



Trading Oracle AI Database 26ai Confusion for Clarity

A guide to upgrade risks and realities for leaders

Rimini Street[®]

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Executive summary

Like all major software releases, the arrival of Oracle AI Database 26ai has been accompanied by bold innovation claims and a sense of urgency intended to push customers toward upgrading. However, despite the vendor positioning this release as a significant step forward, the reality is more complex — with timeline shifts and potential defects introducing both confusion and concern.

As Oracle AI Database 26a is nearing general availability, now is the time for careful evaluation. Before making any moves, licensees must take the following into consideration:

Status and support availability for Oracle Database versions

- **Readiness of Oracle AI Database 26ai for production environments**
- **Operational, testing and stability risks associated with database upgrades**
- **Challenges involved in upgrading to Oracle AI Database 26ai**
- **Viable alternatives to 26ai upgrades**

This eBook explores how Oracle Database customers arrived at this moment, what the practical implications of this new release are and why it's worth taking a more deliberate, value-driven approach to database strategy.

With these insights, licensees will be better equipped to answer the most fundamental question: “Is moving to Oracle AI Database 26ai (or even Oracle Database 23ai) worth the cost, risks and effort required to get there?”

How Oracle Database has evolved over time

Today's upgrade decisions are shaped as much by the vendor's changing release models, support policies and patching strategies as the technology itself.

To put Oracle AI Database 26ai into context, it helps to examine three key areas:

1. The continued reliance on pre-19c versions
2. The broad adoption of Oracle Database 19c
3. The distinct shift brought on by 26ai

Knowing the backstory of how Oracle Database arrived at this point can help leaders evaluate Oracle AI Database 26ai and make informed decisions going forward.

The past still matters: Oracle Database before 19c

Oracle Database has been around for nearly 50 years, dating back to the release of Oracle V2 in 1979.¹ Since then, it has become deeply embedded in enterprise environments. Many organizations are still relying on earlier versions — from Oracle Database 7 on — and successfully doing so, often with the help of third-party support.

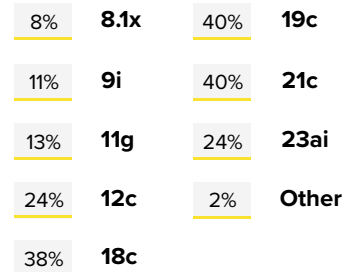
Research data reflects this reality.

A [2025 survey of Oracle Database users](#) found that versions released prior to Oracle Database 19c still account for a significant share of the overall install base. In fact, approximately **94% of respondents reported running Oracle Database 18c or older.**

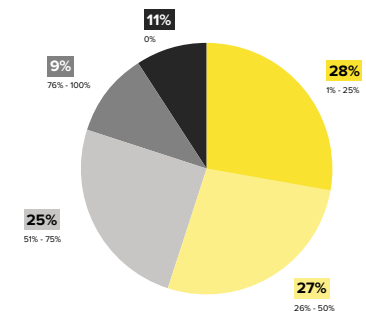
The continued use of these older Oracle Database versions demonstrates a common theme: Despite their age, earlier releases remain stable, reliable and well understood. For many organizations, that simple fact makes them worth keeping.

¹ "Oracle Database," Wikipedia, retrieved 1 April 2026 from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oracle_Database

If you are using Oracle Database which versions are currently in use?



What percentage of your Oracle Database instances are 18c or earlier?



Source: [2025 survey of Oracle Database users](#)



The era of predictability: Oracle Database 19c through 26ai

The 2019 release of Oracle Database 19c marked a period of relative stability in Oracle's database lifecycle. This version introduced several new innovations and features, including:

- Automated indexing
- Query quarantine
- Oracle Machine Learning for Python
- Enhancements to Oracle Data Guard

After the first few quarterly patches, 19c was considered a solid release by those in the Oracle DB community.

Oracle Database 19c gained widespread popularity, eventually becoming the most commonly used version in enterprise environments. Its long support horizon — combined with its enhanced security features and advanced data management capabilities — made it a practical choice for organizations running mission-critical systems.

However, much has changed with respect to Oracle Database since the initial release of 19c. Newer versions have been introduced with different delivery methods, architectural requirements and support timelines — and the trend seems to be holding steady.

A sudden arrival: Oracle AI Database 26ai

In October 2025, Oracle announced the “release” of Oracle AI Database 26ai for existing systems supporting Oracle Database 23ai.² This announcement came as a surprise — not just because of the new version number, but also because of the deployment method.

