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Choosing a control panel for your VPS: what to decide before you install one

Control Panels

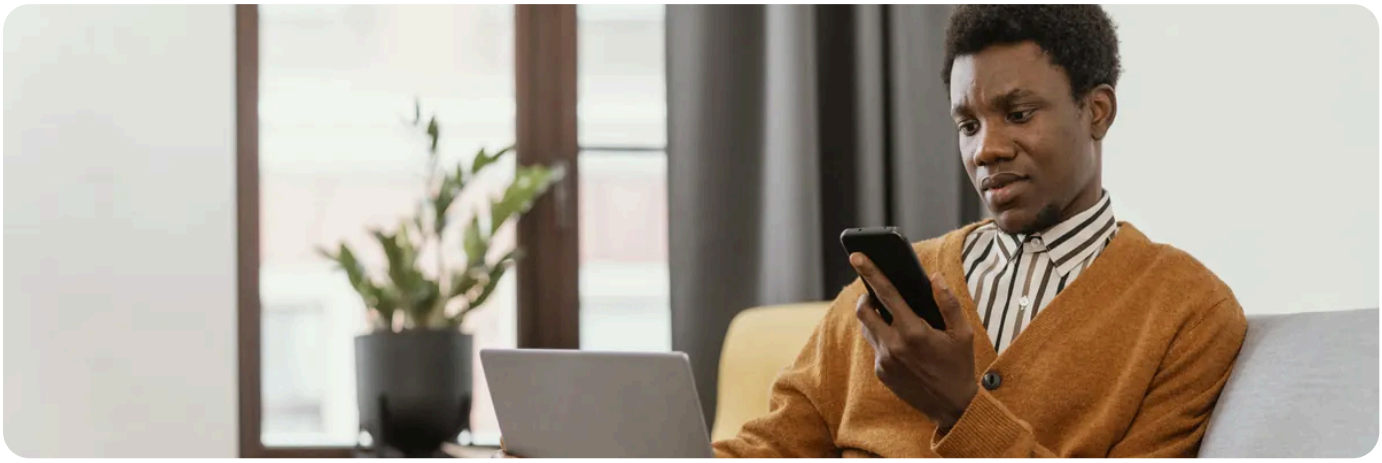
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Choosing a control panel for your VPS: what to decide before you install one

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This article is for people with a VPS or a dedicated server with root access. On shared plans the panel is cPanel, and you neither choose nor install another one. **The short answer:** you do not pick a panel by its looks. You pick it with four questions: **do you need a panel at all**, **which operating system** it runs on, **whether the server will handle e-mail**, and **who keeps it updated**. And you decide before any site goes on the server, because a panel is installed on a freshly installed system, not on top of one that is already working. No panel is included with our VPS: **managed or unmanaged VPS** explains what comes with it and what is ordered separately.

The questions that decide

Question	Why it matters
Do you need a panel?	A single site, run by someone who knows Linux, does fine without one: fewer parts, fewer open ports. Several sites, clients with their own logins or mailboxes created every week call for a panel.
Which operating system?	**The panel decides the system, not the other way round.** Each panel publishes the systems it supports, and some run on one family only (Debian and Ubuntu only, or the Red Hat family only). Check the official list before you order or reinstall: **which operating system to choose**.
Will the server handle e-mail?	Nearly every panel installs a mail server. Keeping mail on the VPS means looking after the IP's reputation, reverse DNS, SPF and DKIM. It is often better to keep e-mail elsewhere: **why a mail server on a VPS is hard**.
Licence or free?	cPanel, Plesk and DirectAdmin need a licence. HestiaCP, Virtualmin (in its free edition), CyberPanel and CloudPanel have free editions. Free does not mean no cost: the maintenance time is yours.
Who maintains it?	On an unmanaged VPS, panel and system updates are yours. An outdated panel with its port open to the internet is one of the most sought-after ways in.

Question	Why it matters
What resources are left?	Panel, mail server, antivirus and database use memory before the first site opens. On a small VPS you will notice: **out of memory on a VPS**.

Where things are: cPanel, Plesk and DirectAdmin

Function	In cPanel	In Plesk and DirectAdmin
Site files	File Manager, folder `public_html`	Plesk: Files, folder `httpdocs`. DirectAdmin: File Manager, folder `domains/<domain>/public_html`.
E-mail accounts	Email Accounts	Plesk: Mail. DirectAdmin: E-Mail Manager.
Databases	MySQL Databases and phpMyAdmin	Plesk: Databases. DirectAdmin: MySQL Management.
DNS records	Zone Editor	Plesk: the domain's DNS settings. DirectAdmin: DNS Management.
Scheduled tasks	Cron Jobs	Plesk: Scheduled Tasks. DirectAdmin: Cron Jobs.
Server administration	WHM, a separate panel	Plesk: Tools & Settings, in the administrator account. DirectAdmin: the Admin level, in the same interface.

Names change with the version and the interface language. Look for the function, not a memorised name. The wider comparison is in **cPanel, DirectAdmin or Plesk**.

Before installing, in this order

1. **Choose the panel first and the system second.** Check in the panel's official documentation that the system and version you have (or will ask for) are on the supported list.

2. **Check what the server has:** in an SSH session, look at the system, processors, memory and free disk:
   `cat /etc/os-release`
   `nproc`
   `free -h`
   `df -h /`

3. **Make sure the server is clean:** if a web server, a database or another panel is already running, the installer may refuse or, worse, mix configurations. To see what is already listening: `sudo ss -tlnp`

4 **If the server already has things on it,** the clean route is to copy them off and reinstall the system: **reinstalling or changing your VPS system**.

5 **Take a snapshot or a backup first** before running the installer, so there is somewhere to go back to: **backing up a VPS**.

6 **Once installed,** change the administrator password, close the panel's port in the firewall to anyone who does not need it, and switch on updates: **keeping your VPS secure**.

One server, one panel.
Two panels on the same system write to the same web server, DNS and mail configuration files, and each one undoes what the other did. To change panels, prepare a new server and move the sites to it.

Want cPanel or Plesk on the VPS?
Those need a licence and can be ordered separately, with a quote first, as explained in **managed or unmanaged VPS**. The free panels you install yourself, and questions about them are answered in each project's documentation and community.

NEED A HAND?

Not sure which panel suits what you will run on the VPS? Tell us how many sites, whether they need e-mail and who will manage them.

Open a support ticket →

In our plans

Memory and disk decide which panel fits. Our VPS plans run on KVM and give full SSH access. They start at VPS1 with 1 vCPU, 2 GB RAM and 40 GB NVMe, and go up to VPS6 with 32 vCPU, 64 GB RAM and 1,280 GB NVMe. The Cloud plans go from Cloud1 (1 vCPU, 2 GB, 25 GB) to Cloud6 (32 vCPU, 64 GB, 400 GB).

- A panel uses part of the RAM for itself. Read the minimum the panel publishes and choose a plan with room above it, not exactly at it.
- No panel comes with the VPS, so the whole disk is yours to organise.
- We do not list the operating systems here. See the list offered for your plan when you order, and compare it with the systems the panel supports before you pay.

SEE ALSO

- cPanel, DirectAdmin or Plesk: what actually differs between control panels
- Managed or unmanaged VPS: which to choose and who does what
- Which operating system to choose for your VPS or server
- Reinstalling or changing your VPS operating system
- HestiaCP and VestaCP on a VPS: what the panel gives you and what stays your job
- Running a VPS without a control panel: what the panel did and how you do it by hand

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