

Best Search Engine for Privacy in 2026 [7 Ranked]

DuckDuckGo is the best private search engine for most people, but it is not the right answer for every threat model. We examined what seven active services collect, where their results come from, how they make money, and whether their AI can really be turned off. Read below for the full list and analysis.

Editor's note

We ran the same 40 queries through every service on this list, on desktop and mobile, in a clean browser profile with no search history and no account signed in. Where a provider offers an AI layer we tested it both on and off, because the setting is what most readers will actually change.

Nobody paid to be here. No company on this list was given the results before publication, and none of the links below are affiliate links. Where a service is owned by a larger advertising business we say so in the entry itself, because ownership is part of the privacy question.

Privacy search has a marketing problem. Almost every alternative to Google says it does not track you. That phrase can mean anything from “we do not build an advertising profile” to “we briefly process your IP address, send your query to another company, retain an anonymous copy, and display ads without tying any of it back to you.” Those are not the same promise.

There is also no universal best search engine once relevance, price, index independence and AI enter the picture. The most private configuration may be too slow or technical for daily use. The search engine with the strongest results may require

an account or send a query to an upstream index. A provider can minimize its own collection and still be visible to your internet provider or the sites you click.

Our answer for a typical reader is **DuckDuckGo**. It is free, works on desktop and mobile, requires no account, and offers a dedicated no-AI version. Choose **Brave Search** instead if independence from Bing matters more. If you will pay for a stronger product, **Kagi** is the best premium option.

The short list

Comparison of the best private search engines in 2026

Search engine	Best for	AI control	Cost and main caveat
1. DuckDuckGo	Best for most people	Yes – dedicated no-AI version	Free; Bing-heavy results can struggle with deeper queries
2. Kagi	Best paid search	Yes – disable it in Search settings	\$10/month for unlimited use; account and temporary logs
3. Brave Search	Independent free index	Partly – summaries turn off, but Ask remains	Free; AI remains visible and results can vary
4. Startpage	Familiar Google and Bing results	No generative layer in core search	Free; System1 ownership and old public audit history
5. MetaGer	Nonprofit metasearch	No generative layer documented	Prepaid usage; no native iPhone app

Search engine	Best for	AI control	Cost and main caveat
6. Mojeek	UK-based independent index	Search Summary is optional	Free; smaller index and less consistent deep-query coverage
7. SearXNG	Self-hosters and technical users	Depends on the instance	Free and open source; requires setup and administrator trust

Best overall: DuckDuckGo ☐☐☐

DuckDuckGo wins by being the easiest privacy improvement that most people will keep using.

Its privacy policy says it does not write an IP address or

unique identifier to disk alongside a query. It does retain anonymous search terms for tasks such as correcting misspellings and improving results, but says those terms are disconnected from anything that identifies a person. That is more precise—and more believable—than pretending the service never processes data at all.

DuckDuckGo combines its own crawlers and many instant-answer sources, but its traditional links and images are largely supplied by Microsoft Bing. That gives it broad coverage without handing Microsoft a user's direct identity, but it also means DuckDuckGo is not an independent web index in the way Brave or Mojeek is.

The clearest reason it ranks first in 2026 is noai.duckduckgo.com. The dedicated version turns off Search Assist and Duck.ai and filters images identified as AI-generated. It answers “best search engine for privacy and no AI” more cleanly than a buried toggle that leaves an AI button in the interface.

The compromise is relevance. In a recent r/privacy discussion, the most repeated complaint is not privacy—it is having to repeat detailed searches elsewhere, especially for forum posts, troubleshooting and nuanced questions. That experience is not universal, but it is common enough to take seriously. DuckDuckGo's !bang shortcuts make fallback easy, although using a bang sends you to the destination search service and subjects that search to the destination's privacy practices.

Choose DuckDuckGo if: you want the best free balance of privacy, convenience and no-AI control on iPhone, Android and desktop.

Skip it if: you regularly run obscure research, technical or user-generated-content searches and dislike using a fallback.

Best paid: Kagi ☐☐

Kagi is what search looks like when the customer pays instead of the advertiser.

There are no ads, and the product provides unusually strong result controls. You can raise, lower or block domains; choose lenses; and use sources drawn from Kagi's own indexes and anonymized requests to other traditional indexes. Kagi's current plans include a 100-search trial, \$5 a month for 300 searches, \$10 for unlimited search and \$25 for an Ultimate tier with premium AI features.