Rather than arriving as a self-contained release, Oracle AI Database 26ai was delivered as part of a patch set. Customers wanting to patch Oracle Database 23ai were told they’d have to upgrade to 26ai to remain supported.

You are here: Oracle Database options today

The confusion deepened in 2025, when Oracle stated that 26ai would be released for Linux and other platforms early the following year. Fast-forward to January 2026, and the vendor made good on its promise to release Oracle AI Database 26ai for Linux — this time using the traditional release methodology. But as of the time of this publication, it’s still unclear when other on-premises releases will be made available.

Due to the sudden timing and release method of Oracle AI Database 26ai — coupled with shifting and sometimes inconsistent messaging — **there’s growing uncertainty about which version of Oracle Database organizations should be running.**

The arrival of Oracle AI Database 26ai turned what would normally be considered standard maintenance for 23ai users into a major push for upgrades.

² “Oracle AI Database 26ai Powers the AI for Data Revolution,” PR Newswire, retrieved 24 March 2026 from <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/oracle-ai-database-26ai-powers-the-ai-for-data-revolution-302582754.html>

As shown in the table below, Oracle currently supports four database releases, each of which has unique characteristics, delivery models and support implications for customers. What was once a straightforward database selection decision has become much more complex.

Oracle Database release details as of April 2026

RELEASE NAME AND TYPE ³	PLATFORMS RELEASED	INITIAL RELEASE DATE	PATCHING END DATE	PREMIER SUPPORT END DATE	EXTENDED SUPPORT OR ULA SUPPORT END DATE
Oracle Database 19c Long Term Release	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> OCI Engineered Systems All on-premises releases 	04/2019	12/2032	12/2029	12/2032
Oracle Database 21c Innovative Release	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> OCI Base Database Service Most on-premises Engineered Systems Select on-premises releases 	12/2020	07/2027	07/2027	N/A
Oracle Database 23ai Long Term Release	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All OCI platforms ODA and Exadata on-premises No on-premises non-engineered systems released 	05/2024	10/2025 ⁴	10/2026 ⁵	N/A
Oracle AI Database 26ai Long Term Release	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All OCI platforms ODA and Exadata on-premises Linux on-premises release (1/2026) Other on-premises releases (TBD) 	10/2025	TBD	12/2031	TBD

These changes have raised the stakes for organizations running earlier versions, as well as those evaluating newer releases beyond Oracle Database 19c, including 26ai. With multiple options in play, having a firm grasp of how net new releases behave in production environments is crucial — especially when it comes to risk.

For enterprise databases, stability, availability and uptime are key performance requirements. Yet, historically, upgrades to Oracle Database have been a leading source of disruption, introducing risk when reliability is most critical. This tension has affected how organizations approach Oracle Database upgrades for decades.

³ Oracle classifies releases as Long Term Support Releases or Innovation Releases. Tim Hall, "Long Term Releases, Innovation Releases and Preview Releases?" The ORACLE-BASE Blog, retrieved 2 April 2026 from <https://oracle-base.com/blog/2021/01/28/long-term-releases-innovation-releases-and-preview-releases/>

⁴ Oracle AI Database 23ai will automatically upgrade to Oracle Database 26ai when Release Update (RU) 23.26.0 (October 2025) is applied.

⁵ Oracle's current database error correction policy indicates that no requests for interim fixes will be supported after 10/2026. Vijayganesha Sivaprakasam, "Oracle Support Extended for 19c and 23ai," DBVisit, retrieved 20 May 2026 from <https://dbvisit.com/blog/oracle-support-extended-for-19c-and-23ai>

Why uncertainty persists with new Oracle Database releases

Historical stability of new Oracle Database releases

New releases of any software can be unstable, and Oracle Database is no exception. Early versions of several major releases — including Oracle 8i, 9i, 11g, 12c and 18c — were widely recognized as problematic.⁶ As a result, many database administrators delayed adoption until later patch levels proved reliable.

It's likely that Oracle AI Database 26ai will follow this same pattern. History suggests that early adoption is most likely among organizations that require a specific new feature, while others hold off to avoid encountering risk.

Features, risk and limited enterprise benefit

Each new Oracle Database release comes with a vast number of new features/function enhancements, deprecations or additions. In practice, however, these new features tend to benefit only a small subset of users overall. For most organizations, day-to-day operations remain unchanged following an upgrade, if successful.

