

TRUSTED CHOICE GUIDE

The Mini Security Checklist 2026

VPN · password manager · antivirus · cloud storage – what to check and our top picks

A free 4-category extract of our Software Buying Checklist. For each category: the criteria that matter, our top three picks with key facts and one practical tip. All comparisons with sources: trustedchoiceguide.net.

Prices and plans change often – always confirm on the provider's official site. Facts as of October 2026.
Sources are listed in each online article.

Contents

1. VPN

2. Password managers

3. Antivirus

4. Cloud storage

01 VPN

WHAT TO CHECK

- **35%** Privacy: independent no-logs audit, jurisdiction, RAM-only servers
- **25%** Network: servers, countries, protocols
- **20%** Devices, apps and extras (ad/malware blocking)
- **20%** Money-back terms and Trustpilot reviews

OUR TOP 3

1 NordVPN Best overall 9.6

Huge server network, independently audited no-logs policy (Deloitte) and extras such as malware and ad blocking. Up to 10 devices at once.

Devices at once: 10

Based in: Panama

Money-back: 30 days

2 Surfshark Best value · unlimited devices 9.4

Unlimited devices on one subscription, RAM-only servers and an audited no-logs policy – the best choice for families and many devices.

Devices at once: Unlimited

Based in: Netherlands

Money-back: 30 days

3 ExpressVPN Easiest to use 9.2

Simple apps, the fast Lightway protocol and many third-party audits. Plans now cover 10 to 14 devices.

Devices at once: 10–14

Based in: British Virgin Islands

Money-back: 30 days

Tip: We don't list unknown free VPN apps: many finance themselves by collecting and selling user data. If you want free, use Proton VPN's or Windscribe's free plan.

Quick answer: Do I really need a VPN?

A VPN encrypts your traffic on public Wi-Fi and hides your IP address from websites. It does not make you anonymous and does not replace antivirus.

Full comparison: trustedchoiceguide.net/best/vpn

02 Password managers

WHAT TO CHECK

- ❑ **40%** Security: independent audits, zero-knowledge design, open source
- ❑ **25%** Features: sharing, passkeys, aliases, breach alerts
- ❑ **20%** Free plan and fair pricing
- ❑ **15%** Trustpilot reviews

OUR TOP 3

1 **Bitwarden** Best free & open source 9.4

Open-source code on GitHub, yearly independent audits and a free plan with unlimited passwords. Premium is one of the cheapest on the market.

Free plan: Yes, unlimited passwords

Open source: Yes

Based in: USA

2 **1Password** Best for families 9.3

Extra protection through a Secret Key in addition to the master password, SOC 2 Type II certification, Travel Mode and easy family sharing. No free plan.

Free plan: No (trial only)

Open source: No

Based in: Canada

3 **Proton Pass** Best for privacy 9.0

Swiss company, open-source apps, audited by Cure53 and a free plan with unlimited logins plus 10 hide-my-email aliases.

Free plan: Yes, unlimited logins

Open source: Yes

Based in: Switzerland

Tip: Why isn't LastPass listed? After the 2022 breach, in which encrypted customer vaults were stolen, we don't recommend it.

Quick answer: Is a password manager safe?

Good ones use zero-knowledge encryption: your vault is encrypted on your device, so the provider can't read it. Use a strong master password and two-factor authentication.

Full comparison: trustedchoiceguide.net/best/password-managers

03 Antivirus

WHAT TO CHECK

- ❑ **40%** Protection: AV-Comparatives Real-World Protection Test (Feb-May 2026) and AV-TEST (Jul-Aug 2026)
- ❑ **20%** Speed impact and false alarms
- ❑ **20%** Features: VPN, password manager, backup, platforms
- ❑ **20%** Refund policy, free version and Trustpilot reviews

OUR TOP 3

1 **Bitdefender Total Security** Best overall **9.7**

Highest protection rate among the programs we list in AV-Comparatives' Feb-May 2026 real-world test, full marks at AV-TEST, and a light footprint on the PC.

Platforms: Windows · Mac · Android · iOS Money-back: 30 days Free version: Yes

2 **Norton 360 Deluxe** Best all-in-one **9.5**

Excellent lab results plus the most complete package: VPN, password manager and cloud backup in one subscription, with a 60-day money-back guarantee.

Platforms: Windows · Mac · Android · iOS Money-back: 60 days Free version: No

3 **Avast Free Antivirus / Avast One** Best free antivirus **9.2**

The free version scores the same top marks at AV-TEST as many paid suites. Watch out for auto-renewal on paid plans.

Platforms: Windows · Mac · Android · iOS Money-back: 30 days Free version: Yes

Tip: Why isn't Kaspersky listed? Kaspersky scores well in lab tests, but its sale is banned in the US since 2024 and the German BSI has warned against it since 2022, so we don't recommend it.

Quick answer: Is Windows Defender enough in 2026?

Microsoft Defender scored 6/5.5/6 at AV-TEST and 99.0% with zero false alarms at AV-Comparatives, so it is solid basic protection. Paid suites add web protection, VPN, password managers and better ransomware tools.

Full comparison: trustedchoiceguide.net/best/antivirus

04 Cloud storage

WHAT TO CHECK

- ☐ **30%** Privacy and encryption
- ☐ **30%** Price per GB and free storage
- ☐ **20%** Apps, sync and sharing
- ☐ **20%** Independent tests and user reviews

OUR TOP 3

1 **Proton Drive** Best for privacy **9.3**

End-to-end, zero-knowledge encryption for files, names and metadata, under Swiss privacy law. Bundles with Proton Mail, VPN and Pass.

Free storage: 5 GB Paid from: 200 GB ~\$3.99/mo (annual) Zero-knowledge encryption: Yes, default

2 **pCloud** Best lifetime plan **9.2**

Pay once, keep the storage: lifetime plans from \$199 for 500 GB. Up to 10 GB free, Swiss company, built-in media player.

Free storage: Up to 10 GB Paid from: 500 GB \$49.99/yr · lifetime \$199

Zero-knowledge encryption: Paid add-on (Crypto)

3 **Sync.com** Best budget encrypted storage **9.0**

Zero-knowledge encryption across your whole storage at a low price: 2 TB for about \$57.60 a year.

Free storage: 5 GB Paid from: 2 TB ~\$57.60/yr Zero-knowledge encryption: Yes, default

Tip: Zero-knowledge means only you hold the key: not even the provider can read your files. Google Drive, OneDrive and Dropbox can technically access your data.

Quick answer: Which cloud storage is the most private?

Proton Drive and Sync.com encrypt everything with zero-knowledge encryption by default; pCloud offers it as a paid add-on.

Full comparison: trustedchoiceguide.net/best/cloud-storage

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