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How to update a Debian or Ubuntu VPS, and turn on automatic security updates

Administration & Fixes

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How to update a Debian or Ubuntu VPS, and turn on automatic security updates

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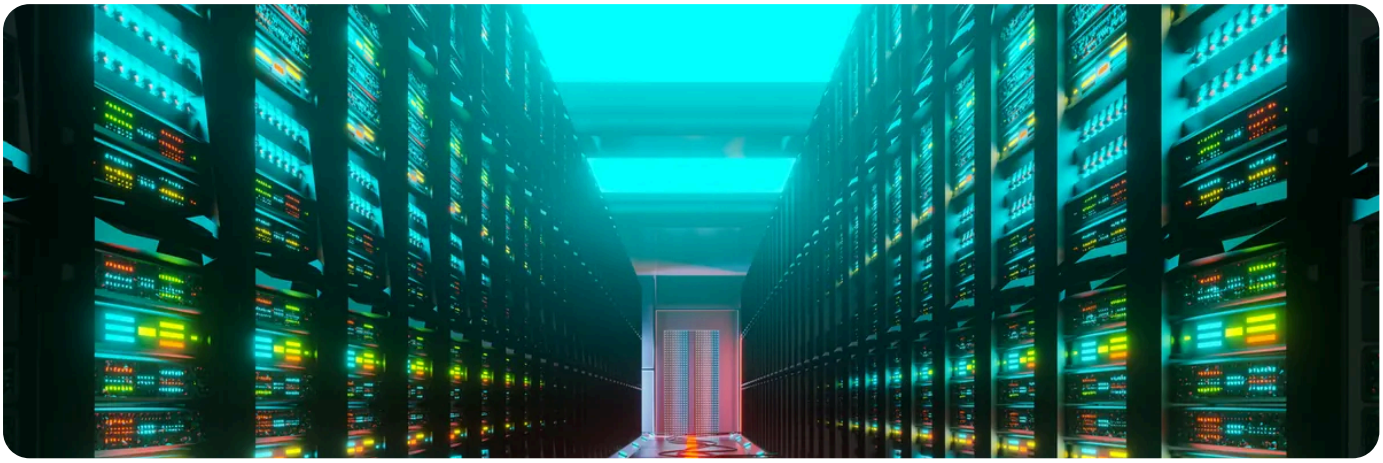

A server that is not updated piles up **known security holes**, and the updates already released are the cheapest defence you have. There are two jobs: the **manual routine** (updating when it suits you, seeing what changes) and **automatic security updates** (only the fixes, with no intervention). This guide covers Debian and Ubuntu; at the end, the equivalent for AlmaLinux and Rocky. The commands are yours, on your own server: support does not run them for you (see **how far our support goes**).

The manual routine

1. **Take a copy or a snapshot first.** It is what saves you if an update breaks a service. See **backing up a VPS: snapshots or files**.

2. **Refresh the package list:** `sudo apt update`. It installs nothing, it only checks what is new.

3. **See what will change:** `apt list --upgradable`.

4. **Apply:** `sudo apt upgrade`. Read what it proposes before confirming. `sudo apt full-upgrade` does the same but also installs or removes packages when needed to resolve dependencies.

5. **Clear out what is left over:** `sudo apt autoremove`.

6. **Check whether you need to reboot.** On Ubuntu, if the file `/var/run/reboot-required` exists, the updates (the kernel, for example) only take effect after `sudo reboot`. Reboot at a quiet moment and confirm that the services came back.

Automatic security updates

1. **Install:** `sudo apt install unattended-upgrades`. On Ubuntu it usually comes installed.
2. **Enable:** `sudo dpkg-reconfigure --priority=low unattended-upgrades` and answer “Yes”.
3. **Confirm** that the file `/etc/apt/apt.conf.d/20auto-upgrades` has the lines `APT::Periodic::Update-Package-Lists "1";` and `APT::Periodic::Unattended-Upgrade "1";`.
4. **Do a dry run:** `sudo unattended-upgrade --dry-run --debug` shows what it would do, without touching anything. The logs are in `/var/log/unattended-upgrades/`.

By default only **security** updates are applied and the server **does not reboot by itself**. It is worth checking now and then whether a reboot is pending.

On AlmaLinux or Rocky	Command
See what is available	`sudo dnf check-update`
Apply	`sudo dnf upgrade`
Check whether a reboot is needed	`sudo dnf install dnf-utils` and then `needs-restarting -r`
Automatic	`sudo dnf install dnf-automatic`, set `apply_updates = yes` in `/etc/dnf/automatic.conf` and `sudo systemctl enable --now dnf-automatic.timer`

You need not update a production server blindly.
An update to something your site depends on (the database, the PHP version) can change behaviour. To pin a package at its current version: `sudo apt-mark hold package-name`. And if the system has reached end of life, it stops receiving fixes: see **keeping your VPS secure: the six that matter**.

“Could not get lock /var/lib/dpkg/lock-frontend”
means another process (often the automatic updates themselves) is using apt. Wait a few minutes and repeat; do not delete the lock file. Moving to a different release of the system is another matter: see **upgrading Ubuntu to the next LTS release without breaking the server**.

NEED A HAND?

Did an update break a service and you do not know how to go back? Tell us what ran and the VPS address.

Open a support ticket →

SEE ALSO

- Keeping your VPS or dedicated server secure: the six that matter →
- Backing up a VPS: snapshots or files →
- Upgrading Ubuntu to the next LTS release without breaking the server →
- Which operating system to choose for your VPS or server →

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