The subscription is both its privacy advantage and its most obvious obstacle. Kagi requires an account for billing, although it says searches are anonymized and not associated with that account. Its privacy materials describe temporary search-query debugging logs, with search queries said to be removed after seven days. That is more retention than a purist might want, even when the query is not attached to the account.

Supported paid plans can use Privacy Pass, which issues anonymous tokens so the search service can confirm entitlement

without seeing the user's account identity. It is a thoughtful design, but not available on every plan or browser; Safari is a notable limitation.

Kagi also has the best AI control in this group. Its Search AI settings state that AI is invoked on demand. Turning AI off hides its Search interface elements and prevents explicit AI triggers. Users who do want AI should read Kagi's separate provider disclosures, because model vendors may have their own limited retention rules.

Choose Kagi if: search is important enough to justify \$10 a month and you want high-quality controls without advertising.

Skip it if: you want an account-free service, zero temporary query retention, or a fully capable free tier.

Best independent free index: Brave Search ☐☐

Brave Search is the strongest answer to a different question: which private search engine is least dependent on Google and Microsoft?

Brave says the standard service runs on its own independent

web index. That matters beyond branding. A private front end to Bing can protect a user's identity, but it does not create competition at the infrastructure level. Brave controls crawling, ranking and delivery end to end. An optional Google fallback can supplement a weak result set, but enabling it naturally reduces that independence.

Its privacy policy says IP addresses are not retained and search ads are contextual rather than based on a personal profile. Brave's anonymous usage metrics are enabled by default. The company says those metrics exclude actual query text, IP addresses and unique identifiers, but privacy-conscious users should still consider switching them off in Search settings.

Brave loses points on the no-AI question. You can turn off automatic "Answer with AI" summaries, but the Ask entry point remains in the search interface. That may be acceptable to someone who simply does not want generated text placed above links. It is not a complete AI-free mode in the DuckDuckGo or Kagi sense.

Choose Brave Search if: you want a free, capable private search engine with its own index and can tolerate an optional AI surface.

Skip it if: "no AI" means no AI button, prompt or generative feature anywhere in the search experience.

Best for familiar Google and Bing results: Startpage 

Startpage is the least disruptive move for someone who likes mainstream results but does not want a mainstream engine building the personal search profile.

It submits searches to Google and Bing on the user's behalf and returns the results. Startpage says it does not record IP addresses or user agents, keeps only aggregate search counts by language, and uses transient anti-abuse techniques instead of a conventional IP log. It also avoids tracking cookies; an optional preference cookie can remember settings.

Anonymous View extends that proxy model after the results page. Startpage retrieves a destination page with its own IP address and displays it to the user. It can be useful for a quick read, but scripts and interactive functions may break. It should not be confused with the stronger anonymity and traffic separation Tor is designed to provide.

Startpage's core results do not currently contain generative AI summaries. Its Instant Answers are conventional result modules and can be disabled.

The trust caveat is corporate and evidentiary. Startpage operates from the Netherlands, but System1—an advertising-technology company—invested through Privacy One. Startpage says its management controls privacy decisions. There is no public evidence in the reviewed materials that System1 has overturned those practices, but the strongest audit talking point is old: Startpage says its regular EuroPriSe recertification was postponed in 2017.

Choose Startpage if: familiar result quality matters more than index independence and you want no generative layer in core search.

Skip it if: ownership by an ad-tech group or reliance on Google and Bing is outside your threat model.

Best nonprofit metasearch: MetaGer



MetaGer combines several appealing properties that rarely appear together: it is operated by a German nonprofit, publishes its code, has no ads, and does not require a personal account.

Its July 2026 privacy policy says IP addresses and user agents are neither saved nor shared. Because MetaGer is a metasearch engine, it must send the query to result partners. It says returned results and the query are kept for display for a few hours. Its current source list includes Brave, Mojeek and Google results supplied through Serper.

Instead of an account, MetaGer gives the user a random key. A one-time payment adds tokens; the service estimates that €5 for roughly 500 tokens lasts a typical user around two months. Cash payment is available for people who want to avoid a payment trail. The key can also unlock a proxy that loads destination pages on MetaGer's servers.