6 An example of this is the classic 248-day bug introduced in the first version of Oracle 8i. Kiran Kumar, "Oracle Hang After 248 Days Uptime," Scribd, retrieved 3 April 2026 from <https://www.scribd.com/document/56800092/Hang-During-Startup-When-System-Uptime-248-Days>

7 "Enterprise Resource Planning to Optimize Operations," Gartner, retrieved 14 May 2026 from <https://www.gartner.com/en/information-technology/topics/enterprise-resource-planning8> An example of this is the classic 248-day bug introduced in the first version of Oracle 8i. Kiran Kumar, "Oracle Hang After 248 Days Uptime," Scribd, retrieved 3 April 2026 from <https://www.scribd.com/document/56800092/Hang-During-Startup-When-System-Uptime-248-Days>

8 Gyana Swain, "How Birmingham's \$48M Oracle ERP project turned into an epic failure," CIO, retrieved 14 May 2026 from <https://www.cio.com/article/3830277/how-birminghams-48m-oracle-erp-project-turned-into-an-epic-failure.html>

9 Eric Kimberling, "Cook County's \$250M IT Failures: What Every Transformation Leader Should Learn," Third Stage Consulting Group, retrieved 14 May 2026 from <https://www.thirdstage-consulting.com/blog/cook-countys-250m-it-failures/>

Upgrades introduce real risks, with cost overruns, delays and project abandonment being a common occurrence.

- According to Gartner, more than 70% of recently implemented ERP initiatives will fail to meet their original business use case goals.⁷
- The budget for Birmingham City Council's Oracle project ballooned by nearly 2.5%, with delays pushing out the launch by four years.⁸
- Cook County spent more than \$75M on an Oracle Fusion ERP launch before abandoning the project altogether.⁹

These effects have repeatedly surfaced across Oracle Database releases, impacting stability, usability and budgets. When weighed against the limited benefit for many workloads, the business case for immediate upgrades becomes harder to justify.

Lessons from past releases

Many organizations have strategically opted to let new releases mature before deploying them into production.

Examples include:

- **Early versions of Oracle Database 7**, which were largely ignored until version 7.3 stabilized
- **Oracle Database 8**, which suffered from serious bugs — including issues that prevented database access after a server uptime of 248 days — adoption accelerated only after the arrival of 8.1.7
- **Oracle Database 11g and 12c**, both of which had numerous issues with internal memory management of the System Global Area (SGA), required a fix before deployment
- **The optimizer in Oracle Database 12c**, which also had numerous issues related to new features (e.g., bloom filters) and took several patch cycles to correct, is still facing adoption hesitancy due to persistent bugs (e.g., shared memory-related issues)

These previous situations explain why many database administrators typically wait 1–2 years before considering a new release. The frequent issues with new versions of Oracle Database may not lend much confidence to the stability of 26ai's initial releases.



Changes in Oracle's patching strategy raise concerns

Though caution around new releases has always been warranted, recent changes to Oracle's patching approach are raising the stakes.

In the past, Oracle limited major new functionality to new database releases, while patches primarily focused on bug fixes. Early Oracle Database 19c Release Updates (RUs) followed the old patching paradigm; however, later patch cycles introduced new features that were backported from Oracle Database 23ai, which the vendor struggled to deploy outside of Oracle Cloud Infrastructure-housed systems or Oracle Engineered Systems. As a result, the line between maintenance and upgrades started to blur.

The change became unmistakable in October 2026, when an RU triggered a full database version upgrade. This event caught the Oracle community off guard and marked a seismic shift from established upgrade practices.¹⁰ Whereas upgrades usually come with some expectancy in time for planning, budgeting and testing, organizations now face the possibility of version changes delivered through routine patching — with minimal lead time.

Unsurprisingly, concerns about post-patch stability have intensified. Oracle is not only injecting new features/ functionality into the database but also pushing full version upgrades via the patching vehicle. When routine patching results in an upgrade, it can introduce more problems than it solves — expanding the testing burden, increasing operational risk and creating disruptions that organizations didn't budget or schedule for.

The implications for customers are significant, altering the risk profile of future Oracle Database maintenance and upgrade decisions.

