**What Does Browsing in Incognito Mode Really Do?**

Seems like your [web browser](https://computer.howstuffworks.com/different-web-browsers-android-tablets.htm) knows more about you than your friends. It feels weird that you can be searching for trips to Paris and then ads for vacation packages to France start popping up on random web pages or in your [Facebook](https://computer.howstuffworks.com/internet/social-networking/networks/facebook.htm) feed.

Is it time to use the incognito or private feature on your browser? Maybe, maybe not. Privacy modes have limitations you should understand.

"Ever since private browsing was first created, users have been confused about the difference between protecting their online activity from other users of a shared device, from websites and ad networks, or from their internet service providers," emails Seth Schoen, a senior staff technologist for the Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF). "Private browsing mode does well with the first of these, sometimes partly addresses the second, and has absolutely no effect on the third. The browser developers have tried to make this clear."

### **How to Go Incognito**

Let's say you want to use the incognito feature in the Chrome browser or Chrome app (The [name of this feature varies](https://www.computerhope.com/issues/ch001378.htm) depending whether you're using Chrome, Firefox, Safari or something else.) Here's what to do:

1. To the right of the Chrome address bar, tap the three buttons in a vertical row (which brings up more features).
2. Look for the New Incognito tab. Tap on that and a new window opens up.
3. Alternately, pressing Control+Shift+N will send you to Incognito mode in just one step.
4. You can tell you're in Incognito mode by the Incognito icon in the middle of the screen and at the top right.

**An example of the Chrome incognito page.**

In addition to the Incognito icon, you'll also see these warnings regarding private browsing on the home screen:

"You've gone incognito. Now you can browse privately, and other people who use this device won't see your activity. However, downloads and bookmarks will be saved. Chrome won't save the following:

* Your browsing history
* Cookies and site data
* Information entered in forms

Your activity might still be visible to:

* Websites you visit
* Your employer or school
* Your internet service provider"

Here's what this means: Browsers typically store the web addresses (called URLs) of the sites you visit. That makes it easier for you to find them again later.

In private (incognito) mode, your browser works a bit differently. Your search history won't be stored locally. This is great for concealing your browsing history from anyone else who's using the same device, such as when you're shopping for a surprise gift or if you're on adult-oriented websites. But that doesn't mean your activities are entirely private.

Your browser also stores cookies, which are little data files that have a plethora of uses. Cookies can automatically enter passwords, for instance, so you don't have to type them each time you visit a site. Or, they can provide tracking information for advertising companies that really want to understand how you browse from site to site, all the better to help someone, somewhere sell products to you.

"The original design of web tracking features like cookies was based around the expectation that tracking would be within individual sites only, and would not connect separate browsing sessions unless the user wanted it to," says Schoen. "Both of these norms have been violated massively by the internet advertising industry, which often creates detailed, comprehensive profiles of what people do online over time."

Schoen adds that in some cases, private browsing mode can temporarily disconnect someone's browsing from the technical means used to maintain most of those profiles. In other words, in private mode cookies won't provide advertisers with the detailed information they'd otherwise mine from your activities.

### **Private Mode is Not Anonymous Mode**

But it's critical to understand that using incognito mode doesn't make you anonymous. It's not a sort of superpower of online invisibility.

It won't stop your internet service provider (ISP) or employer from tracking your web activities. It's not going to conceal your location from the sites you frequent. If you're logged in to your Google account, Google's still tracking your search patterns, even if you choose incognito mode. If you're surprised by this, you're not alone — [one 2018 study showed](https://www.blaseur.com/papers/www18privatebrowsing.pdf) that misconceptions about private browsing run rampant (Fifty-six percent of respondents thought search queries would not be saved in private mode, even though they were also logged in to their Google accounts and 40 percent thought their geolocations would be hidden. A further 27 percent thought the private mode offered protection against malware and viruses. None of these are true.)

Even though you're far from anonymous, private browsing still has a number of good uses. In addition to preventing other local users from seeing your search history, sometimes it's good for dodging paywalls that block you from reading content on subscriber-only news sites. And private browsing may reduce the odds that your web searches will be skewed by the algorithms that track your usage in an effort to anticipate the information you're looking for. It will also stop that annoying tracking by websites and ad networks, as in the Paris example we gave at the beginning. And let's say a friend wants to borrow your computer to quickly check his Facebook page; he could do that in incognito mode and log in to his own Facebook account without first having to log out of yours.

### **A Better Form of Online Anonymity**

If you really need online anonymity, you'll have to do more than use private mode. "The most accessible options are [virtual private networks](https://computer.howstuffworks.com/vpn.htm) (VPNs) and [Tor](https://computer.howstuffworks.com/private-browser.htm), which route your communications through intermediaries in ways that decrease what your ISP knows about what you're doing online, and also decrease what websites you visit know about where you're connecting from," Schoen says.

But he's quick to point out that these are not magic remedies that make you totally anonymous.

"Both of these solutions also suffer from many myths and misconceptions. Although the technical details of who can see what are different from the private browsing mode situation, those details still exist and users should become familiar with them before relying on these privacy technologies for anonymity."

With a [bit of research](https://www.csoonline.com/article/2975193/9-steps-completely-anonymous-online.html), though, you can begin the journey to better online privacy. In doing so, you can better guard your personal and professional life and have [more peace of mind](https://privacy.net/stay-anonymous-online/) on a network that's full of potential pitfalls.