How to Use Instagram Privacy Settings

Instagram shares your location data and other information with Facebook. These steps will control how much data is collected and some of the ways it gets used.

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Photo: iStock

The corporation that owns Instagram, Facebook, and WhatsApp used to be called Facebook. Last October the company changed its name to Meta, but a lot of other things didn't change. For one, those apps continue to share infrastructure, technology, and user data. And if you're an Instagram user, your personal information is used for a variety of business purposes, including

targeting ads to you across the internet and throughout the Facebook platform.

Instagram has fewer privacy controls than Facebook, but there are settings you can adjust if you want to exert some control over your information.

You can't keep data collected by Instagram away from its parent company, but you can adjust how certain information is used. Among other actions, you can curb the app's access to location information, limit your posts to a select audience, and adjust some targeted advertising.

Most users access Instagram through the app, but some of the platform's privacy settings are accessible only when you log in using a browser.

Giving Instagram access to your location lets you automatically tag posts with your whereabouts. And Instagram uses location data to recommend content from people you don't follow.

But Instagram also uses location to help other companies send you targeted ads. And that doesn't just happen on Instagram. The data is connected to your Facebook profile, and the company is involved with ads you see all over the web, including in other apps. If you're not comfortable with that, it's easy to turn off the app's access to your phone's GPS. You can always switch it back on later if you want to. In fact, Instagram will probably ask you to to give that access back every once in a while.

Facebook and Instagram can still infer your location using other information, including your IP address and WiFi connections, but revoking GPS permissions will make it a harder to track exactly where you are.

On an iPhone: Go to the phone's Settings > Privacy > Location Services > Instagram > Never.

On an Android phone: Go to the phone's Settings > Location > App access to location > Instagram > Deny. (These instructions are for a Google Pixel; they may vary slightly on some devices. On other versions of Android, Location settings are sometimes under a Permissions menu.)

Don't Let Strangers See Your Posts

By default, Instagram makes your account visible to anyone using the app. But you can make your account private. Then people will need to send a request to follow you before they can see your posts and videos.

Instagram says turning the setting on won't affect anyone who already follows you. They'll still be able to see your posts.

On the app: Go to your profile by clicking the icon in the bottom right > Open the menu in the top right > Settings > Privacy. Switch on the Private Account toggle.

Stories are one of the main ways people post on Instagram. Sometimes you might want to share other people's Stories, either sending one of theirs to a friend or adding it to your own feed.

Other people can do the same with your Stories, but if you're not comfortable with that it's easy to put a stop to it.

You can also create a "close friends list" that limits your Stories to a select group of your choosing.

On the app: Go to your profile by clicking the icon in the bottom right > Open the menu in the top right > Settings > Privacy > Story. Under Sharing, switch

the toggles off for "Allow sharing to story" and "Allow sharing to messages."

To create a close friends list, find the same menu and tap the number listed under Close Friends > Select the people you want in your close friends group > The next time you post a Story, tap Close Friends on the bottom to limit the Story to your new list.

Make Instagram Ads a Little Less Personal

You can't opt out of targeted advertising on Instagram, but there are a couple of tools that will limit how the platform uses your data for ads—once you find the settings.

One setting prevents Facebook and Instagram from using data other companies send for ad campaigns. The other will stop Meta from using your activity on Facebook and Instagram to show you ads on apps and websites that other companies own. In both cases you'll still see the same number of ads, but Facebook and Instagram say some categories of your data will be off-limits for targeting.

Here's the catch: You have to adjust the second setting on Facebook, not on Instagram. When you do that, Meta will apply the change across all its services as long as it can match your various accounts together, according to Stephanie Chan, a company spokesperson.

The second set of instructions below are for a web browser, but you can adjust the settings in the Facebook mobile app as well. If you're not a Facebook user, there's no way to adjust that second setting.

On the app: Go to your profile by clicking the icon in the bottom right > Open the menu in the top right > Settings > Ads > Data About Your Activity From Partners. Now, switch all the toggles off.

On a computer: Log in to Facebook > Click the downward arrow in the top right corner > Settings & Privacy > Settings > From the menu on the left, select

Ads > From the menu on the left, hit Ad Settings > Ads Shown Off Of Facebook > Switch the toggle off.

