

All you need to know about browser cookies

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As internet users, we often see a pop-up banner asking for consent to use cookies in everyday internet browsing. However, in most instances, we cannot make an informed decision because we do not know what a cookie is, its function, classification, safety protocols, etc. Below are answers to some of the most frequently asked questions about browser cookies.

WHAT IS A COOKIE?

Simply put, cookies are small text files that store small pieces of data used to identify your computer network. For example, when you visit a website, cookies are sent back and forth between your web browser and that website's server. The browser on your device stores these cookies. The server may create data in a cookie as soon as you connect to it. An anonymous identifier (ID) specific to you and your device is used to identify this data. Your computer and the network server exchange cookies. When they do, the server scans the ID and knows exactly what data to provide you.

ARE THERE DIFFERENT TYPES OF COOKIES?

There are different types of cookies, each with unique functionalities. A website uses the type of cookie that suits its website type and needs the most. Cookies may be classified as session cookies or persistent cookies based on expiry. Session cookies expire when you log off the internet or close your browser, although some may be retained temporarily. On the contrary, after you exit the browser, persistent cookies continue to exist on your device until they expire or are deleted.

Depending on who sets them, cookies can also be categorised as first-party or



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third-party cookies. Cookies from the first party are owned by the website that set them; e.g. they often provide authentication or memory for user preferences. Cookies from websites or organisations other than the website's owner are known as third-party cookies. Depending on their intended use, these cookies can also be classified as strictly necessary, essential or non-necessary.

WHAT ARE COOKIES USED FOR?

Websites generally use cookies to improve the user experience. For example, without cookies, you would have to log back in each time you left a website or, if you accidentally closed the browser, rebuild your shopping cart. Therefore, cookies are a crucial component of using the internet.

On the other hand, advertisers may utilise cookies for invasive marketing activities. For example, they can keep

tabs on your purchases and shopping locations. This enables marketers to learn more about individuals and target them with advertising relevant to their interests. In addition, because the advertiser utilises the cookie ID to follow the users, you may notice that the same ad keeps showing up when you navigate from website to website. Since these businesses already know much about the consumers without asking them, this might be detrimental to your right to privacy.

ARE COOKIES SAFE?

In general, cookies don't have any viruses or malware that might endanger your computer. They also don't have any executable code that can be run, and they can't get any other private information on the customer's device. Most of the time, cookies don't include any personally identifiable data, but web servers might

misuse them to monitor users. Because of this, cookies have become questionable over time.

A cookie stores your information in an anonymous user ID. Moreover, because your device may be monitored through cookies, you might be at risk of a password compromise or privacy breach on unsafe websites. Because not all cookies are created equal, and because not everyone has the same intention, some websites are unsafe than others. Reliable and known websites of reputed organisations or news portals, in most cases, tend to be safer because they are well-regulated in most instances.

SHOULD I ALLOW COOKIES?

Most of the time, cookies make browsing the web better, but they should always be used responsibly. For instance, allowing cookies may provide you with a more seamless or personalised experience. However, it may come at the cost of your peace in terms of privacy or intrusive advertisements while browsing. As such, it is up to you to decide if you want to allow cookies on certain websites.

Keep in mind that you are not bound to accept cookies and are, in most cases, offered the option to not accept them. Some websites may prevent access if you refuse to accept their cookies. In such specific circumstances, you may choose to give up particular types of information only. Moreover, there are cookie-protective open source browsers such as Mozilla that you may consider. Generally, it is usually safer to delete any unwanted, unnecessary cookies after a certain period of time. Doing so will allow you a better browsing experience.

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