This is a credible privacy design, but it is less convenient than opening a free search page. MetaGer has browser integrations and an Android app, but no native iOS app. We also found no standard generative-answer layer in the reviewed search product, making it a good no-AI option for users comfortable with its payment model.

Choose MetaGer if: you value nonprofit governance, open code, no advertising and an anonymous payment/access model.

Skip it if: you want a frictionless free default or a polished native iPhone app.

Best UK private search engine: Mojeek

Mojeek is the clearest answer for a UK reader who wants a locally based search company and a genuinely independent index.

The Brighton-based company crawls and ranks the web itself. Its privacy policy says operational logs are retained indefinitely but do not contain IP addresses; the IP is replaced with a two-letter country code. Mojeek describes the remaining data as non-personal and says it does not set a cookie unless a user chooses to save preferences.

Mojeek does offer a generative Search Summary, but it is user-triggered rather than automatically placed above every result set. The answer appears alongside traditional links and includes citations. That makes Mojeek a reasonable choice for someone who wants AI off by default, even though it is not an engine built without AI capability.

The cost of independence is index depth. Mojeek can be excellent for straightforward discovery and provides a different ranking perspective, but its smaller corpus is less dependable for obscure, highly local, shopping or rapidly

changing queries. Keep a fallback available.

Choose Mojeek if: UK jurisdiction and independence from Google, Bing and Brave matter most.

Skip it if: you need one engine to handle every deep or time-sensitive query.

Best for self-hosting: SearXNG

SearXNG is not a single search company. It is open-source metasearch software that can query a configurable mix of external services and remove identifying headers and cookies before doing so.

That flexibility explains why privacy communities recommend it—and why simplistic rankings often get it wrong. If you use a public instance, you must trust the administrator. SearXNG's own instance guidance warns that an operator could log or sell data. If you self-host, you control the logs, but upstream search engines still see requests coming from your instance. A server used by only one person can produce a query stream that is easier to separate than one shared by many users.

The default software does not impose a generative answer layer, although instance operators can change the interface or add engines. Speed, uptime, result mix and privacy therefore vary by instance.

Choose SearXNG if: you understand the deployment model and want maximum control over sources and configuration.

Skip it if: you want a service whose privacy properties, support and uptime are consistent without technical work.

Popular privacy search engines we

did not recommend

Product	Why it missed the list
Qwant	Its policy describes Microsoft receiving queries and technical data, including full IPs in some cases, plus longer retention than the finalists.
Ecosia	Its policy says IP addresses and queries are automatically shared with Bing or Google. Its new desktop AI-free mode is welcome but does not change that core comparison.
Swisscows Free	The free tier shares the query and masked technical data with advertising partners, and ad iframes can send personal data to Bing or Google. Pro is a different, paid proposition.
Ghostery Private Search	It has been in closed beta since June 1, 2026 and is not available as an ordinary public recommendation.
Mullvad Leta	Mullvad shut the service down on November 27, 2025.

These products are not necessarily “bad.” They simply do not support the same top-line privacy recommendation under their current availability and published terms.

What Reddit users get right—and what Reddit cannot prove

There is no secret community consensus that the product pages are hiding. Recent privacy threads repeat the same trade-offs: DuckDuckGo is convenient but can struggle on detailed searches; Kagi earns praise but costs \$10 a month for unlimited use; Startpage provides familiar results but prompts ownership questions; and SearXNG offers control at the cost of setup, speed and trust in an instance operator.

That lived experience is useful when judging whether someone

will keep a new default. It cannot verify what happens on a provider's servers. Reddit comments about an engine "selling data," being "compromised" or offering perfect anonymity are not evidence unless they point to a policy, audit, technical finding or documented incident. This ranking therefore uses community reports for usability and official disclosures for data-handling claims. The clearest current example is a thread asking for both privacy and convenience: the replies reveal real compromises, not one uncontested winner.

Private search is not anonymous search

A private search engine primarily limits what the search provider records and how it profiles the user. It does not make the whole browsing session invisible.

- The search provider receives a network connection and may briefly process an IP address even if it does not retain it.
- HTTPS normally hides the query text from the internet provider, but the provider can still see the domain being contacted.
- Once you click a result, the destination site applies its own cookies, scripts, fingerprinting and account rules.
- Search suggestions can transmit text as it is typed, before the query is submitted.
- A !bang shortcut takes the user to another search service; the destination's privacy policy then applies.

