Finding Your Solution

As you build your photo collection, designate one computer - and one main folder on that computer - to be the primary location where you keep all of your photos. Otherwise, it's difficult over time to remember where you've put them all. It's also much easier to create a backup from a designated computer and the designated "photo" folder. Of course, once you have the "master" copy of a photo on your main "photo computer," feel free to keep copies on as many other computers as you like.

Next, organize your photos in a way that you can easily find them in the future. And finally, decide what backup method you'll use to safeguard your photo files.

To help you set up a backup plan that will work for you personally, we've assembled a table to compare the different media and methods you can use to preserve your photo memories. The single most important thing to consider as you look through the options, is to pick something that will work best for you — something that you get started using right away and you'll be likely to stick with as your photo collection grows.

Backup Methods at a Glance

	Longevity	Capacity*	Cost	Comments
Prints	70+ years if the right combination of ink and paper is used or if printed commercially	Unlimited!	10 to 39 US cents per standard size (4"x6") print	Most suitable for your most valuable photos that you absolutely do not want to lose. Human-eye readable - no device required to view photos!
External hard drive	Variable, generally 4-5 years, but may fail without warning	Up to 750 GB	$100-$500 (prices continue to drop)	Easy to store and backup large numbers of photos. Backup process can run unattended.
CD	Use 'archival or photo grade quality' only.	Low, only 600 or 700 MB (less than a 1GB camera card)	CD discs and burners are relatively inexpensive. Most personal computers are now sold with CD burners (CD-RW drives).	May need dozens of CDs to store all the photos in a typical collection, and thus difficult to search. Some compatibility issues reading discs on different computers.
DVD	Use 'archival or photo grade quality' only.	4.7 GB (stores photos from four 1 GB camera cards). Blu-Ray and HD DVD versions available with higher capacities (need special drives)	DVD discs and burners are relatively inexpensive. Blu-Ray and HD versions are currently relatively expensive.	Probably need several DVDs to store all the photos in a typical collection, and thus difficult to search. Some compatibility issues because of different formats and from reading discs on different computers. The lifetime of Blu-ray and HD DVD discs may be less than the lifetime of standard DVDs.
Online storage	As long as the company lasts, and the customer meets purchase or subscription requirements. Also depends on the quality of the company's own backup procedures	Varies: may be limited in terms of total capacity or number of photos. Resolution/quality of stored photos may also be limited.	Can be free, but be sure to read terms & conditions. For example, you may have to make a regular purchase. Paid services may offer more storage and guaranteed data backup ($15 - 20/mo).	Requires uploading. Downloading of photos back to computer may not be possible, or may require a payment. Usually possible to order CDs or DVDs as well as prints, albums and other photo items

*Note: One gigabyte (GB) of storage capacity will hold about 850 photos from a 3 MP (megapixel) digital camera or 400 photos from a 5 MP camera.

Other Backup Methods

	Longevity	Capacity	Cost	Comments
Networked hard drives for home storage	Variable, generally 4-5 years, but may fail without warning. Special techniques such as 'RAID' can be used for greater security of your photos	Up to 1 Terabyte (TB) = 1,000 GB	Relatively expensive ($600-$2000)	May be complex to set up and maintain, may be more reliable than a single hard drive

Backing up digital photos onto film will soon be provided as a service to consumers. Specially designed film should last for decades to 100+ years with proper storage methods. Film IS recommended for long-term backup; however at this time services are not readily available to consumers. Keep an eye out for this type of service to become available soon.

Methods NOT recommended for long-term backup include regular camera cards, USB flash drives, magnetic tape, and floppy disks.