




What Is an ISP?

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By Anne Nagro, Contributor April 21, 2020

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The internet touches every part of our lives. We use it for entertainment, to work from home, take online classes, and even monitor the thermostat. As such, we need a fast and reliable internet connection. But internet services differ greatly, as do the providers. To better understand this technology and find the best solution for you, read our guide.

This guide contains the following sections:

- [Internet Service Providers](#)
- [How Much Does Internet Service Cost?](#)
- [What Internet Speed Do I Need?](#)
- [How Much Internet Data Do I Need?](#)
- [How Do I Get Internet Service?](#)

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What Is an ISP?

An ISP, or internet service provider, is a company that lets you access the internet from home, usually with a monthly subscription. Think of it like a cable company, but instead of connecting you with TV channels, an ISP connects you to the internet.

An ISP may sell one or more types of internet service, also called connection types. The most common types are cable, fiber, DSL (Digital Subscriber Line), and satellite internet.

High-speed internet service is called broadband. Non-broadband internet is slower. According to the [Federal Communications Commission \(FCC\)](#), a connection must deliver download speeds of at least 25 megabits per second (Mbps) and upload speeds at a minimum of 3 Mbps to be considered as high-speed. The types and levels of online activities your household enjoys determines the connection speed you need.

According to [Leichtman Research Group](#), which analyzes the broadband industry, 85% of U.S. households subscribe to an internet service. We're also

spending more time online. American adults with home internet access spent 3.7 hours a day online in 2019, compared to 2.8 hours in 2014, reported the same study. Much of this is spent watching videos, with half of all households watched video online daily, up from 29% in 2014, the company found.

When it comes to choosing an internet provider, most of us have a choice. The [FCC says](#) 94% of Americans have three or more ISPs offering broadband internet where they live. However, not all types of broadband are available in all areas. Rural and outer-suburban areas in particular have more limited options.

Types of Internet Service

FEATURES	FIBER	DSL	CABLE	SAT
Download Speed	0.2 Mbps - 2,000 Mbps	0.20 Mbps - 940 Mbps	10 Mbps - 2,000 Mbps	12 Mbps
Upload Speed	0.128 Mbps - 1,000 Mbps	0.128 Mbps - 940 Mbps	1 Mbps - 1,000 Mbps	
Latency	12 ms - 33 ms	19.5 ms - 51 ms	22 ms - 28 ms	
Consistency	64% - 99%	60% - 80%	90% - 105%	
Packet Loss	0% - 1%	0% - 1%	0% - 1%	
Data Cap	1TB - No Cap	1TB - No Cap	1TB - No Cap	

Disclaimer: Select data provided by fcc.gov

Internet service providers use different technologies to connect you to the internet. Some may use more than one to complete the “last-mile” connection,

which is the distance from the junction box or ISP facility to your door. Types of internet connections include:

Cable Internet: This service uses coaxial cable. It's the same cable that delivers cable television to a home, and providers of cable TV generally also sell cable internet service. Cable internet is fast and reliable, consistently delivering advertised speeds. It also has low latency, which means users experience fewer delays or lag time, such as when playing online games.

Cable internet is widely available and is often consumers' top pick for internet service. In its most recent report on internet access, the [FCC says 382](#) companies offered cable internet service in 2017. The top cable companies have about 68 million broadband subscribers, states [Leichtman Research Group](#). For more information, see our rating of the [Best Cable Internet Providers in 2020](#).

Fiber Internet: This service uses fiber optic cable made from strands of glass to transmit data at the speed of light. As such, fiber internet has some of the fastest download and upload speeds. It also has the lowest latency of internet technologies, which translates to fewer delays for gamers and video conferences. Fiber supports heavy internet use. Multiple users can simultaneously stream video, play live-action games, and share large files, as well as connect numerous personal and household devices.

Fiber broadband is available to about 39% of the U.S. population, [reports the FCC](#). Nonetheless, the network is growing, with fiber deployed to a record [5.9 million homes](#) in 2018. And adding fiber broadband access increases rental and property values, according to a study conducted for the [Fiber Broadband Association](#). For more information, see our rating of the [Best Fiber Internet Providers in 2020](#).