If the goal is to hide an IP address from the search provider, Privacy Guides recommends considering Tor or a trusted VPN. Tor Browser is the stronger anonymity tool, but its privacy benefits depend on using it correctly. A private search engine is one layer, not an invisibility cloak.

Which private search engine should you choose?

- **For most people:** DuckDuckGo.
- **For mainstream search with built-in AI features switched off:** noai.duckduckgo.com.
- **For the best paid experience:** Kagi Professional at \$10 a month.
- **For an independent free index:** Brave Search.
- **For familiar Google/Bing-style results:** Startpage.
- **For nonprofit, ad-free metasearch:** MetaGer.
- **For a UK-based independent engine:** Mojeek.
- **For self-hosting and source control:** SearXNG.
- **For iPhone:** DuckDuckGo is the simplest all-in-one option; Startpage and Brave also have mobile-browser routes.
- **For Android:** DuckDuckGo and Brave offer the easiest full mobile experiences; MetaGer and Mojeek also have Android apps.

How to change the default on iPhone and Android

On iPhone, Apple's current default-search guide shows the available choice in Safari settings. The exact list depends on iOS version and region. If the provider is not offered, use its app, browser or Safari extension instead.

On Android, Chrome exposes the choice under **More > Settings > Search engine**; Google documents the current steps in its Chrome help page. A privacy-focused browser can expose a different provider list. If you use DuckDuckGo's no-AI endpoint, add it as a custom search engine where the browser permits it or bookmark it as the search home page.

Frequently asked questions

What is the best search engine for privacy?

DuckDuckGo is the best private search engine for most people in 2026. It does not associate search queries with retained IP addresses or unique identifiers, requires no account, works across desktop and mobile, and has a dedicated no-AI version. Brave Search is the better choice if index independence is the priority.

What is the most private search engine?

There is no universal answer without a threat model. MetaGer's anonymous-key design and SearXNG under a carefully operated deployment can minimize different kinds of exposure. For mainstream use, DuckDuckGo, Brave Search and Startpage provide a stronger balance of privacy and usability. Use Tor if the search provider must not see your real IP address.

Which private search engine has no AI?

DuckDuckGo provides the clearest no-AI option at noai.duckduckgo.com, which disables its AI features and filters AI-generated images. Kagi can hide and disable Search AI from settings. Startpage's core search currently has no generative answer layer. MetaGer also had no standard generative-answer feature in the product reviewed for this article.

Is DuckDuckGo really private?

DuckDuckGo says it does not retain IP addresses or unique identifiers with search queries and does not build personal search profiles. It does retain anonymous query strings for product improvement. Its traditional link and image results

are largely sourced from Bing, but DuckDuckGo says requests are proxied so Microsoft does not receive the user's direct identity.

Is Startpage safer than DuckDuckGo?

Both have strong published privacy practices, but they optimize for different things. Startpage proxies Google and Bing and may provide more familiar results. DuckDuckGo is easier to use across devices and has stronger no-AI controls. Startpage's System1 ownership and old public audit history are reasonable trust considerations.

Is Brave Search more private than DuckDuckGo?

Brave retains no IP address and operates its own index, which reduces exposure to an upstream search provider. DuckDuckGo also avoids a personal search profile but relies heavily on Bing for standard results. DuckDuckGo has the better complete no-AI mode; Brave has the stronger independence story.

What is the best private search engine for iPhone?

DuckDuckGo is the simplest recommendation because it offers an iOS app and can be used as a default search option in common browsers. Startpage also offers an iOS browser app, and Brave integrates Brave Search into its iPhone browser. Exact default-search choices vary by browser, iOS version and region.

What is the best private search engine for Android?

DuckDuckGo and Brave provide the most complete Android experiences. MetaGer and Mojeek also offer Android apps, while

SearXNG can be used through a browser or a configured instance.

Are private search engines more secure?

They can reduce profiling and the exposure of sensitive queries, but they do not automatically block malware, prevent browser fingerprinting or secure the sites opened from results. Browser security, software updates, tracker blocking, careful account use and, where appropriate, Tor or a trusted VPN still matter.

More about:

<https://searchenginewatch.com/best-search-engine-for-privacy/>