

What would happen to TikTok on my phone if the app is banned?

Megan Cerullo



Edited By [Alain Sherter](#)

Updated on: January 14, 2025 / 10:29 AM EST / CBS News

Supreme Court likely to uphold TikTok ban

[Why the Supreme Court seems likely to uphold TikTok ban 04:09](#)

TikTok faces a [possible ban in the U.S.](#) later this month if a law that could require the social media app's Chinese owner, ByteDance, to part ways with the platform takes effect as scheduled on Jan. 19.

Specifically, the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act would [make it illegal](#) for app stores from Google or Apple, as well as web-hosting services, to distribute or service TikTok. If ByteDance had started the process to sell TikTok, the president also could push pause on adoption of the law for 90 days.

On Tuesday, Bloomberg [reported](#) that Elon Musk could acquire TikTok's U.S. operations, effectively allowing the app to evade a ban. Wedbush technology analyst Dan Ives said that he doesn't expect ByteDance to ever sell TikTok with its algorithm, which is widely considered to be the platform's most valuable feature.

Asked for comment on the possibility of a sale of its U.S. operations to Musk, a spokesperson for TikTok told CBS MoneyWatch, "We can't be expected to comment on pure fiction."

Musk did not immediately respond to CBS MoneyWatch's request for comment.

The Supreme Court on Jan. 11 heard arguments from government attorneys, who say TikTok poses a threat to U.S. national security, and from lawyers for the social media platform. Experts said the justices seemed receptive to the government's case, increasing the likelihood of a ban. Here's what that would mean for TikTok users in the U.S.

Could I use TikTok after the ban?

If the law goes into force on Jan. 19, people in the U.S. who have not already downloaded the TikTok app would no longer be able to access it. It will no longer be available for download in app stores, including Apple's and Google's.

For TikTok users who already have the short-form video app on their devices, it remains to be seen what will happen to the app. In one scenario, it will go dark, and users will receive a notice indicating that it's not functional or available to them.

"They will get a notice that says, 'This service is not available in your country. That's most likely what will happen based on what we've seen in other countries that have banned certain platforms,'" Timothy Edgar, a professor of cybersecurity at Brown University, told CBS MoneyWatch. "This generation may be in for a very rude awakening if the law goes into effect and they find a major social media platform that they came to rely on as creators, or just users, is suddenly not available."

While such an action would be unprecedented in the U.S., that's been the experience of users of banned apps in other countries, added Edgar, who thinks this is most likely outcome in the U.S.

Other cybersecurity experts say TikTok might not become inaccessible overnight, but rather that the user experience in the U.S. will degrade over time.

"If you already have TikTok on your phone you can still use it, but over time you will not receive any updates, so the app will become obsolete," said Qi Liao, a professor of computer and network security at Central Michigan University, told CBS MoneyWatch. "Various issues could arise because TikTok may introduce new features or security patches, and the app in the U.S. will have a sluggish performance as well as security issues. So eventually TikTok users will probably stop using the vulnerable version."

Could I access TikTok through a VPN?

Edgar notes that the new law doesn't target users, meaning that even if the ban takes effect it wouldn't be illegal for people to have TikTok on their phones or to try to access the platform.

Indeed, U.S.-based users would likely be able to work around the ban by using a virtual private network to access TikTok. VPNs offer privacy and can make U.S.-based computers appear to internet service providers to be based outside of the country.

Eva Galperin, director of cybersecurity at the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a nonprofit focused on digital rights, told CBS MoneyWatch that U.S. TikTok users would likely be able to circumvent the ban via VPN, though that approach does carry risks.

"Presumably, it would work just fine," she said, while warning that "a lot of free VPNs make money by selling user data."

Galperin added that some providers of free VPN services have been known to install malware on users' devices. "So I would advise people to be very careful about the VPN they choose," she said.

Meanwhile, Edgar cautioned that more sophisticated VPNs require time, money and effort to set up.

"It's not something Americans are used to doing because we haven't experienced our government filtering the internet," he said.

What are some TikTok alternatives?

Users looking for a TikTok replacement app do have alternatives, such as YouTube Shorts and Instagram Reels.

"Short-form video content is something people want and they'll continue to find ways to get it," Edgar said.

[Legal analysis of the TikTok ban Supreme Court arguments 01:53](#)

Another substitute is Lemon8, a social media app owned by ByteDance that launched in 2020, although experts note it could be subject to the same law that threatens to ban TikTok in the U.S.

RedNote, a Shanghai-based Chinese language social media app also bears many similarities to TikTok. Called "Xiaohongshu" in China, meaning "little red book" in Mandarin, it's available for download in app stores in the U.S., and is currently the top social app in Apple's store.

In:

- [TikTok](#)

[Megan Cerullo](#)

Megan Cerullo is a New York-based reporter for CBS MoneyWatch covering small business, workplace, health care, consumer spending and personal finance topics. She regularly appears on CBS News 24/7 to discuss her reporting.