Google unveils auto-delete for location, Web activity, and app usage data

Enlarge / Mountain View, Calif.—May 21, 2018: Exterior view of a Googleplex building, the corporate headquarters of Google and parent company Alphabet.
Getty Images | zphotos

reader comments

63 with 50 posters participating

Share this story

Google will soon let users automatically delete location history and other private data in rolling intervals of either three months or 18 months.

“Choose a time limit for how long you want your activity data to be saved—3- or 18-months—and any data older than that will be automatically deleted from your account on an ongoing basis,” Google announced yesterday. “These controls are coming first to Location History and Web & App Activity and will roll out in the coming weeks.”

Google location history saves locations reported from mobile devices that are logged into your Google account, while saved Web and app activity includes “searches and other things you do on Google products and services, like Maps; your location, language, IP address, referrer, and whether you use a browser or an app; Ads you click, or things you buy on an advertiser’s site; [and] Information on your device like recent apps or contact names you searched for.”

You can already go into your Google activity control settings to completely turn off the features that save your location history and Web and app activity. But the new auto-delete option will provide a middle ground in which users who are concerned about the data storage can save activity data for a non-forever period of time without having to manually delete it once in a while.

Chrome browser history as well as “activity from sites, apps, and devices that use Google services” are currently listed as a subset of Web and app activity in Google’s activity controls settings, and the saving of this data can be disabled. The new auto-delete function doesn’t appear to cover Chrome history in a preview provided by Google, however. Note how Chrome history is listed separately at the end of this short video showing how you’ll be able to enable the auto-delete functionality when it rolls out:

What’s the advantage of saving the data at all? Google’s announcement said that saving the data “can make Google products more useful for you—like recommending a restaurant that you might enjoy, or helping you pick up where you left off on a previous search.”

But Google’s disclosures about how it saves data history haven’t always been accurate. Last year, the Associated Press found that “several Google apps and websites store user location even if users have turned off Location History.” In response, Google changed a help page that erroneously claimed, “With Location History off, the places you go are no longer stored.” The page now says, “Some location data may continue to be saved in other settings, like Web & App Activity, as part of your use of other services, like Search and Maps, even after you turn off Location History.”

Google has been facing scrutiny from Congress as lawmakers consider proposals for a new data privacy law.

“We work to keep your data private and secure, and we’ve heard your feedback that we need to provide simpler ways for you to manage or delete it,” Google said in its announcement yesterday.

No word on auto-deleting other data

Google seemed to indicate that the auto-delete function will come to other data when it said, “These controls are coming first to Location History and Web & App Activity.” But Google didn’t say whether or when its new auto-delete function will be available for any other specific categories of data, such as YouTube search and watch history, or voice recordings from Google Assistant requests. Like location history, Web history, and app activity, you can disable saving of this other data completely in your account settings.

Google says that “Device information“—another category that can be turned off completely but isn’t included in the new auto-delete function—includes “things like contact lists, calendars, alarms, apps, and music, and can help Google give you more accurate results and suggestions.”

In its privacy policy, Google says, “We use various technologies to collect and store information, including cookies, pixel tags, local storage, such as browser web storage or application data caches, databases, and server logs.”

Deleting your data from your Google account should erase it from Google’s data centers, except when it’s stored in a way that doesn’t identify you.

“When you delete data, we follow a deletion policy to make sure that your data is safely and completely removed from our servers or retained only in anonymized form,” Google says. “Complete deletion of data from our servers… generally takes around two months from the time of deletion” and “often

includes up to a month-long recovery period in case the data was removed unintentionally," Google also says. Google also uses encrypted backup storage "to help recover from potential disasters" and says that "[d]ata can remain on these systems for up to six months."

https://arstechnica.com/?p=1499235