first.

Use the keyboard in place of the mouse

*Move and click
with the
numeric keypad*

That alternative is a feature named Mouse Keys which lets you use the keyboard to control the movement of the on-screen pointer and to generate 'clicks' and 'right-clicks'. This uses your keyboard's numeric keypad, so it's best suited to full-size keyboards which have a separate numeric keypad to the right of the letter keys.

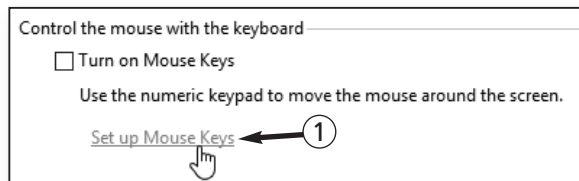


Smaller keyboards do not have a numeric keypad, but it involves making a group of the letter keys do double-duty. When Num Lock is switched on to enable the numeric keypad, the letters U, I, O, J, K, L and M (or similar) stop producing letters and instead produce numbers. Since you'll obviously want to type those letters at times, you'll have to turn the Mouse Keys feature on and off as needed, whereas users with a separate numeric keypad could leave it switched on permanently.

If you'd like to try Mouse Keys, here's what to do:



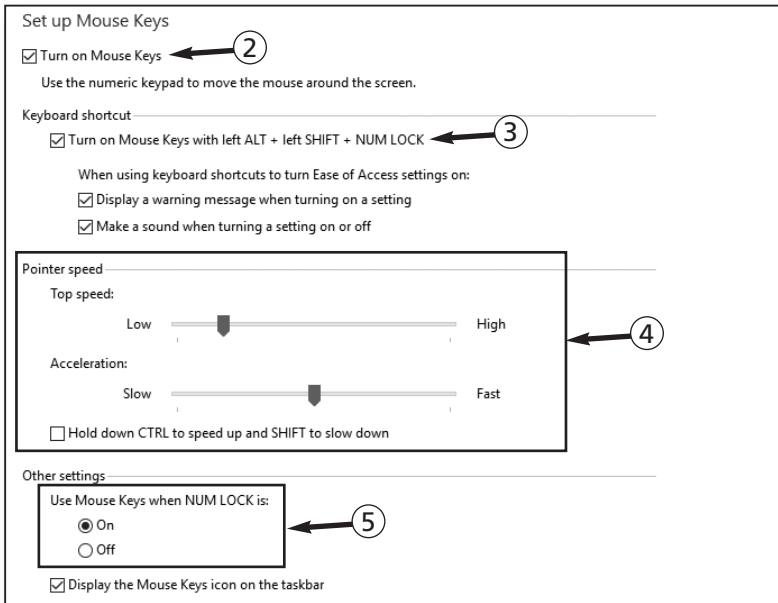
1. Open the Control Panel by following step 1 on page 6.
2. In the Control Panel window, click the large heading **Ease of Access**. On the next page, below the 'Ease of Access Centre' heading, click the smaller words **Change how your keyboard works**.
3. In the section near the top of the window, headed 'Control the mouse with the keyboard', click the words **Set up Mouse Keys** ①.



*Switch on the
Mouse Keys feature*

4. This leads you to a page titled 'Set up Mouse Keys', pictured below. Start by ticking the box beside **Turn**

on **Mouse Keys** ② and then adjust the options as you choose. I'll explain the ones that matter:



- **Turn on Mouse Keys with left ALT + left SHIFT + NUM LOCK** ③: I recommend leaving a tick in this box and keeping that key combination in mind, especially if you have one of those smaller keyboards without a separate numeric keypad. This way, you can press **Alt+Shift+Num Lock** (using the Alt and Shift keys on the left side of the keyboard) to turn Mouse Keys on or off as needed. *A key combination to toggle it on and off*
- **Pointer speed** ④: there's no point in adjusting the sliders in this section at the moment, since they may be fine as they are – you won't know till you try out Mouse Keys! But you can return here at any time and adjust them. The **Top speed** slider specifies how fast the mouse moves when you press direction keys on the numeric keypad, and *You can fine-tune the pointer speed*

Should Num Lock be on or off?



Acceleration sets how much faster the mouse moves when you hold a direction key down. If you tick the checkbox below the sliders, which is worth doing, you can make the pointer move more quickly or slowly by combining those direction keys with the **Ctrl** or **Shift** key respectively.

