

Controlling Data Use

You depend on your smartphone, tablet or other data-ready wireless device for so much—Web browsing, news, directions, weather, checking your bank balance, shopping and more. But using “apps” (mobile applications) and “streaming” multimedia such as video, music and games require huge amounts of data, and every bit of data costs money. It’s important to understand how much data each type of activity uses so you can manage your data consumption. Staying in control of your phone bill is easy when you know how.

1. How do I pay for data?

Unlimited data plans used to be more common. Now wireless carriers offer mostly metered “buckets” of mobile broadband data for a set price, pay-per-use plans or prepaid plans. Data usage is measured in kilobytes (KB), megabytes (MB) or gigabytes (GB) rather than minutes. There are 1,024 KB in 1 MB and 1,024 MB in 1 GB.

- Metered-use plans offer “buckets” of service—say \$15 for 200 MB of data or \$25 for 2 GB of data. It’s an option that works well for individuals or families who use roughly the same amount of data each month and can stay below their limit. If you use more, you’ll pay an additional charge for “overage,” or going over your allotted bucket.
- Pay-per-use plans charge for an increment of data used, for example \$1.99 per MB of data. This option can be more expensive and is usually reasonable only for people who use very little data.
- Prepaid plans require no credit check and no contract. There’s no monthly bill, either, since you pay for service before you receive it. You might be able to buy a certain amount of data (sometimes bundled with voice minutes and text messages) per month or buy data to use as needed over a specified time—such as one day or one year. You must “refill,” or pre-pay, to get more data.

2. Do apps, video, music and games use data?

Apps use data when you download them, use them and update them. Standard apps might average 5 MB of data per download, while games may use as much as 80 MB just to download. Any application that requires a broadband connection to function will also use data. This is especially true of “streaming media” such as music, video and games and live video chats. Streaming Internet radio could use 60 MB or more an hour. Watching a 90-minute feature-length Netflix movie on your tablet consumes about 225 MB. Watching video in “high quality” mode uses much more data than in regular mode. You can disable your mobile broadband connection, turn apps off after use and set them for manual updates to avoid unintended data usage. See the “Settings” menu on your device.

3. How can I avoid using data?

Whenever possible, set your phone to “Wi-Fi” instead of mobile broadband. The time you spend on Wi-Fi doesn’t count against your mobile data usage. So when you download or update apps, set your phone to use your wireless Internet connection at home, the office or at hotels, or use a free public Wi-Fi connection at your library or local cafe.

4. How can I check how much data I’ve used?

All major carriers make it possible to check your usage at any time on the device or on the carrier’s website. You can receive usage information via text message. Ask your carrier for details.

5. Will I be warned before I incur extra data charges?

Under an agreement between wireless carriers and the Federal Communications Commission, customers who are nearing their monthly limit for voice, text or data services will receive alerts.

Learn more and access tools to help measure your data usage at www.WirelessED.org