New “Canary” channel will showcase more-experimental, less-stable Windows builds

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Microsoft started its Windows Insider program in 2014 to get public feedback on Windows 10 as it was being developed. Ever since then, the company has continued to provide regularly updated prerelease builds of Windows 10 and Windows 11 to preview and test new features.

Like many public beta programs, Microsoft has maintained different channels for different users, with periodic tweaks to each channel’s name and stated purpose. Today, Microsoft is renaming one channel and introducing another one. The one formerly known as the “Dev” channel will now be called the “Canary” channel, and it will be where Microsoft tests its least-stable and most-experimental features (including “major changes to the Windows kernel, new APIs, etc.”).

“The builds that will be flighted to the Canary Channel will be “hot off the presses,” flighting very soon after they are built, which means very little validation and documentation will be done before they are offered to Insiders,” writes Windows Insider Program Lead Amanda Langowski.

Some software releases' Canary channels (including Chrome Canary and Firefox Nightly) can update once per day, and Microsoft has historically maintained a "Canary" channel for internal use that is updated daily. This new public Canary channel "won't receive daily builds," writes Langowski, "however, we may ramp up releasing builds more frequently in the future."

Microsoft explains the new Windows Insider program channel structure.

The Dev channel will still exist, but it's being "rebooted" as a rung between the Dev and Beta channels. Microsoft will continue testing early features here, including some that will never make it to the stable version of the operating system. But compared to the Canary channel, the builds "will provide better platform stability" and will be more thoroughly

documented—blog posts highlighting new fixes and features will still be available for all Dev and Beta channel releases, but not for all Canary channel releases.

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The Beta and Release Preview channels aren't being changed. The Beta channel will be more stable than the new Dev channel, and features that make it to the Beta channel will likely be released to the public eventually. And the Release Preview channel is typically the last stop an update makes before it's released to the general public.

Shaking up the different Windows Insider channels makes more sense for how Windows 11 is being updated—a little bit at a time, with small tweaks released regularly, larger batches of updates bundled together a few times a year, and bigger structural changes confined to once-yearly "feature updates" that become the foundation for other changes going forward.

But it may cause some short-term pain for anyone in the old Dev channel. Insiders in the current Dev channel will automatically be moved to the Canary channel, where they will continue to get Windows updates with build numbers in the 25000s. Moving to the "rebooted" Dev channel to get 23000-series builds will require a clean install of the operating system, though it is possible for current Beta and Release Preview channel users (both with builds in the 22000s) to move to the new Dev channel without reinstalling Windows.

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