



Person of Non-Interest

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What is a VPN?

What a VPN really does, what it doesn't, and whether you need one.

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In short: a VPN (virtual private network) sends your internet traffic through an encrypted tunnel to a VPN company's server. It hides what you do from the Wi-Fi network you're on and from your internet provider, but the VPN company can see it instead. It does **not** make you anonymous. Many people don't need one for everyday browsing.

How it works, in plain words

Normally, your internet provider, or whoever runs the Wi-Fi you're using, can see which websites you connect to. With a VPN, your traffic first travels through a sealed tunnel to the VPN company, and only then out to the internet. To the websites you visit, it looks like you're coming from the VPN company.

What a VPN does

- **Hides your browsing from the local network**, such as a hotel's, café's, or airport's Wi-Fi, and from your internet provider.
- **Can make it look like you're in a different place.** Some services detect and block this, so it isn't guaranteed.

What a VPN doesn't do

- **It doesn't make you anonymous.** Websites and apps can still track you through your accounts, your phone's location, cookies, and other methods.
- **It doesn't remove trust, it moves it.** The VPN company can see your browsing instead of your internet provider. Some VPN companies collect or sell that information.
- **It doesn't protect you from scams.** A VPN won't stop a phishing (<https://beaponi.com/learn/spot-phishing>) message, a bad download, or a weak password.

Do you need one?

- **For most everyday browsing at home: usually not.** Most websites already encrypt your connection (the "https" in the address). See What is encryption? (<https://beaponi.com/learn/what-is-encryption>)
- **It can be worth it** if you often use Wi-Fi you don't trust and you choose a VPN company you do trust.
- **Be wary of "free" VPNs** and big promises like "total anonymity." If a VPN company doesn't charge you, ask how it makes money.

Common questions

Does a VPN protect me on public Wi-Fi? It hides your traffic from whoever runs that network. Because most websites now use encryption anyway, it matters less than it used to, but it can still add a layer on networks you don't trust.

Will a VPN stop websites from tracking me? No. Websites can still recognize you through your accounts, cookies, and other methods.

Is a VPN the same as antivirus? No. A VPN changes how your traffic travels. It doesn't scan for or remove harmful software.

Sources

Checked on October 18, 2026. Next review: by April 2027.

- Choosing the VPN That's Right for You (<https://ssd.eff.org/module/choosing-vpn-thats-right-you>) (Electronic Frontier Foundation, Surveillance Self-Defense)
- Glossary: virtual private network (https://csrc.nist.gov/glossary/term/virtual_private_network) (NIST)

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