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Incremental backups: what they are and when a full copy is still needed

Making Backups

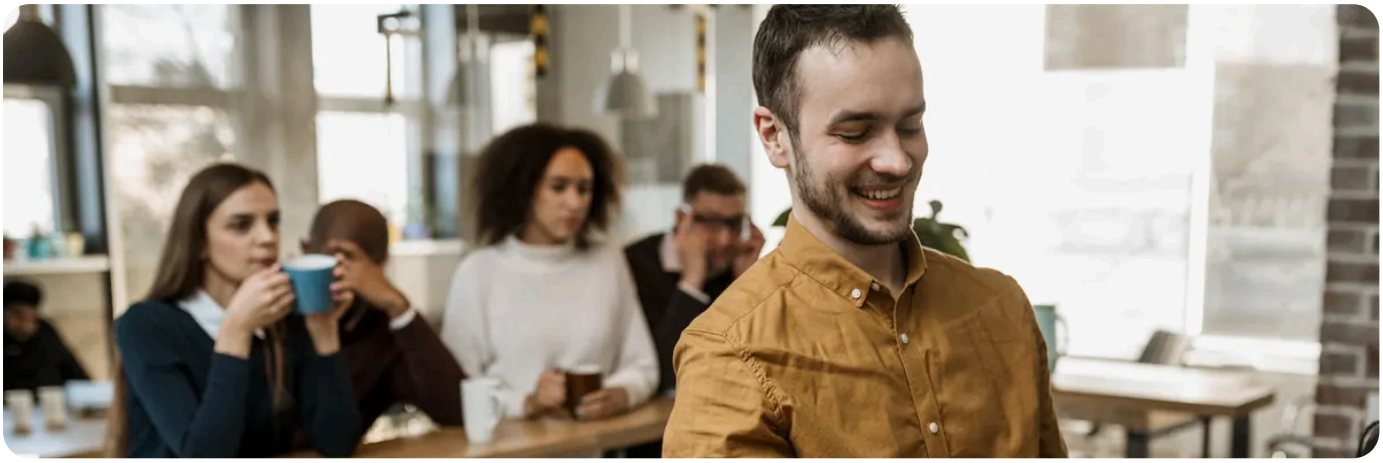
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Incremental backups: what they are and when a full copy is still needed

Making Backups Created on **October 10, 2026** 3 min read



A **full** backup stores everything, every time. An **incremental** backup stores only what changed since the previous one. It saves time and space, with a price: to restore, you need the starting full copy **and** every incremental after it, in order. That is why even people who use incrementals make a full copy now and then.

Full, incremental and differential

Type	What it copies	To restore you need	Space and time
Full	Everything, every time.	Just that copy.	The most, each time.
Incremental	What changed since the previous copy, whatever kind it was.	The full copy and every incremental up to the day you want.	The least. Each copy is small.
Differential	What changed since the last *full* copy.	The full copy and the latest differential.	Grows every day until the next full copy.

An example. Monday, a full copy. Tuesday, only the files that changed since Monday. Wednesday, only those that changed since Tuesday. To restore Wednesday, you combine Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. If Tuesday's file is damaged, Wednesday no longer restores properly.

What this means for a site

1. **The files** (themes, plugins, images) change little from day to day: the ideal case for incrementals. A site with lots of images gains a lot.

2 **The database** is different. `mysqldump` always produces a full copy (**backing up and restoring with mysqldump**). Incremental database backup exists, but it needs access to the database server's configuration, which a VPS has and a shared account does not. For most sites, a full database export every day is small and enough.

3 **The automatic copy of your account** is made by us, before dawn, with the last 30 days kept (**how long we keep backups**). How the provider organises it inside is the provider's business; for you, what counts is being able to pick a day and restore.

On a VPS: incrementals with rsync

On your VPS you can make copies that *look* full but only take space for what changed. rsync has the `--link-dest` option: files identical to the previous copy become links to the same data, and only new ones use space. The commands are yours, and support does not install or repair them (**how far our support goes**).

An example, with practice dates you swap for yours (the first run, with no previous copy, copies everything):

```
rsync -a /var/www/ /backups/2026-10-09/
rsync -a --link-dest=/backups/2026-10-09 /var/www/ /backups/2026-10-10/
```

Each dated folder shows the whole site, and you can delete one without damaging the others. The database copy is made separately, beforehand, with mysqldump. To send this to another machine, see **copying files to another server with rsync**.

! **In a chain, one damaged link affects the rest.**
If an incremental copy gets corrupted, the later ones may not restore. Make a full copy every so often, and rehearse the restore (**testing a backup**).

! **Everything on the same disk is one copy.**
Rsync's linked copies live on the same disk; if the disk dies, they all die. Take at least one away: **off-site backups**.

Many WordPress backup plugins
offer "incremental" for the files. Check in the plugin itself whether the database is copied in full each time, and whether the destination keeps more than the latest copy.

NEED A HAND?

Want to know what your account already keeps before you build copies of your own? Ask us.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- Making and keeping your own backup, and testing that it works
- How many backups to keep: daily, weekly and monthly
- Copying files to another server with rsync, safely
- Backing up a VPS: snapshots or files

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