A Consumer Action Fact Sheet

IP Transition: Making the Switch

Connecting you with new changes to the phone system

You may have heard that there is a conversation going on about what the future of the American telephone network looks like. This frequently-asked-questions document is designed to help you understand what changes are going to be taking place and how they might impact you.

What is the IP transition?

For the last 75 years or so, the telephone network in America has remained essentially unchanged. In the last 25 years, however, we have built new networks that we use to access the Internet. These new networks are more efficient, more capable, faster and more robust. They also enable people to communicate and connect in all the ways they want to—by voice, email, text message and video. The IP (Internet Protocol) transition is the process of moving all of our phone traffic off of the old network and onto the new network. While over two-thirds of Americans have already made the switch, you still have plenty of time to learn more, understand your options and make the best service choices for you and your family.

What is traditional landline phone service?

Traditional "plain old telephone service" (POTS) delivers calls to your home phone via a nationwide network of copper wire and switches that ends at a phone "jack" in your wall. This system is also called the public switched telephone network (PSTN). This is the same technology and network that has been used for many decades with relatively minor changes along the way. New technology will replace the PSTN and deliver your home phone service through a faster, more capable network.

How is traditional landline phone service different from U-verse Voice, FiOS Digital Voice or the telephone service I can get from the cable company?

These phone services are different in the way that they connect and transmit your calls. Known as Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), these services use data networks to transmit your voice in Internet Protocol, similar to what service providers use to enable you to browse the Web.

Why are we switching phone technologies?

Transitioning away from the old networks and onto the new networks makes sense for a couple of reasons. First, IP-based voice service promises advantages, such as faster transmission, clearer calls and the ability to take advantage of digital phone features (voicemail forwarding and call filtering, for example). Second, a large and growing number of households and businesses have already transitioned. About two-thirds of Americans now use a wired VoIP service (such as U-verse Voice or a voice service from their cable company) or a mobile phone. As the number of PSTN users decreases and the old circuit-switched, copper network continues to age, it will become increasingly expensive and difficult to maintain. The benefits of the new IP-based network combined with the decreased use of the aging network means it is time to begin figuring out how to make the universal transition to IP-based service as smoothly and effectively as possible.

What will we use instead?

Rather than using the traditional public switched telephone network, phone calls will be sent and received via modern IP networks that are both wired and wireless. However, most customers will be able to continue using the same phone they use today, regardless of whether it is cordless or corded.

What is IP-based phone service?

Unlike traditional phone service, which is transmitted over the public switched telephone network, IP-based calls are transmitted over IP networks. Because Voice over Internet Protocol uses the same networks that we use to access the Internet, it can also enable access to other services, such as video and data transmission.

Who is making the transition?

About two-thirds of U.S. consumers have already transitioned away from traditional POTS and adopted IP-based or wireless phone service instead. For most people this means that they get their phone service from their Internet service provider (ISP) or television provider, or that they use only a wireless phone. If you have a "double-play" or "triple-play"—bundled phone, TV and Internet service through a single provider—you likely already have IP-based phone service. Many schools, health care organizations and other public agencies have already made the transition, too. Many expect that, at some point, the transition to IP-based phone service will be universal, meaning that everyone would get their phone service through modern technology rather than the old telephone network.

How will the transition take place?

The transition is well underway, with about two-thirds of U.S. consumers already using wireless or IP-based phone service. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requested that companies submit plans to run "IP transition trials" in which they will work with consumers in selected geographic areas to help them make the switch. The companies, together with the FCC, will monitor these trials closely to resolve any issues that may arise and to learn as much about the transition process as possible. They will also share findings with other state and federal authorities so that lessons can be used to help all consumers and ensure the smoothest and fastest migration to IP-based technologies possible for the rest of the country.

Why is this important to me?

It's important for you to be aware of the transition and the possibility that you could be part of a trial. You will be informed by your current telephone service provider if it is conducting a trial in your area. It's also important that you understand your service options, as well as their advantages and disadvantages, so that you are prepared to make the best choices for you and your family if you haven't done so already.

Will I require a new telephone?

You should confirm with your service provider, but you should be able to continue using the same phone you use today, regardless of whether it is cordless or corded. However, you may choose to purchase a new phone to take advantage of advanced features such as caller ID, call forwarding and high-definition (HD) voice, which provides clearer call quality.

