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# Getting an API key for an AI model, and keeping it safe

Agents & AI on a VPS

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# Getting an API key for an AI model, and keeping it safe

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An **API key** is a long password that identifies your account with an AI model provider. Whoever holds it uses your account and **spends your money**. You get one from a developer account at the provider, and you keep it **on the server, outside the code and outside any published folder**. That last part is the one people get wrong.

## How to get one

1. **Choose the provider.** The best known are OpenAI, Anthropic and Google, and there are others. Each has its own developer platform, separate from the chat app you use on your phone.

2. **Create the developer account** and attach a payment method if the provider requires one. APIs charge by use, apart from any subscription to the chat app.

3. **Set the spending limit** or usage alerts before you create the key. Most providers offer this in the console.

4. **Create the key** in the API keys section, name it for what it is for, and if there are permissions, choose the minimum.

5. **Copy it straight away.** Many providers show it only once. If you lose it you cannot get it back: create another and revoke the old one.

Where each option sits changes from provider to provider and over time. Follow the provider's documentation, not a screen you saw in a video. The price is always on their pricing page.

## Where to keep it, and where never

| Place | Fine? | Why |
|---|---|---|
| **An environment variable on the server** | Yes | It stays out of the code. See **environment variables and secrets**. |
| **A configuration file outside the public folder, readable only by you** | Yes | It is not served to anyone and does not go into the repository. |
| **A password vault** | Yes, as a copy | If you lose the server you do not lose the key. |
| **Inside the website's code, or in JavaScript the visitor downloads** | Never | Any visitor can see it, and starts spending on your account. |
| **In a public repository (GitHub, etc.)** | Never | Programs sweep repositories looking for keys, and they are quick about it. |
| **In a chat, e-mail or message** | Never | It stays in places you do not control. |

**If the key has leaked**
(it showed up in a repository, a shared screen, an e-mail), revoke it **now**, in the provider's console, and create another. Then check usage to see whether anyone has used it. Deleting the message is not enough: the key may already have been copied.

1. **One key per project or agent.** You can revoke one without stopping the others.
2. **Rotate them now and then** and whenever someone who knew them leaves the project.
3. **Keep the limit as low as the project allows,** and raise it only when you need to.

On a WordPress site, if a plugin asks for the key, it is stored in the site's database. That is acceptable, but only if the site is kept updated and protected. See **WordPress with AI help**.

NEED A HAND?

Need help working out where to keep a key on your VPS? Tell us how it is set up.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- **Tokens explained: how AI model APIs are counted**
- **Environment variables and secrets for your application**
- **What OpenClaw costs: the API keys, not the server**

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