

Getting up to speed

Broadband internet for low-income households

Broadband is the service that gives you access to high-speed internet. In today's world, having access to broadband is a necessity. Unfortunately, many low-income households are not connected to the internet. This document explains more about broadband, including its importance, benefits, availability and pricing. It also presents special programs that help low-income households get internet service.

Benefits of broadband internet

Having access to high-speed internet at home has many benefits, from increased communication with family and friends to the ability to find jobs and improve one's health.

Here are just a few of the things you can do on the internet:

- Communicate with family and friends through email, video chat and social media
- Complete homework assignments (many assignments require the internet for research and to access student materials)
- Search for jobs (even, in some cases, work from home, or "telecommute")
- Apply for assistance and services
- Find information on topics of interest and local events
- Read the news
- Manage healthcare
- Enroll in online banking (check balances, transfer money between accounts and deposit checks by taking a photo of them)
- Shop online (order and pay for your purchases with a debit or credit card)
- Watch videos on your mobile device, computer or TV
- Upload and download large files, including video and audio

Types of broadband technology

There are many different types of technology that internet service providers (ISPs) can use to connect households to the internet. These include dial-up, cable, fiber and satellite via "fixed" lines, as well as wireless and Wi-Fi "mobile" technologies. Except

for dial-up, all of these technologies enable a broadband (high-speed) connection.

To access the internet, you need an internet-ready device such as a smartphone, tablet or computer. Sometimes these devices can connect directly to your mobile carrier's network for a monthly fee. Other devices and tablets can connect only to wireless internet signals (Wi-Fi) in your home, office or public places when you are near a signal. For home-based internet, you will need a modem to bring the broadband signal into your home. (Your provider may charge a monthly modem rental fee.) To create a home Wi-Fi network, where you do not need to be connected to the modem by a cord and one or more users can access the internet at the same time, you will need to connect via a "wireless router." Often, modems and wireless routers come together in a single device. If your modem does not have a built-in router, you will need to connect an external router to it.

The broadband technology you choose will depend on where you live (urban or rural), service offerings and price. In most areas, there are two fixed (not mobile) broadband providers—the local cable company and the local phone company. In many areas, consumers have three or more choices for mobile broadband from national wireless service providers. In most cases, you will be required to sign a contract for broadband service. Make sure you understand your contract, including any early termination fees for switching service before your contract expires.

Mobile technology vs. fixed broadband

When the internet became widely available to households and businesses in the late 1990s, access

was provided only by “dial-up” service, which was slow to “load” web pages and download files. Broadband internet access sold today is very fast by comparison, and users have come to expect speedy connections that allow them to do the many tasks that are now common on the internet, from banking and school homework to watching online video and keeping in touch with family.

Mobile broadband, usually accessed on a smartphone or tablet computer, can vary in availability and reliability because it is relayed by local cell phone towers, and in some areas transmission towers are few and far between. “Fixed” broadband, delivered through a direct connection from the provider’s network into the home, is often more reliable. Mobile broadband is usually device specific, while “fixed” broadband allows all the members of your household to connect their internet-enabled devices (even smartphones) if you have a Wi-Fi router. However, many people like the freedom of mobile broadband, which allows you to access the internet anywhere your provider offers services.

Mobile (not home-based) broadband plans are sold by amounts of access, measured in megabytes (MB) or, in larger allowances, gigabytes (GB) of “data.” Playing (“streaming”) video or music for even a few hours a day can quickly use up your mobile data allowance.

When you use more data than your plan offers, you will be warned before you reach your limit so that you can avoid being charged more money for additional data. (Whenever possible, set your phone to Wi-Fi to allow you to save your mobile data allowance for when Wi-Fi isn’t available.)

Mobile internet plans typically require a credit check and they may require you to lock into a contract. If you end the contract early, you typically must pay an “early termination fee” of \$100 to \$200 or more.



How broadband internet is priced

Broadband service fees are charged monthly, which means you pay a fixed rate for your connection. With home-based access, you can use the internet as often as you like, for as long as you like.

Home-based internet is sold by speed, which usually is measured in Mbps (mega-bits per second). You will pay more for faster speeds. A broadband connection has two speeds: “download” and “upload.” When you are surfing the internet, you are downloading information from the web; when you are sending email or posting a photo, you are uploading to the web. Download speeds tend to be faster than upload speeds.

Your plan is priced by the “maximum” speed it can reach; however, this can vary. Many “speed test” websites exist to help you measure and track your broadband speed.

You can buy “prepaid” smartphones and data. Prepaid plans require no credit check and no contract. When you have used up all the data you paid for, you will have to purchase more if you need more access to the internet. Prepaid mobile internet can be a good way to control costs, however most plans require you to provide a debit or credit card to automatically “re-up” your plan at regular intervals, such as monthly.

Low-cost broadband programs

There are programs that offer low-income households more affordable access to the internet. These programs are available through broadband providers or non-profit organizations. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has approved a federal “Lifeline” program offering subsidies for low-income families to access the internet, but it’s not available yet.

