

tems, senior “life alert” services, TDD/TTY machines (telecommunications devices for those who are deaf, blind or have hearing loss) and fax machines

- Telephone device requirements
- The ability to switch back to your traditional landline service if you want to (currently that is allowed, but at some point providers may cease offering the option)

If you want to keep your old touch-tone phones or fax machines, you most likely can, but you should check with your service provider. Newer devices may enable you to take advantage of advanced features that IP-based telephone service offers, such as high-definition (HD) voice, which makes calls clearer—a welcome improvement, especially for those who have hearing loss.

There are a few other things you should know about transitioning to VoIP services.

Making emergency (911) calls. When you begin receiving VoIP services, you may need to register your home address, or your service provider may do it for you. This will ensure that emergency services know your exact location when you call from home. Check with your provider to make sure you have the right information about this process.

The cost. 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 of-

fers 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.

Participation in trials. You will be informed by your current telephone service provider if it is conducting a trial in your location. Not all carriers will conduct trials. If your carrier does, you will receive specific information about what the trial entails and what your phone service options are. During the initial phase, the trials will be voluntary, but you should work with your provider to understand how the trials will evolve over time.

Phone service providers will be running IP transition trials on an ongoing basis as they file proposals with the Federal Communications Commission. The FCC’s job is to make sure you are getting reliable service throughout the transition, and they will be notified about the progress of the trials.

Want to learn more?

The FCC is the federal agency that regulates telecommunications systems and services in the U.S. Learn more about the IP transition and trials at:

- 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>

Consumer Action, a nationwide non-profit consumer education and advocacy organization, is helping consumers understand the IP transition and make wise service choices. Find more information at NewPhoneNetwork.org.

Consumer Action

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IP Transition: Making the Switch

The next communication evolution

Understanding the transition to Internet-based communication technologies

A Consumer Action Publication

www.consumer-action.org

Since the creation of the telephone, the telecommunications industry has constantly improved and advanced the way we connect with each other—moving from the telegraph to the party line, to cheaper long distance calling, to modern wireless technologies.

In recent years, many people have moved away from traditional “plain old telephone service” (POTS) delivered over a traditional phone network to new wireless or Internet-based (Internet Protocol, or IP) systems that use the same kind of connections we use for our Internet service and allow us to make calls, send messages, watch videos and surf the Web.

In fact, since 2000, over two-thirds of Americans have already adopted these newer connections, embracing the improvements in service quality as well as expanded capabilities and availability.

Why should you be aware of this evolution? It is expected that in the future all Americans will transition to using the new phone networks, and AT&T expects that their customers will transition by 2020. Whether you’ve already made the switch to IP or will in the future, it’s important that you know what your options are so that you can make the best choices for you and your family.

What is IP-based phone service?

“Internet Protocol,” or IP, is the network communications language that facilitates the delivery of phone calls (voice), text

and email messages and video over the same network—similar to the type of service many people already get on their smartphones and other wireless devices. Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP), whether used for home phones, business phones or mobile devices, uses the Internet Protocol to send your voice over copper, cable, fiber or wireless data networks as opposed to the traditional “public switched telephone network” (PSTN). VoIP can be accessed using many different types of devices, including your traditional “wired” telephone.

While IP or VoIP technology may not sound familiar to you, you might recognize services such as U-verse Voice, FiOS Digital Voice, Vonage or Skype, which are examples of VoIP service. In addition, you might be familiar with the “triple play” (bundled) service packages offered by local cable operators. The voice components of those bundles are VoIP services that use the same connection as your cable and high-speed Internet to allow you to make and receive calls. Some users of VoIP services choose to make and receive calls via computer (sometimes to make use of a webcam and see the person they’re talking to), but with most services you can also continue to use the same phone you use today.

Advantages

Just as digital cable television service vastly expanded consumers’ program options and greatly improved their viewing experience, IP-based voice service pro-

vides many advantages over what can be delivered over old copper networks:

- Speed and quality (faster transmission and clearer calls)
- Reliability (newer infrastructure)
- Expanded voice and Internet capabilities (video calls, call filtering, voice-mail forwarding, “Do not disturb” and more)
- Expanded access to broadband Internet services, as advanced networks are built out to serve more customers
- Increased options for telephone service, as more competitors can offer you service
- Potentially lower prices (many VoIP services include free unlimited domestic long distance calling and lower rates for international calls)

Making the transition

The transition away from POTS to newer networks is well underway across the country—more than two-thirds of U.S. consumers have already chosen to switch to IP-based service that can deliver higher-quality calls, more ways to communicate and fast Internet access. Many schools, health care organizations and other public agencies have made the transition, too.

Recently, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) called on telecommunications companies to submit proposals to conduct trials in which IP services will be rolled out in selected communities.

Consumers in those areas will receive the information and assistance they need to make an informed decision regarding their telephone service options. Participating phone companies are expected to start launching their IP transition trials in 2015. 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 (much like the switch to digital TV, which also entailed such trials).

If you are still getting your home phone service through the traditional telephone network, now is the time to prepare yourself for the evolution by understanding your options. Gather information by contacting providers such as your cable company, your Internet service provider (ISP) or your current telephone carrier, which could be AT&T (its IP service is called U-verse Voice), Verizon (FiOS Digital Voice) or another phone company. While shopping around, in addition to inquiring about service plans and pricing, ask about such things as:

- 911 accessibility and battery backup options when the power is out
- Number portability (transferring your current phone number to the new service)
- Compatibility with home alarm sys-