Limit the Ads You See on Certain Topics

Instagram makes most of its money on ads, and there's no way to stop seeing them altogether. You can try to avoid ads on a few select topics, though. Navigate to the ad topic preferences menu, and you can tell Instagram you want to see fewer ads related to alcohol, parenting, pets, social issues, elections, and politics.

You'll find the same settings on Facebook accounts. In both cases, the company doesn't guarantee you won't see ads related to these subjects altogether. These settings won't do much to protect your privacy, but they're one of a few ways you can [adjust your social media feed](#) for a healthier and more pleasant experience.

On the app: Go to your own profile by clicking the icon in the bottom right > Open the menu in the top right > Settings > Ads > Ad topics > Tap the subject you want to avoid > Save.

One of the [easiest ways to boost your security](#) is to use multifactor authentication (MFA), aka two-factor authentication. It's available for many services; you may already use it for your email or bank account.

If you turn it on, Instagram will text you a code that it will use to confirm your identity whenever you log in from a new browser or an unfamiliar device.

Experts agree that text messages aren't the most secure option for multifactor authentication, and for an extra boost, Instagram will also let you [set up multifactor authentication using an app](#) on your phone, such as Google Authenticator or Duo Mobile.

With MFA on, no one will be able to log in to your account unless they have access to both your phone and your password.

On the app: Go to your profile by clicking the icon in the bottom right > Open the menu in the top right > Settings > Security > Two-Factor Authentication > Tap the log-in in method you want to use and follow the next instructions.

Limit Data Sharing With Other Companies

You can connect Instagram to external apps, which some people use to do things like schedule posts, edit photos, and analyze followers' activity.

Apps connected to your Instagram account can access some of your data. The more apps you tie together, the more vulnerable you are to security and privacy risks. Third-party apps played a big role in the [Cambridge Analytica scandal](#) and the data leak that ultimately led to the demise of Google's social media network, [Google+](#).

Instagram makes it easy to examine what kind of data and permissions you've made available to other apps, and revoke access for apps you're uncomfortable with or don't use anymore.

On the app: Go to your profile by clicking the icon in the bottom right > Open the menu in the top right > Settings > Security > Apps and Websites > Active > Next to a particular app, tap Remove.

Decide Who Can Message You on Instagram

Messages are a core component of the Instagram experience. Anyone you're following can send you a message, but by default, when someone you aren't following tries to contact you, their messages are sent to a "message requests" tab.

You can read messages in the requests folder without the other person knowing that you've looked at them, which lets you get a little preview before you decide to open up a dialog.

However, you can decide not to receive these messages at all. Or, for people

you're friends with on Facebook but not on Instagram, you can also do the opposite and send every message straight to the regular chat folder so you're sure not to miss them.

Instagram lets you fine-tune how you want these messages to be handled. You can make specific choices for different categories of people, such as friends of friends, or people you haven't followed back.

On the app: Go to your profile by clicking the icon in the bottom right > Open the menu in the top right > Settings > Privacy > Messages > For the various potential connections, tap and select how you want to be contacted.

Don't Broadcast That You're Online

Instagram launched a feature that lets users see when people they follow or message with are online. That might be handy for deciding when to send a friend your favorite new meme, but seeing other users' online status requires that you make yours public, too.

If that doesn't seem like a worthwhile trade, you can switch the feature off.

On the app: Go to your profile by clicking the icon in the bottom right > Open the menu in the top right > Settings > Privacy > Activity Status > Switch the toggle off.

You may have noticed that when you follow a new account, Instagram recommends that you check out a few similar users. The same thing happens in reverse: Instagram will recommend your account to other people.

That's useful if you want to attract more followers, but you can also choose to make yourself harder to find. You'll need to use a browser, not the app, to access the appropriate setting.

On a browser: Log in to Instagram > Click on your profile picture in the top right to open the menu > Profile > Edit Profile > Uncheck the box for Similar Account Suggestions.

Protecting Your Online Privacy

It doesn't matter whether you're on your phone or laptop: Your personal information can leave a digital trail of where you go online. On the "[Consumer 101](#)" TV show, Consumer Reports expert Thomas Germain explains to host Jack Rico what to do to protect your online privacy.

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