

# What Is Windows S Mode? The Complete 2026 Guide (Windows 10 & 11)

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### In brief

Windows S mode is a locked-down setting - not a separate edition of Windows - that limits your PC to apps from the Microsoft Store and Microsoft Edge for browsing, in exchange for better security and battery life. To switch out, go to Settings > System > Activation on Windows 11 (or Settings > Update & Security > Activation on Windows 10), select Go to the Store under the "Switch to Windows Home/Pro" section, then click Get. It's free and takes a minute, but it's permanent - you can't turn S mode back on afterward. One important 2026 note: Windows 10 lost official support in October 2025, so if your S mode device is still on Windows 10, switching out is really step one toward moving to Windows 11.

If you've just unboxed a budget laptop, inherited a school-issued Chromebook-style PC, or you're trying to install a browser that refuses to download, there's a good chance you're dealing with Windows S mode. It's one of those settings that quietly ships on a lot of affordable and education-focused machines, and most people don't realize it's there until something they try to install gets blocked. This guide covers what S mode actually is, how it differs between Windows 10 and Windows 11, how to check whether you're in it, and exactly how to get out, plus what's changed now that Windows 10 has reached the end of its support life.

## What Windows S Mode Actually Is

S mode is a configuration, not a different version of Windows. Underneath, it's the same Windows 10 or Windows 11 you'd get on any other PC, the same kernel, the same Settings app, the same core experience. What changes is a set of restrictions layered on top: you can only install apps distributed through the Microsoft Store, and Microsoft Edge is locked in as your browser with Bing as the default search engine. You can still install other browsers if they're available in the Store, and you can point Edge at whichever search engine you like, you just can't sideload software or run traditional .exe/.msi installers from outside the Store. This trips people up because Microsoft used the "S" branding twice, for two different things. Back in 2017, Windows 10 S was a genuinely separate edition of Windows aimed at classrooms and low-cost hardware. Microsoft later retired that as a standalone edition and turned it into S mode, a toggleable configuration that can be applied to Windows 10 Home, Pro, Enterprise, or Education, and now to Windows 11 Home as well. If you're researching an older article or forum thread that talks about "Windows 10 S" as its own OS, that's the discontinued version. What ships on new devices today is S mode. In practice, S mode exists to solve two problems: keep malware out by only allowing vetted Store apps, and keep low-power hardware running smoothly by avoiding background bloat from third-party installers. That's why it shows up most often on inexpensive laptops and school-managed PCs rather than higher-end machines.

## Windows 10 S Mode vs. Windows 11 S Mode

The core idea is identical across both versions, but there are a few practical differences worth knowing before you decide what to do.

Available on | Home, Pro, Enterprise, and Education editions | Home edition only (retail); separate deployment images exist for schools

Support status | No longer receiving free security updates as of October 14, 2025 | Actively supported and updated

Where to switch out | Settings > Update & Security > Activation | Settings > System > Activation

Upgrade path | Pro/Enterprise/Education editions in S mode must switch out before Windows Update will offer Windows 11, since those editions don't support S mode on Windows 11 | N/A , already the current OS

The practical takeaway: if you're still running Windows 10 in S mode on anything other than the Home edition, you can't just wait for Windows 11 to arrive automatically. You have to switch out of S mode first, and then the upgrade becomes available.

## How to Check If Your PC Is in S Mode

Before doing anything else, confirm whether S mode is actually on , some of the "S mode won't let me install this" complaints online turn out to be unrelated permission or account issues.

1. Press the Start button and open Settings.
2. Go to System > About.
3. Look under Windows specifications. If your edition reads something like "Windows 11 Home in S mode" or "Windows 10 Home in S mode," you're in S mode. If it just says "Windows 11 Home" or "Windows 10 Pro" with no mention of S mode, you're not.

## Should You Switch Out of S Mode?

This depends entirely on what you use the PC for. S mode isn't a lesser version of Windows , it's a trade-off, and for some people it's the right one.

### Reasons to stay in S mode

- Security. Every app comes from the Microsoft Store, which screens submissions before they're listed. That closes off one of the most common ways malware ends up on a PC , tricking someone into running a downloaded installer.
- Performance on low-end hardware. Budget laptops with limited RAM and slower storage benefit from not having background processes and auto-updaters from random third-party software.
- Simplicity for shared or managed devices. Kids' PCs, school-issued laptops, and devices used by less tech-savvy family members are harder to accidentally break when installs are restricted to the Store.

### Reasons to switch out

- You need a specific app , a browser, a creative tool, work software, a game launcher , that isn't in the Microsoft Store.
  - You want to install drivers or utilities from a manufacturer's website (some hardware tools aren't Store-distributed).
  - You're setting the PC up as a general-purpose daily driver rather than a locked-down secondary device.
- If you're not sure yet, there's no harm in trying to install the one app you need first. Windows will tell you plainly if it's blocked by S mode, and at that point you can decide whether switching out is worth losing the restrictions.

## How to Switch Out of S Mode on Windows 11

This only works with an active internet connection, since the switch happens through the Microsoft Store.

1. Open Settings from the Start menu.
2. Go to System > Activation.
3. Find the section labeled Switch to Windows 11 Home (the wording may vary slightly) and select Go to the Store.
4. On the Microsoft Store page titled "Switch out of S mode," select Get.
5. Wait for the confirmation message. Once it appears, S mode is off and you can install apps from outside the Store.