- **Use Mouse Keys when NUM LOCK is On/Off** ⑤: the Mouse Keys feature is only enabled when Num Lock is either on or off, and here you can choose which it should be. If you plan to switch the feature on and off using the key combination further up the page ③, it doesn't matter much which you choose.

If your keyboard has a separate numeric keypad, here's a suggestion: choose **Off** here and you can probably ignore the key combination ③. Whenever you want to use Mouse Keys, turn off Num Lock; when you need to use the numeric keypad to type numbers and arithmetic symbols, turn it back on. (It means you won't ever be able to use the numeric keypad for its subsidiary purpose – an additional set of Home/End/Page/Insert/Delete keys – but you quite likely never use it for that purpose anyway.)

Try it out and make adjustments if needed

5. Click the **Apply** button at the bottom of the window. This puts these new settings into effect and switches on Mouse Keys, but it keeps this window open. You can now try out the Mouse Keys feature and see what you think of it. If you need to adjust the pointer speed, you can use the sliders ④ to do so and click **Apply** again. And, of course, if you decide straight away that you won't get on with it, you can turn it off again by removing the tick near the top of the page ②. When you're finally happy with your choices – whatever they may be – you can close this window by clicking the **x** in its top-right corner.

So, with Mouse Keys switched on, how do you use it? First, make sure Num Lock is switched on or off, according to which you chose for ⑤ above, and then use these keys to move the pointer around:

Move the pointer

Direction	Key
Diagonally up and left	7
Straight up	8
Diagonally up and right	9
Left	4
Right	6
Diagonally down and left	1
Straight down	2
Diagonally down and right	3

When you want to 'click' or 'drag' something after moving the pointer to it, there are two steps involved. First, choose which button to 'click' with by pressing the appropriate arithmetic key on the numeric keypad:

Specify a mouse button to use...

Mouse button	Key
Left	/ (divide)
Both	* (multiply)
Right	- (minus)

Then do this to click or drag-and-drop an item:

... and click or drag

Action	Key
Click or right-click	5
Double-click	+ (plus)
Start dragging an item	0
Drop the item (after moving the pointer to the required position)	. (decimal point)



When you've chosen a 'mouse button' to use by pressing the divide, multiply or minus key, it remains set as your 'active button'. So, to perform a number of left-clicks in sequence, you need only press the divide key once. Thereafter, you can use the direction keys to move around and the 5 key to 'click' each time.

ClickLock: No Need to Hold Down a Button

Not easy to move the mouse with a button pressed?

For some users, moving the mouse isn't too troublesome, and performing a brief click is reasonably easy, but doing both at the same time – dragging the mouse while holding down a button – is awkward. That makes it difficult to drag icons from one place to another, for example, and to select text by swiping the mouse over it.

ClickLock could help

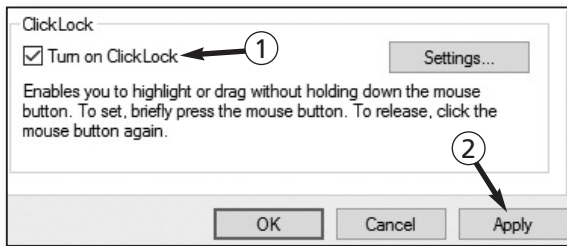
If you find this troublesome, a feature named ClickLock can help. With ClickLock switched on, you move the pointer to the item you want to drag, or to the place in the text where you want to begin highlighting, and then perform a long click, holding the left mouse button down for a second or two. This 'locks' the click, making Windows behave as if the button is still pressed when you release it. You then move the mouse as necessary to perform the drag or selection, and give the mouse button a brief click afterwards to 'unlock' it.

If this ClickLock feature sounds useful, here's how to switch it on:



1. Start by opening the Control Panel and making your way to the **Buttons** tab of the 'Mouse Properties' dialog by following steps 1–3 on pages 6 & 7.

- Near the bottom of the dialog, tick the box beside **Turn on ClickLock** ① and then click the **Apply** button ②. This switches on the ClickLock feature while keeping this dialog open in front of you.



- Now put it to the test. Move any open windows on your screen so that you can see one of the icons on your desktop – the Recycle Bin icon perhaps – and we'll try dragging it a little way.
- Move the pointer to the icon you've chosen and press the left button for longer than you normally do when you click something.
- Now move the mouse an inch or two, towards a blank space on the desktop: you should find you're dragging the icon as you do this. When the pointer is over any blank space on the desktop, give the left button a quick click and this 'unlocks' the mouse button and drops the icon you were dragging.
- Did it work? If not, you didn't perform a long-enough 'long click' in step 4 to select the icon, but that's not your fault: it's simply that Windows is currently expecting a longer click. To fix that, click the **Settings** button alongside the check-box you ticked in step 2. In the tiny dialog that opens,

Try this exercise

Need to adjust the length of 'long click'?



you can use the slider to choose how long you need to hold the left button to 'lock' it. Adjust this as necessary, click **OK** followed by **Apply** and then try repeating the exercise above.

