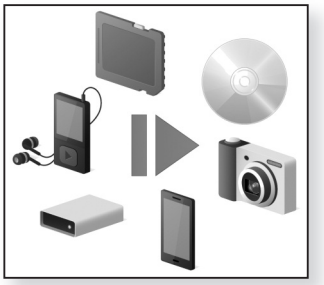
AutoPlay Devices: Stay in Control

Choose What Happens When You Insert a Disk or Connect a Device to Your PC

This article shows you how to:

- Check whether or not AutoPlay is switched on
- Choose what your PC does when you insert CDs, DVDs, flash drives, cameras and more
- Solve common problems with AutoPlay



Even if you didn't know its name, you've certainly encountered AutoPlay. Whenever you insert a CD or DVD, or connect a device such as a flash drive or a digital camera, the AutoPlay feature leaps into action. It either asks what you want to do or it starts doing something automatically – playing the CD, perhaps, or copying photos from the camera. The trouble is, it might start doing the wrong thing, or do nothing at all and leave you scratching your head! In this article, I'll explain how to set up AutoPlay the way you want it in Windows 10, 8.1, 7 and Vista, and show you how to solve all the common AutoPlay problems.

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AutoPlay Basics: How It Works

You insert a disc because you want to use it

If you insert a music CD into your computer's CD/DVD drive, it's almost certainly because you want to listen to it. If you connect a flash drive to one of your PC's USB sockets, you probably want to see and use the files it contains, or copy more files to it. And if you connect your digital camera, you're probably intending to copy your latest photos to your PC. It's unlikely that you'd insert a disc or connect a device and not want to use it in some way.

AutoPlay offers helpful actions you can take

The aim of the AutoPlay feature is to help you do what you want quickly and easily. While you could do any of the things I've mentioned above with a certain amount of clicking around, AutoPlay can do them for you automatically. So, for instance, if you insert an audio CD, the AutoPlay feature can open Windows Media Player for you and start playing the CD without your having to lift a finger.

Example: inserting a CD

To explain the basics of AutoPlay, let's take the example that you've just inserted a CD. After a few seconds' pause for the disc to spin up to speed, AutoPlay takes a look at it to see what it contains. It may be an audio CD, a software CD you've bought in a computer shop, or a blank CD, and AutoPlay needs to see what it's dealing with before it can decide what to do.

Having carried out this quick check, one of three things will happen:

AutoPlay asks what you'd like to do…

- You'll see a prompt or a dialog on the screen which asks what you want to do with this CD and gives you a choice of actions (including the option to do nothing at all).

… or takes your default action…

- AutoPlay will carry out your 'default action' – whatever you've previously specified should happen automatically for this type of CD – without stopping to ask questions.

- AutoPlay won't do anything at all if you've previously specified that AutoPlay should 'Take no action' for this type of CD.

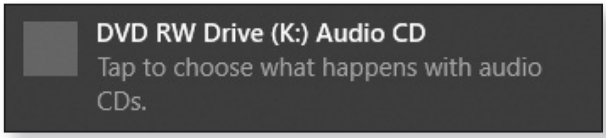
… or it may do nothing

The way this happens varies according to which version of Windows you're using, so let's take a more detailed look at what happens in each version.

Windows 10 and 8.1: dealing with AutoPlay notifications

This notification appears

In the two latest versions of Windows, shortly after you insert a CD or DVD, or connect a device such as a flash drive or digital camera, a rectangular notification like the one below will appear at the right of your screen:



Click it to see the AutoPlay dialog

This notification only remains on your screen for a few seconds, so be ready for it! Click it with the left mouse button and you'll see a dialog like this:

This dialog presents a choice of actions

This dialog lets you choose what you'd like to do with the disc or device. Of course, the options vary according to exactly what it is you've inserted or connected (I've inserted an audio CD in the example above). They can also vary according to what software is installed on your computer, because some of your programs might add their own options for certain types of disc or device. As you can see, I have options to play the CD using several different programs.

If you don't want to do anything at all with the disc or device you've connected, just ignore the rectangular notification and leave it to vanish after a few seconds. Alternatively, if you clicked the notification and then decided you don't want to use any of the actions offered in the dialog, press the **Esc** key (or click anywhere outside the dialog) to dismiss it.

Choose the action you want

Now, let's assume you want to listen to the audio CD, so you click on **Play audio CD|Windows Media Player**. Just as you'd hope, this dialog vanishes, and Windows Media Player opens and begins playing your CD. Perfect!