Consumer Action has identified these programs offering eligible low-income families internet access for \$9.95 per month: Access from AT&T, Internet Basics (CenturyLink), Internet Essentials (Comcast) and Connect2Compete, a national non-profit organization that partners with local internet service providers. (Charter Communications, which will be known as Spectrum after its May 2016 merger with Time Warner Cable and Bright House Networks, will offer its low-income broadband program by the end of 2016.) It is necessary to apply for these services (not all are available in every part of the United States) and eligibility requirements vary.

Access from AT&T. You may qualify for Access from AT&T (<http://www.att.com/access>) if you:

- Have at least one resident in your household who participates in the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). (California households also qualify if a resident receives Supplemental Security Income [SSI].)
- Live in AT&T's 21-state service area, in which the company offers home-based internet service (<http://www.att.com/Common/merger/files/pdf/att-us-service-area-map-21-state.pdf>).
- Do not have outstanding debt for AT&T's fixed internet service within the last six months or outstanding debt incurred under the Access from AT&T program.

Qualifying households will get the fastest of three speed tiers—10 Mbps, 5 Mbps or 3 Mbps—available at their addresses. Service providing 10 Mbps and 5 Mbps will cost \$10 a month, and service providing 3 Mbps will cost \$5 a month. Installation and internet equipment fees are free for participating households.

CenturyLink's Internet Basics. You may qualify for CenturyLink's Internet Basics program (<http://www.centurylink.com/home/internetbasics/>) if you:

- Meet guidelines for the company's Lifeline/TAP phone service programs (<http://www.centurylink.com/Pages/Support/LifeLine/>).
- Do not have an overdue CenturyLink bill or unreturned equipment.
- Have not subscribed to CenturyLink internet service and are not currently a CenturyLink internet customer.

- Live in an area where CenturyLink provides service.

Comcast's Internet Essentials. You may qualify for Comcast's Internet Essentials program (<https://www.InternetEssentials.com>) if you:

- Live in an area where Comcast internet service is available.
- Have not subscribed to Comcast internet within the last 90 days.
- Do not have outstanding debt to Comcast that is less than one year old.

Additionally, applicants must fall into one of the following programs:

- K-12 Program: Open to any family that has at least one child eligible for the National School Lunch Program. Families whose children attend schools with 40 percent or more participation in the National School Lunch Program can get instant approval without needing to submit additional paperwork.
- Housing Assistance Program: Open to households who receive HUD housing assistance such as Public Housing, Housing Choice Vouchers (Section 8 Vouchers) or Multifamily Assistance (such as Project-Based Section 8 and 202/811).
- Senior Citizen Pilot: Open to low-income seniors (62 years or older) receiving federal or state public assistance and residing in Palm Beach County, FL, Boston, Philadelphia, San Francisco or Seattle.
- Community College Pilot: Open to community college students receiving a federal Pell Grant and residing in Illinois or Colorado.

Internet Essentials from Comcast provides low-cost internet service for \$9.95 a month with in-home Wi-Fi included; the option to purchase an internet-ready computer for \$149.99; and access to free digital literacy training that's available in person, online or in print.

EveryoneOn's Connect2Compete. You may qualify for EveryoneOn's Connect2Compete program (<http://everyoneon.org/about/c2c/>), which may be offered through companies in your local area, if you:

- Have at least one child eligible for or enrolled in the National School Lunch Program.

- Have no outstanding bills with the service provider or unreturned equipment.
- Have not subscribed to internet service within the last 90 days.

For most customers, there is no deposit required, contracts to sign, or installation or modem rental fees.

Coming soon. Charter Spectrum's low-income broadband plan, expected to be available by the end of 2016, will offer 30 Mbps speeds for \$14.99 per month with a free modem and free self-installation kit. You may qualify if:

- You have students in your household who participate in the National School Lunch Program or you are 65 or older and receive Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits.
- Have not had a broadband subscription from Charter, Time Warner Cable or Bright House Networks within 60 days of applying for the low-income program.
- Do not have unpaid bills with Charter, Time Warner Cable or Bright House Networks.

Be safe online

When you and your family are using the internet, be aware that you could be exposed to scams. Scammers use email, surveys, online ads, pop-up boxes and search results to trick you into sending them money or personal information. Here are some resources to help you stay safe online:

Consumer Action offers many free, multilingual brochures and guides that alert you to online risks and offer ways to protect your privacy on the internet. (<http://www.consumer-action.org/english/library/C355>)

Family Online Safety Institute offers many resources to make the online world safer for children and families. (<https://www.fosi.org>)

OnGuardOnline.gov is the federal government's website to help you be safe, secure and responsible online. (<https://www.onguardonline.gov/>)

Consumer Action

www.consumer-action.org

Consumer Action empowers low- and moderate-income and limited-English-speaking consumers nationwide to financially prosper through education and advocacy.

Consumer advice and referral hotline

Submit consumer complaints:

Online: English (http://www.consumer-action.org/hotline/complaint_form/) or Spanish (http://www.consumer-action.org/hotline/complaint_form_es/)

Phone: 415-777-9635 (Chinese, English and Spanish spoken)

About this project

Consumer Action created this brochure with funding from Comcast NBCUniversal.

A series of companion flyers offering more detail on the low-income internet plans mentioned in this guide are available online (http://www.consumer-action.org/modules/articles/low_income_broadband_plans).