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Keeping your own copy of your e-mail: how to back up a mailbox

Making Backups

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Keeping your own copy of your e-mail: how to back up a mailbox

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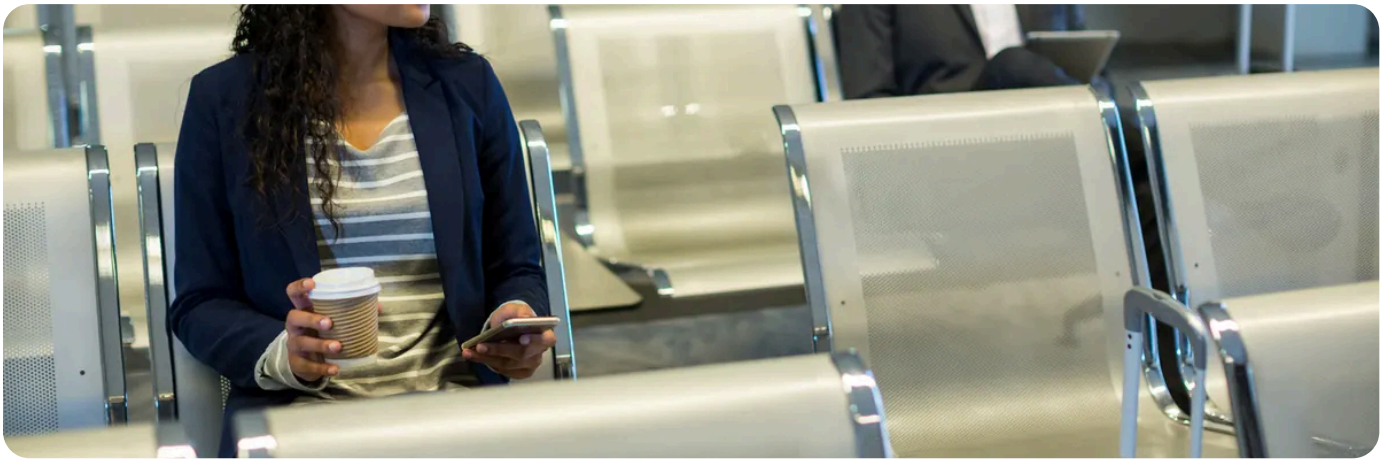

Your messages are in the account and are part of the daily copy we make, but a mailbox nobody has copied out is a mailbox with a single copy. To have your own: either **copy the folders to your computer** through an IMAP mail program, or **download the mailbox folder** from cPanel, or include the e-mail in a **full account copy**. This article is about making the copy; to put messages back, see **restoring a single e-mail account or folder**.

The routes, side by side

Route	Good for	Limit
A mail program over IMAP (Thunderbird, Outlook)	A few mailboxes, and people already using the program.	It only copies what the program has synced. See below.
Download the mailbox folder in cPanel	A complete, faithful copy of one mailbox, with its folders.	Stored in the server's format; to read it you import it into a mail program.
The full cPanel backup	Everything at once: site, databases and e-mail.	A big file, and it is for keeping, not for restoring yourself. **See how it is done**.
Another IMAP mailbox, by copying folders	Forwarding the archive to another service.	Not a backup on its own: deleting in one deletes in the other, if they are synced.

Route 1: the mail program

1. **Set the mailbox up as IMAP** (not POP): **setting up Thunderbird**. If you are unsure of the difference, see **POP or IMAP**.

2. **Wait for the sync to finish.** The program only copies the messages it has already downloaded; on a large mailbox, leave it on for hours.

3. **Create a local folder** (in Thunderbird, “Local Folders”) and drag what you want to keep into it, folder by folder. Those messages no longer depend on the server.

4. **Copy the program’s profile folder** to your external disk, or use the export the program offers. Check which export your version has.

Route 2: download the mailbox folder

1. **In cPanel, open File Manager** and go to the `mail` folder, then the domain and the mailbox. Subfolders with a dot in front (like `.Sent`) are the message folders.

2. **Compress** the mailbox folder into a ZIP and **download it**. Then delete the ZIP from the account: it takes up space and holds everything.

3. **Check that it opens** on your computer and that the size makes sense. A ZIP of a few bytes is an empty copy.

With POP, the only copy may be on your computer.
If the program downloads messages and removes them from the server, the copy that counts is the one on the computer, and that is what has to go into your backup routine. With IMAP the messages stay on the server and are part of the account copy.

An e-mail copy is a copy of private affairs.
Keep it encrypted or on a disk that is kept away, never inside `public_html`, and never on an open shared service.

Tidy before you copy.
A mailbox full of old attachments is slow to copy and takes space. See **what to delete from a full mailbox**. And make the copy before deleting, not after.

NEED A HAND?

Need messages back from a specific date? Tell us the address and the day.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- Restoring a single e-mail account or folder
- POP or IMAP: which to choose, and what you lose by picking wrong
- Bringing your mailboxes from another provider: the messages, not just the addresses
- Professional e-mail

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