This action is stored and used next time too

However, something else also happens. AutoPlay remembers the choice you've just made, and every time you insert an audio CD in future, it will immediately open Windows Media Player and start playing it. In other words, the option you've just chosen becomes your 'default action' for audio CDs: you won't see that rectangular notification or be given the option to do anything different with an audio CD.

In some cases, this situation is probably fine. For an audio CD, perhaps the only thing you ever want to do is play it, so you're happy that this now happens automatically every time.

This could be annoying!

In other cases, though, it might just be annoying. Perhaps the first time you connected a flash drive you chose **Take**

no action, and now AutoPlay has remembered that choice, with the result that nothing at all happens when you connect a flash drive.

The way out of this irritating situation is to change AutoPlay's settings, and I'll explain how to do that on page 6.

Windows 7 and Vista: dealing with the AutoPlay dialog

The AutoPlay dialog appears

In Windows 7 or Windows Vista, soon after you insert a CD or DVD, or connect a device such as a flash drive or a digital camera, you'll see an AutoPlay dialog like this:

The dialog presents a choice of actions

This dialog lets you choose what you'd like to do with the disc or device. Of course, the options vary according to exactly what it is you've inserted or connected (I've inserted a CD containing a collection of audio files in the example above). They can also vary according to what software is installed on your computer, because some of your programs might add their own options for certain types of disc or device.

The most important thing in this dialog is that checkbox near the top labelled **Always do this for audio files**:

Carry out the same action every time?

- If you tick this box, the option you click below it becomes your 'default action' for this type of disk or device. For example, if I ticked that box and then chose **Play using Windows Media Player**, then every time I insert a disc of audio files in future, they'll automatically begin playing: I won't see this AutoPlay dialog or be given any choice in the matter.

Or continue to be given a choice?

- If you don't tick this box, the option you click below it will only happen this time. For example, if I choose **Play using Windows Media Player**, I'll be able to play the music on this CD, but next time I insert a CD of audio files, I'll see the AutoPlay dialog again and I'll be able to choose the same option or a different one.

If you don't want to do anything at all when this dialog appears – or, at least, none of the things it offers – just close it by clicking the **x** in its top-right corner.

The key, then, is only to tick the box beside **Always do this for**… if you're certain that the action you're about to choose is the one you'll want to use every time you insert the same type of disc or device in future.

Of course, we all make mistakes or change our minds about things, and you might easily find yourself stuck with an action occurring that you never (or rarely) actually want! You can fix this by changing AutoPlay's settings, so let's explore those.

Set AutoPlay to Work the Way You Want

AutoPlay should save you time…

From reading the last few pages, you'll have gathered that AutoPlay can be a helpful time-saver. Either entirely automatically, or with just a click or two, it can do something useful with a disc you've inserted or a device you've connected.

… but it could do the opposite!

But, just as easily, it could become an annoyance. In Windows 10 or 8.1, that happens very easily indeed, since the first action you choose for a particular type of disc or device becomes the 'default action' that's used for it every time. In Windows 7 or Vista, it happens less easily because you have to tick the box beside **Always do this for**…, but you might well have done that and later come to regret it.

Fix problems in AutoPlay's settings

Fortunately, your choices for AutoPlay aren't permanent. You can change one particular action that AutoPlay keeps using, or, better still, work through the options to ensure you'll always be given a choice about what to do. Here's how:

1. **Windows 10 or 8.1:** right-click the Start button (or press the key combination **Win+X**) and choose **Control Panel** from the menu that appears.

   Windows 7 or Vista: open the Start menu and click on **Control Panel**.

2. In the Control Panel window, click on **Hardware and Sound** and then on **AutoPlay**.

3. This takes you to something that looks much like the screenshot on the next page. It varies a little according to your version of Windows, but the essentials are all the same.