Will I still be able to plug my phones into my existing phone jacks at home?

This depends on the type of service that you choose. If you transition to a wireless device, you will have a couple of options. Many companies offer a "wireless home phone" that enables you to continue using your existing phone (or a new phone if you want advanced features) over a wireless network. In that case, you will get a new device to plug your phone into that will replace your phone jack. You could also choose to switch to a mobile device like a cell phone or smartphone if it better meets your needs, in which case you would no longer need a phone jack.

Alternatively, if you have a wired IP connection, it may connect into your existing home wiring, allowing you to keep using your current phone jacks.

What kinds of issues might I have with equipment linked to my phone and how should I handle them?

If you have a home alarm system, a "life alert" service, a TTY/TDD, a phone-operated doorbell or intercom system, a fax machine, a medical device that connects to your phone or any other device or service that is phone dependent, discuss your needs and options with the service provider before making the switch. It's possible that one carrier's service may be compatible with your devices while another's might not. For example, existing fax machines have been known to have problems working with wireless service regardless of the company providing it, but they should work with a wired VoIP connection.

Additionally, IP-based and wireless services require a battery backup to work in the event of a power outage; you should discuss your backup battery options with your service provider to ensure you have a product that meets your needs.

What about my TTY/TTD equipment—will it work with the new phone service?

This will depend on what kind of service you have. If you decide to switch to a wireless service, then it is very likely that your mobile device has a "TTY mode" that will enable it to work with your equipment. Additionally, depending on your service provider, your TTY should work with a wired VoIP connection. If you are going to be transitioning to a new product, it is important that you discuss this with your service provider to determine if it will meet your needs.

What if I can't get a strong wireless signal in my home?

You might be able to strengthen the wireless signal throughout your home with a device such as a "wireless booster," or a solution may be as simple as moving your device to a different part of the house. Ask the service provider to give you information about the cellular coverage for your area, options for enhancing the signal, and what policy it has for canceling the service without an early termination fee if you are unhappy with the reception.

Can I keep my phone number?

You can switch telephone services, including to wireless or VoIP, and keep your existing phone number as long as you remain in the same geographic area. (Note: Do not terminate your current phone service before setting up your new service or you could lose your phone number.)

What will the transition cost me?

The actual cost of transitioning will depend on factors such as the carrier and service plan you select, the equipment you need and any promotional offers or subsidies from the carrier. Some potential costs, such as a new phone or installation, will be one-time expenses. Others may be reflected in your monthly bill. For example, your plan may have a different base rate than before or may include domestic long distance calls at no additional charge.

Will I still be eligible for Lifeline (discounted phone service) if I switch my phone service?

Participation in the discounted Lifeline program will not be a problem for the foreseeable future. If you decide to switch to IP-based or wireless service, there are service providers that offer the Lifeline discount to eligible households. Be sure to ask about the Lifeline discount when you shop around.

If I'm not part of a trial can I still transition to IP-based technology?

Yes. Even if there isn't a formal trial taking place where you live, it is likely that one or more companies that serve your area offer IP-based service.

What if I don't like my IP connection—can I switch back to my old landline service?

Maybe. This may depend on who your service provider is and how your transition worked. It is something that you should discuss with your service provider. In some cases, the traditional phone line that runs to your house will be replaced with a different type of wire. If that is the case, it may be much more challenging for you to switch back. At some point, the transition will be universal, which means that the traditional landline service may no longer be available. If you think you might want to switch back, ask the carrier if that is an option before you make the transition.

If I am part of a trial, do I have to switch my service?

In the beginning, the trials will take place in a voluntary manner. In most cases, the trials will have a phased approach for transitioning customers and the FCC will have to approve each phase. Only upon getting approval from the FCC in later phases would you be required to make the switch.

Where can I get more information?

For more information about the changes coming to phone service throughout the country and how to make a smooth transition, visit www.NewPhoneNetwork.org. The FCC will also have consumer information about the IP transition on its website: www.fcc.gov/guides/ip-transition.

If you are located in Carbon Hill, AL or West Delray Beach, FL and have been told by AT&T that you are part of its trials, you can learn more at http://ip4CarbonHill.att.com or http://ip4WestDelrayBeach.att.com.

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