- Done* 7. When you've fine-tuned the ClickLock feature until you're happy with it (or, if you can't get along with it, switched it off by unticking its checkbox ①), click **OK** at the bottom of the dialog and then close the Control Panel window by clicking the **x** in its top-right corner.

Easy Solutions to Common Mouse Annoyances

Cure those little mouse irritations

Perhaps you don't especially want to escape the mouse itself, but there may well be times when it drives you up the wall! We all have exasperating moments when we ask 'Why on earth has it done that?' or 'Why won't it do this?', so let's find solutions for some of those irritations.

Moving a window causes it to jump to the top of the screen and resize itself

A window moves and resizes...

All you want to do is drag a window a little distance, but it suddenly jumps to the top of the screen, or to one side, and changes size to cover the whole desktop or one half of it.

... if you drag it to an edge of the screen

This happens when the title bar of the window gets close to one edge of the screen while you drag it. You can prevent the window from being snatched away from you by taking no notice and continuing to drag – or, if you were caught by surprise and let go of the mouse button, by dragging the window away from where it landed.

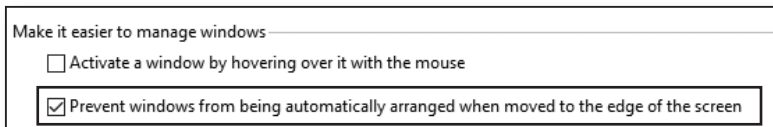
You can prevent this

However, if this behaviour annoys you, you can turn it off so that Windows will never try to do this. Here's how:

1. Open the Control Panel by following step 1 on page 6.
2. In the Control Panel window, click the large heading **Ease of Access**. On the next page, below the 'Ease of Access Centre' heading, click the smaller words **Change how your mouse works**.
3. Scroll to then bottom of the page if necessary and you'll see a checkbox whose label begins **Prevent windows from being automatically arranged**. Tick that box.



Tick this box

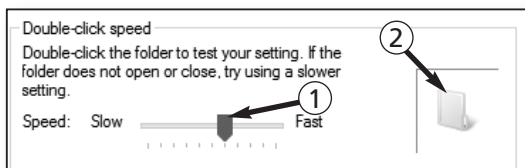


4. Finally, click **OK** and then close the Control Panel window.

Some of my double-clicks are ignored

It happens to all of us, often because we don't always double-click at quite the same speed. If most of your double-clicks don't work, you can follow steps 1–3 on pages 6 & 7 to open the Mouse Properties dialog and use the slider ① in the middle of the dialog to adjust the double-click speed (and the folder icon beside it ② to test a few double-clicks).

Having to double-click several times?



But there's an alternative. If you've double-clicked something a couple of times and Windows just doesn't seem to be taking you seriously, press **Enter** on your

*Just press **Enter** instead!*

keyboard. One thing you certainly achieved with all those clicks was to select the item you want to double-click, and pressing **Enter** does the same thing to a selected item as double-clicking it.

The mouse gets over-excited when selecting long passages of text!

If you try to select a large amount of text which involves dragging the mouse over several paragraphs, you can find that the selection suddenly extends downwards at a great rate of knots, selecting page after page!

A controlled way to select text

What you need is a more controlled method of doing it. Click at the beginning of the first word you want to select, so that the cursor is flashing to its left. Next (without accidentally clicking elsewhere!), scroll down to find the end of the text you want to select. When you can see it, hold down the **Shift** key and click to the right of the last word: this selects everything between those two clicks.

The pointer often gets in the way while I read what I've typed

Windows has a useful option to hide the mouse pointer as soon as you start typing and only reveal it again when you move the mouse a tiny distance, and that's well worth switching on.

Make the pointer vanish while you're typing

Follow steps 1 & 2 on pages 6 & 7 to open the 'Mouse Properties' dialog, and then switch to its **Pointer Options** tab. Near the bottom of the dialog, in the 'Visibility' section, tick the box beside **Hide pointer while typing**. Click **OK** and then close the Control Panel window and you're done.