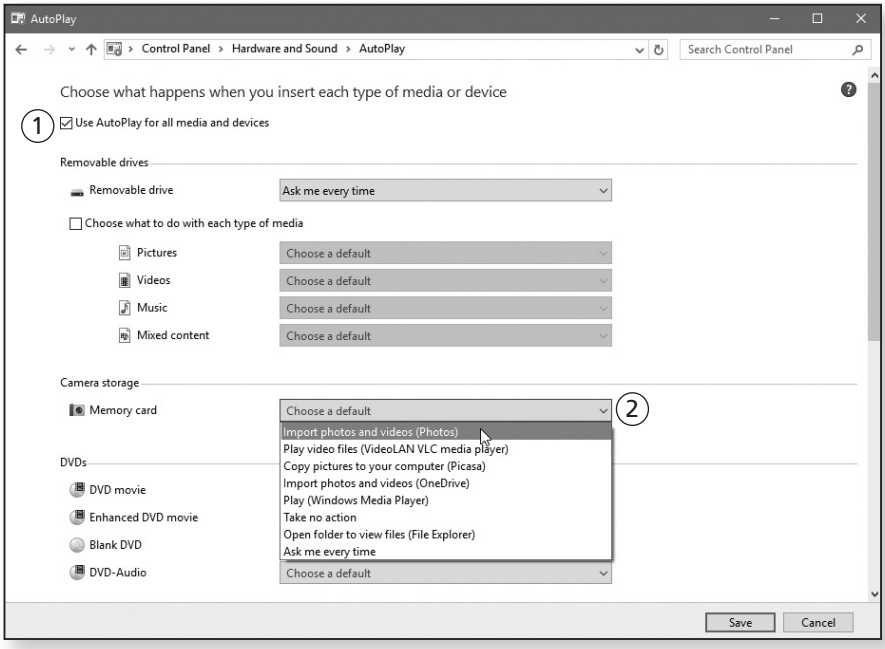
Make sure AutoPlay is switched on

4. The first thing to do is to make sure there's a tick in the checkbox beside **Use AutoPlay for all media and devices** ①. Removing this tick switches off AutoPlay completely, meaning that nothing will ever happen when you insert discs or connect devices.

Various types of media and their actions

5. Below this checkbox, the window contains a collection of drop-down lists, each with a short description to its left. These are all the different types of discs and devices AutoPlay can recognise, such as

removable drives, digital cameras, audio CDs, blank DVDs or CDs, and disks containing mostly pictures, videos or music. For each of these different types, you can open the drop-down list and choose what action AutoPlay should take ②.



*Is anything set to **Take no action**?*

6. The first thing I recommend is to have a quick look through this column of drop-down lists and see whether any are set to **Take no action**, meaning that AutoPlay wouldn't do anything at all if you inserted this type of disc or device. If you find one that does say **Take no action**, open that drop-down list and choose **Ask me every time** instead: this ensures that AutoPlay will take notice of this type of disc and display the rectangular notification (in Windows 10/8.1) or AutoPlay dialog (in Windows 7/Vista) to let you choose what to do with it.

7. Next, look down the column again to see whether you've chosen a particular action for a certain disc or device and, if you have, whether you're happy with that choice. For example, if you've set the option for **Blank CD** to **Burn an audio CD**, are you sure that's what you'll want to do with every blank CD you insert? If so, that's fine; if not, change it to **Ask me every time** so that whenever you insert a blank CD you'll be asked what to do with it.

Are you happy with other actions you've set?

In Windows 10 and 8.1, the options below the **Removable drives** heading near the top need a quick explanation. You can choose a single action from the drop-down list beside **Removable drive** which will apply to every removable drive you connect, regardless of what it contains. Alternatively, you can tick the box beside **Choose what to do with each type of media** and then use the four items below to choose different actions according to whether the drive contains pictures, music, videos, or a mixture of different files.

8. There's one final thing worth doing, especially if you're using Windows 10 or 8.1. See whether any of those drop-down lists still say **Choose a default**. If they do (and quite a few probably still do), open them and choose **Ask me every time** instead. This gets around that annoyance I mentioned earlier about the latest versions of Windows – that as soon as you've chosen an action for a certain type of disc or device, Windows does that every time rather than asking. Now, you really will be able to choose what you want to do every time.

*Don't leave anything set at **Choose a default***

9. When you've finished choosing options in the various drop-down lists, click the **Save** button at the bottom and then close the Control Panel window by

Save your changes and close the window

clicking the **x** button in its top-right corner. Needless to say, you can come back and make other changes in the same way whenever you need to.

Troubleshooting: When Things Go Wrong with AutoPlay

You can do without AutoPlay…

As I mentioned earlier in this article, AutoPlay really is just a time-saver – it doesn't do anything you couldn't do yourself with a few clicks. So, if AutoPlay takes the wrong action or does nothing at all, you could just shrug it off and manually open the program you wanted to use with that disc or device.

