

Update, Update, Update

6 Tips to Make Your pfSense Update Smooth

Overview

It's important to ensure that your firewall is up-to-date with the latest security patches and bug fixes. As important and basic as this sounds, it's just as easily forgotten. Don't just set and forget your firewall. Set reminders on your calendar, read the Netgate Newsletter that discusses the latest updates, subscribe to the Netgate Blog feed, or just make it your mission to check for updates on the first and the fifteenth of each month. Whatever you have to do to remember, run the updates.

Updating pfSense is easy, but every firewall is set differently and there are some best practices to observe before and during your update that can make the process smooth from start to finish.

1) Backup Before You Update

Updates generally go smoothly, but depending on the complexity of your configuration, it's possible something unexpected could happen. Having a backup of the configuration file (config.xml) is a lifesaver if you need to reinstall pfSense software from scratch. You can find the Backup and Restore options in the Diagnostics menu.

2) Read the Release Notes

A simple upgrade can be frustrating if it doesn't run as expected. It's even more frustrating if it's a problem that could have been avoided.

Our developers, testers, and the community work hard to make the update as smooth and seamless as possible, running release candidates through extensive testing before approved for release. As part of the development process, sometimes a decision is made to push off a bug or issue fix to a later release, especially if we're working to fix a security vulnerability. We document these decisions in the release notes so that users are aware of it before they update.

When updating, take a minute to look over the release notes before you commit.

3) Uninstall the Packages

We don't usually recommend uninstalling packages before running a pfSense update, but there are occasions when you might want to as a precaution.

If the pfSense software you're running is out of date by several versions, you might consider uninstalling your packages before update, especially if the packages have also had new version releases.

Another reason might be based on the release notes. You might not need to uninstall all of the deployed packages. Follow the guidelines set forth in the release notes to determine if uninstalling packages is required for the update.

4) Let the Update Complete

This is probably the most important updating tip of all. Do not turn off the system until the update is complete! This cannot be stressed enough.

Some updates can take longer than others because of a variety of reasons. Don't be impatient. Rebooting before the update completes will generally corrupt the pfSense install and require a fresh reinstallation.

The next tip will help you identify when the update is complete so there's no question.

5) Watch the Console Output

Watching the serial or video (depending on the system) console output can help you determine when the update has completed. When you initiate an update from the webConfigurator, you can see it begin, but then you see a countdown timer to tell you when it will try to reboot, with specific instructions not to leave or refresh the page.

You won't get a clear picture of what's happening on the system through the webGUI because you lose the network connection, but your console connection is still active. If you monitor the console output, you will see exactly what packages are being installed and you will know when the update is complete.

6) Update in a Lab Environment

This last tip might not be practical for every situation but depending on the size of your organization and the number of pfSense deployments you have, it's often better to work in a lab before moving updates into your production environment.

Working in a lab offers you the opportunity to verify the update will work as expected without affecting your network uptime.

About Netgate

Netgate, the open-source secure networking company, delivers superior value firewall, VPN, and routing solutions. With over 1 million active pfSense installations – businesses, educational institutions, and government agencies around the world depend on Netgate for cloud or premises, enterprise ready, secure networking solutions.

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