Oracle's patching approach then and now



Pre-19c

Patch sets focused on defect correction (or "bug fixes")



Post-19c

Patch sets introducing new features and triggering upgrades

¹⁰ Tim Hall, "Oracle AI Database 26ai On-Prem Announced," The ORACLE-BASE Blog, retrieved 3 April 2026 from <https://oracle-base.com/blog/2025/12/04/oracle-ai-database-26ai-on-prem-announced/>

The real-world challenges of upgrading to Oracle AI Database 26ai

Moving to Oracle AI Database 26ai introduces complexity beyond the typical effort required to upgrade to a new database release. There are two major challenges organizations will encounter:

- 1. The lack of a direct path from pre-19c versions to 26ai**
- 2. The required adoption of the new CDB/PDB database architecture**

Together, these factors increase the time, effort and risk involved in moving to Oracle AI Database 26ai — particularly for organizations with long-established environments.

The impractical path: Moving from older Oracle versions

Currently, Oracle Database 23ai — and Oracle AI Database 26ai by extension — only supports direct upgrades from Oracle Database 19c and 21c.¹¹ As a result, organizations running versions earlier than 19c are required to perform one or more intermediate upgrades before reaching 26ai.

Compounding this challenge, there's no direct upgrade path from Oracle Database 19c to Oracle AI Database 26ai. Instead, organizations must first upgrade to Oracle Database 23ai and then apply the October 2025 RU patch set to complete the transition to 26ai. Though it only requires the application of one RU patch to the base Oracle Database 23ai image — as patch sets are cumulative — the overall process is still less streamlined than most database administrators would prefer.

¹¹ An alternative single-pass database migration path is available when moving smaller databases to Oracle Database 23ai. In these cases, you can use Oracle Data Pump Export/Import to export all the data from the old database and then import it into a newly created Oracle Database 23ai. This option is not viable for larger databases because it's a slow process that requires a significant amount of IO and disk space.

Note that the use of Oracle Data Pump doesn't address the issues revolving around the need to modify apps to use the CDB/PDB architecture.

For instance, if an organization is running Oracle Database 12.2, upgrading to Oracle AI Database 26ai typically requires:

1. Upgrading from 12.2 to 19c
2. Upgrading from 19c to 23ai
3. Apply the required RU patch to move to 26ai

Each step adds significant downtime, effort and risk — and requires regression testing after each upgrade is completed. For legacy environments, the cumulative burden can be substantial.¹²

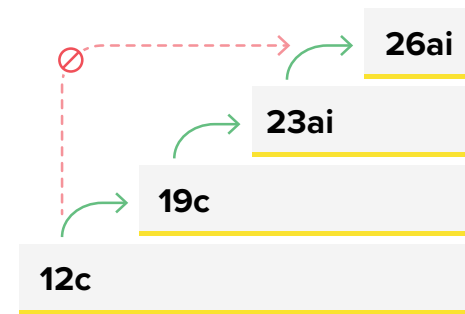
Architectural change as a barrier: The end of the classic database model

Along with the upgrade path complexity, Oracle AI Database 26ai enforces a fundamental architectural requirement — one previously introduced with 12.2 as optional. Whereas the classic architecture contained only one logical database, the CDB/PDB architecture supports multiple databases called pluggable databases (PDBs) — all of which are managed by a single master database called the container database (CDB).¹³

Oracle has now fully discontinued support for the classic, non-CDB model. This means that upgrading to Oracle Database 23ai or 26ai requires the use of the CDB/PDB model. For those running older, non-CDB databases, the conversion represents a separate and often substantial effort.

This architectural shift must be factored into any Oracle Database upgrade decision, as it adds time, cost and risk regardless of the starting database version.

Example of a multistep upgrade path



¹² Another option is to upgrade using either Oracle Data Pump or the Oracle exp\imp utilities; however, it's usually more difficult and time-consuming than a direct upgrade.

¹³ Tim Hall, "Multitenant: Overview of Container Databases (CDB) and Pluggable Databases (PDB)," ORACLE-BASE, retrieved 3 April 2026 from <https://oracle-base.com/articles/12c/multitenant-overview-container-database-cdb-12cr1>
<https://oracle-base.com/articles/12c/multitenant-overview-container-database-cdb-12cr1>

What comes after Oracle AI Database 26ai — and why it matters

A natural question following the release of Oracle AI Database 26ai is, “What comes next?” As of the time of this publication, Oracle has not announced any version of its database product beyond 26ai. Between the extended timelines and delays with Oracle Database 23ai and 26ai, it seems unlikely that another major Oracle Database version will be introduced in the near term.