… but you get used to having its help!

Nevertheless, you can get so used to the way AutoPlay helps that you feel rather lost when it doesn't work as it should, so here's a quick run-through of the most-likely problems you'll have with it:

The AutoPlay notification vanished before I could click it!

Too late to click the notification…

This must be a common problem in Windows 10 and 8.1. When you insert a disc or connect a device, there's a pause of a few seconds and then that rectangular **Tap to choose what happens** notification appears – but only for a few seconds. If you're too late to click it, what then?

… or accidentally close the dialog

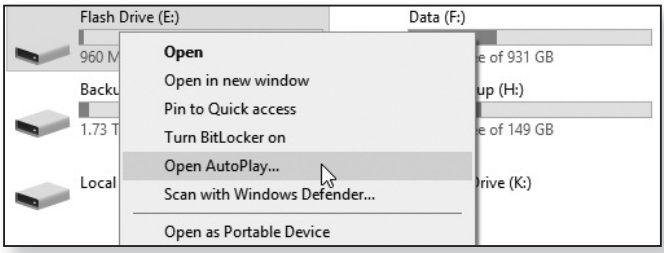
Similarly, in any version of Windows, after AutoPlay's list of possible actions appears, you might accidentally close it before getting around to choosing something. In either case, here's what to do:

1. Press **Win+E** to open File Explorer (also known as Windows Explorer).
2. In the File Explorer window, do you see the icons for your computer's drives? If not, at the left of the window click on **This PC** (in Windows 10 or 8.1) or **Computer** (in Windows 7 or Vista) to see them on the right.

3. Now find the icon for the disc or device you just inserted. When you find it, right-click it.

4. On the context menu that appears, do you see an **Open AutoPlay** item? If you do, click it and the AutoPlay dialog will appear – you can ignore the remaining steps below.

Displays its AutoPlay dialog



5. If you don't see that item, click **Eject** instead. If you'd inserted a CD or DVD, this pops out the disc. If it was some other device, you'll see a message that it's safe to remove this device: when that message appears, unplug the device.

No luck? Eject and reinsert

6. Now pop the disc back in, or reconnect the device, and you'll be back at square one, ready to click the notification (in Windows 10 or 8.1) and select an option from the AutoPlay dialog.

AutoPlay always does the wrong thing with this disc or device, without asking

The wrong action is set to happen

If you've chosen a 'default action' for a particular type of disc or device, AutoPlay will take this action every time without displaying a notification or dialog. If it's an action you no longer want, follow the steps on page 7 to find that disc or device in the list and choose a different action (ideally **Ask me every time**).

Force the AutoPlay dialog to appear when needed

Alternatively, you can do this: just before you insert the disc or connect the device, press and hold the left **Shift** key on your keyboard (it must be the **Shift** key at the left,

not the right, of your keyboard). This tells AutoPlay to ignore any default action and display the AutoPlay dialog instead: keep that **Shift** key held down until the AutoPlay dialog appears, and then use the dialog to choose the action you want.

Nothing happens when I insert a disc or connect a device

Is AutoPlay switched off?

If AutoPlay never does anything, regardless of the type of disc or device you connect, it suggests that the AutoPlay feature has been switched off. To fix this, follow steps 1–4 on page 7 to tick the box beside **Use AutoPlay for all media and devices** and then click **Save** and close the window.

If that doesn't help, or if that option was already ticked, AutoPlay has probably got itself confused and stopped working. The best solution – as with many niggly problems in Windows – is to restart your computer.

*Is it set to **Take no action?***

If AutoPlay seems to ignore just one type of disc or device (or just a few types), but it does work with others, you've probably told AutoPlay to 'Take no action' for that type of item. Again, follow the steps on page 7 to open AutoPlay's settings and see whether any of the drop-down lists are set to **Take no action**. If they are, change them to **Ask me every time** and click **Save**.

No response when you insert a particular CD or DVD?

A related problem is that you might insert a CD or DVD (particularly a home-created disc given to you by a friend) and find that AutoPlay takes no notice of it. In that case, follow steps 1 and 2 on page 10 to open File Explorer and find your way to the icon for your CD/DVD drive. When you find it, double-click it: in most cases, that will display the files on the disc, which is probably exactly what you want to see. However, if the disc was designed in such a way that something else should have happened – and AutoPlay just failed to do it for some reason – that double-click should get it going.