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How to see what is using CPU, memory and disk on your VPS

Administration & Fixes

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How to see what is using CPU, memory and disk on your VPS

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Five commands that ship with the system tell you the essentials: `uptime` (load), `top` (who uses processor and memory), `free -h` (memory), `df -h` (disk) and `ss -tulpn` (what listens on the network). To follow things over time, not only when you happen to look, there are simple tools. On an unmanaged VPS, watching this is part of the job for whoever owns it.

The commands, by question

The question	The command	What to read
Is the server heavy?	`uptime`	The last three numbers are the load average (1, 5 and 15 minutes). Compare with the number of processors `nproc` shows: a load steadily above it means processes waiting.
Who uses processor and memory?	`top` (or `htop`, easier to read, installed with the package manager)	Press `M` to sort by memory and `P` by processor; `q` to quit.
How much memory is left?	`free -h`	The “available” column. A low “free” is normal, because Linux fills free memory with cache.
Is the disk filling up?	`df -h` and `df -i`	The percentage used and the inodes. To find what takes it: **finding what fills the disk**.
Is the disk slow?	`vmstat 1 5`	The “wa” column: time waiting for the disk. High and steady means a slow or overloaded disk.
Which ports are open?	`sudo ss -tulpn`	Each line is a program listening. Something you do not recognise deserves a question.

The question	The command	What to read
Which processes are the biggest?	`ps aux --sort=-%cpu | head` or `--sort=-%mem`	The top ten by processor or by memory.

Reading the top of top

The processor line shows percentages: **us** (your programs), **sy** (the system), **wa** (waiting on disk) and **st** (*steal*). `st` is time the physical machine hosting your VPS did not give you. If it is high and steady, your VPS is losing processor for reasons that are not inside your server; note the times and open a ticket, so we can look from our side.

Following it over time

1. **The sysstat package.** Install it (`sudo apt install sysstat` on Debian and Ubuntu) and switch on collection following the distribution's documentation. Then `sar` shows processor, memory and disk for earlier hours and days: the answer to "what happened at three in the morning?".

2. **An alert from outside.** An external monitoring service that visits your site every few minutes e-mails you when it does not answer, even if the server is too sick to complain.

3. **A dashboard of your own, if you want one.** There are third-party open-source programs (for example Netdata, or Prometheus with node_exporter) that draw graphs of the server. They are yours: you install, update and protect them, and our support does not install or repair them (**how far our support goes**).

A monitoring dashboard is one more program to defend.
If you install one, do not leave it open to the internet without a password and HTTPS, and close its port in the firewall if only you use it (**ports and firewall**).

Keep the before and the after.
When you change a configuration to improve performance, note the numbers first (`free -h` , the load, the site's response time), so you know whether the change helped. For the site side, see **the site is slow: what to measure before you change plan**.

NEED A HAND?

Do the numbers show a problem that looks like the machine or the network? Send us the times and what you saw, and we will check on our side.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- **Out of memory: the OOM killer**
- **No space left on device: what fills the disk**
- **The site is slow: what to measure before you change plan**
- **Keeping your VPS secure**

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