Rather than planning around an uncertain future release, the most logical strategy — and one increasingly implemented by enterprises — is to make the most of existing database investments.

According to a [recent DBTA/Unisphere Research survey](#):

63%

of respondents identified **high Oracle support costs** as a significant issue

23%

expressed concern about **pressure to upgrade or use cloud services**

These findings underscore the need for an economical alternative to expensive database upgrades and maintenance — one that proven third-party support provider Rimini Street addresses by helping organizations keep their databases stable, predictable and aligned with business needs.



Support, security and flexibility with Rimini Street

With Rimini Street, Oracle Database customers can pair a long-term strategy for the versions in use today with trusted third-party support and optimization services — reducing disruption while preserving control over when (and if) upgrades occur.

Rimini Support™

Rimini Support™ for Oracle Database enables organizations to:

- Retain existing database versions fully supported for up to 15+ more years
- Reduce annual maintenance fees by up to 50% and TCO by up to 90%
- Avoid the cost, risk and disruption of unnecessary upgrades

Additionally, consulting, managed services, monitoring and interoperability solutions are available to simplify operations and maximize the ROI of existing Oracle Database investments.

Further, partnering with Rimini Street can enable a more flexible approach to innovation. If AI or another new functionality is required, it's more practical and less risky to innovate around the edges of core business systems running on Oracle Database. For example, adopting an Agentic AI ERP model with Rimini Street's help allows enterprises to introduce intelligent automation and AI-driven enhancements without disrupting the underlying Oracle Database that supports mission-critical operations.

For those wanting to retain their existing databases for the foreseeable future and take advantage of new features and functionalities without disruption, Rimini Street's approach offers a pragmatic path forward.

Rimini Protect™

Rimini Protect™ for Oracle Database delivers:

- Proactive protection for a strengthened security posture
- Zero-day defense that monitors database memory activity
- Database assessment discovery and custom rules to help mitigate risks

Conclusion: Enterprise needs, not vendors, should dictate upgrade decisions

Oracle AI Database 26ai is presented as an important advancement, introducing new capabilities and reinforcing the vendor's long-term direction. But as this eBook has shown, the availability of a new version doesn't automatically warrant immediate adoption — and 26ai hasn't yet proven itself to be a stable, advantageous choice. As such, the right decision isn't driven by version number but by overall impact.

While evaluating Oracle AI Database 26ai, organizations should consider:

1

Whether the latest Oracle Database release meets business needs

Even with Oracle Database 23ai and 26ai, the database's basic functionality remains largely unchanged. Though some new features have been added, most business systems don't require these capabilities to operate effectively. In many cases, existing Oracle Database environments are already running smoothly, supporting ongoing development without the disruption, risk and resource lock-up of a major upgrade.

2

Whether upgrading will yield a strong ROI

Upgrading to newer Oracle Database releases such as 26ai involves multistep upgrade paths, mandatory architectural changes, extensive testing and increased operational risk. Organizations should weigh these factors against the benefits they expect to gain from the new database version. Often, they'll find that they can't justify the time, complexity and potential impact on stability.

3

Whether time and budget could be better applied elsewhere

Database upgrades consume a sizable amount of financial and operational resources. For many enterprises, those investments may deliver greater value when redirected toward initiatives that improve efficiency, resilience or innovation — without destabilizing the systems that run the business.

Ultimately, a smart Oracle Database strategy is one guided by business needs, not vendor timelines. By focusing on what's truly required today — and keeping future options open — organizations can maintain stability while still moving forward with confidence.

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[Learn how global leader of third-party support for Oracle Database, Rimini Street, can provide flexibility in the current environment.](#)

About Rimini Street

Rimini Street, Inc. (Nasdaq: RMNI), a Russell 2000[®] Company, is a proven, trusted global provider of end-to-end, mission-critical enterprise software support, managed services and innovative Agentic AI ERP solutions, and is the leading third-party support provider for Oracle, SAP and VMware software. The Company has signed thousands of IT service contracts with Fortune Global 100, Fortune 500, midmarket, public sector and government organizations that have leveraged the Rimini Smart Path[™] methodology to achieve better operational outcomes, billions of U.S. dollars in savings and self-funded AI and other innovation.

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