One detail worth calling out: on that Activation page you may also see a separate link under "Upgrade your edition of Windows." That one is for buying a Windows 11 Pro upgrade, it does not remove S mode. Make sure you're using the "Go to the Store" link specifically. Also worth knowing: switching out doesn't change your edition. If you're on Windows 11 Home in S mode, you end up on regular Windows 11 Home, not Pro.

## How to Switch Out of S Mode on Windows 10

1. Open Settings and go to Update & Security.
2. Select Activation from the left sidebar.
3. Under Switch to Windows 10 Home/Pro, select Go to the Store.
4. On the Store page, select Get, then wait for confirmation.

If this is your situation, treat switching out as the first step, not the destination. Windows 10 stopped receiving free security updates, feature updates, and technical support from Microsoft on October 14, 2025. The PC will keep working, but running an unpatched, unsupported OS long-term is a real security risk, especially once you've already opened it up to software from outside the Store. If your hardware supports it, switching out of S mode and then upgrading to Windows 11 is the safer move. If it doesn't meet Windows 11's requirements, at minimum make sure you're not relying on the device for anything sensitive, and consider Microsoft's Extended Security Updates program if you need more time on Windows 10.

## If the "Switch Out" Option Isn't Showing Up

A few things commonly cause this, in rough order of likelihood:

- Pending Windows updates. Go to Settings > Windows Update, install anything waiting, restart, and try again.
- Wrong date, time, or region settings. Under Settings > Time & Language, make sure "Set time automatically" is on and your region/country is set correctly. The Store page can fail to load correctly if these are off.
- A work or school account is managing the device. If the PC is signed in with an organizational account, an administrator may have deliberately enforced S mode through Intune or a similar management tool, and only they can lift it. Try creating a separate local administrator account to check whether the option appears there, or contact whoever manages the device.
- Microsoft Store needs a reset. Go to Settings > Apps > Installed apps, find Microsoft Store, open its advanced options, and use the Reset button. Then try the Activation page again.

## What Works and What Doesn't in S Mode (2026)

The list of what's actually available through the Microsoft Store has shifted a fair amount over the years, and it's worth being current on it since a lot of older guides are now out of date.

Category: Browsers | Works in S mode: Microsoft Edge, Firefox, Brave (available via the Store) | Doesn't work in S mode: Google Chrome, still not Store-distributed as of early 2026

Category: Gaming | Works in S mode: Xbox app and PC Game Pass titles, Epic Games Store and its catalog | Doesn't work in S mode: Steam and any game requiring a Steam or non-Store installer

Category: Everyday apps | Works in S mode: Spotify, Netflix, Microsoft 365 apps, Zoom, and most mainstream apps that have a Store listing | Doesn't work in S mode: Any app whose only distribution is a direct .exe/.msi download , this includes many developer tools and some creative software

Category: Security | Works in S mode: Windows Security (Microsoft Defender) , built in and fully functional | Doesn't work in S mode: Third-party antivirus suites that require a standalone installer

A quick myth-check: some people assume being in S mode means you're stuck without antivirus protection or that you need to buy separate security software. That's not the case , Windows Security is built into both Windows 10 and Windows 11 in S mode and updates normally through Windows Update, with no extra installation needed.

## Is It Worth Staying on Windows 10 in S Mode in 2026?

For most people, no , and it's worth being direct about why. Windows 10 losing official support means new security vulnerabilities discovered from October 2025 onward won't be patched for free.

Combine that with a locked-down app environment that was originally designed to reduce attack surface, and you end up in an odd spot: the restriction that used to be a security feature is now sitting on top of an operating system that's no longer being defended at the source. If your device can run Windows 11, this is a good moment to make the jump. If it can't, it's worth weighing whether the machine should still be used for anything involving personal accounts, banking, or sensitive data.

## Frequently Asked Questions

Is switching out of S mode free? Yes, on both Windows 10 and Windows 11. There's no cost involved , you're just removing a restriction, not buying an upgrade. Can I turn S mode back on after switching out? No. The switch is one-way. If you think you might want the restrictions back later, it's worth being sure before you commit. Does switching out of S mode upgrade me to Windows Pro? No. You stay on the same edition , Home stays Home. Switching out only removes the Store-only/Edge-only restriction; it doesn't change your Windows edition or add Pro features. Will I lose my files or settings when I switch out? No. It's a configuration change, not a reinstall or reset. Your apps, files, and settings stay exactly as they were. My school or work laptop won't let me switch out , why? If the device is managed by an organization, an administrator can enforce S mode through a management policy, and only they can remove it. This is common on education-issued devices on purpose. Is Windows S mode good for gaming? It's workable if you stick to Xbox app/PC Game Pass titles or the Epic Games Store, but it's a real limitation if your library lives on Steam. Most serious PC gamers switch out for this reason alone.

## Bottom Line

Windows S mode is a legitimate, security-first way to run Windows , genuinely useful for shared, managed, or lower-powered devices , but it's not built for anyone who needs software outside the Microsoft Store's catalog. Checking whether you're in it takes ten seconds, and switching out takes a couple of minutes if you decide you need to. The one thing worth remembering going into any of this: it's a one-way door, so it's worth confirming you actually need to make the switch before you do. And if you're doing this on a Windows 10 device, treat it as the first step toward Windows 11 rather than the end of the job , the operating system itself needs the upgrade more urgently than the S mode restriction needs removing.