DSL: Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) connects you to the internet using the telephone line. Since most homes are wired for telephone, the service is widely available and traditional telephone companies typically offer DSL. Almost 88% of people in the U.S. have access, [says the FCC](#). However, even when high-speed DSL internet access is available in your area, keep in mind that the farther you

live from the ISP's facility, the slower the speed. Distance increases line interference and weakens the connection.

In general, DSL internet is faster than satellite internet but not as fast as cable and fiber internet. For more information, see our rating of the [Best DSL Internet Providers in 2020](#).

Satellite Internet: This wireless internet service uses geostationary satellites to send and receive data between your home and the internet. But because data has to travel to space and back, it has the highest latency, or delay, of all connection types. Additionally, its internet speed can be affected by weather and how busy the network is at any given time. Data caps that limit your total data usage are common. The combination of these drawbacks makes satellite internet a poor choice for real-time gameplay or binge-watching online videos.

That said, satellite internet is often one of the only high-speed options for people living in rural areas and places served by slower dial-up, DSL, or mobile internet plans. Satellite internet is accessible to nearly the entire U.S. population, [reports the FCC](#). For more information, see our rating of the [Best Satellite Internet Providers in 2020](#).

Dial-Up Internet: Around since the 1990s, dial-up uses your existing phone line to make an internet connection. It is not "always on" like broadband internet service. Connecting to the internet requires dialing an access number (which looks like a phone number) and using a special modem. Unlike with a DSL connection, you cannot make phone calls while online when using dial-up.

With dial-up, the maximum speed at which you can send and receive data is 56 kbps, which may cause some applications and webpages to time-out before loading. Dial-up access is low cost, accessible (most homes have a landline), and secure. It may be one of the few internet options in rural areas.

Most people have switched to faster technologies. In 2015, 3% of Americans were using a dial-up connection, according to the [Pew Research Center](#).

A Guide to Understanding Internet Service

It helps to understand the lingo when evaluating internet providers and internet service plans. Here are some commonly used terms and what they mean:

- **Asymmetrical Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL):** A type of DSL for residential use. It has a faster download than upload speeds.
- **Bandwidth:** The amount of data an internet connection can transmit at a given time.
- **Broadband:** The FCC defines broadband as an internet service that is always on, has a download speed of at least 25 Megabits per second (Mbps), and an upload speed of at least 3 Mbps.
- **Bundle:** When internet providers give a discount for buying more than one service, they group the services into a bundle. Services you can bundle may include internet, TV, VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol) phone, home security, and home automation.
- **Consistency:** A measure of how reliably an ISP provides its advertised speed during peak internet use times. The [FCC uses an 80/80 metric](#) that measures the minimum speed experienced by at least 80% of subscribers at least 80% of the time during peak periods.
- **Data Cap:** The limit placed on how much data you can download each month as outlined in your internet service plan. Some plans have data caps; others have unlimited data. Activities that use lots of data include streaming high-definition videos, video chatting, and updating applications.
- **Download Speed:** The speed at which you get information from the internet. You download data when you browse webpages, stream videos, and video chat, among other activities. People typically download more information than they send.
- **Fixed Broadband:** A broadband connection delivered to a fixed address, compared to broadband delivered to mobile phone via a cellular network.
- **Hot spots:** A network of Wi-Fi locations, each covering small geographic areas, that let you connect to the internet. Some ISPs offer access to nationwide hot spots as part of their service plans.





- **Latency:** The delay you experience between requesting an action from the network and receiving a response. It's measured in milliseconds (ms).
- **Megabits per second (Mbps):** The unit for measuring download and upload speeds in seconds as data passes through an internet connection. A data rate of 1 Mbps is equal to 1,000 Kilobits per second (Kbps). Today's ultra-fast plans are around 1,000 Mbps, which is the equivalent of 1 Gigabit per second (Gbps).
- **Modem:** A piece of electronic equipment that communicates with the internet and allows you to send and receive data using your computer or other device. A modem is sometimes incorporated into a single device with a router, which is called a gateway.
- **Packet Loss:** Data flows through the internet in packets. When packets don't reach their intended destination it is referred to as packet loss which results in slower speeds and lag time. It's especially noticeable in real-time video chatting, audio (VoIP), and gaming applications.
- **Router:** A device that connects to the modem and uses radio waves to create a wireless home network.
- **Symmetrical Digital Subscriber Line (SDSL):** A type of DSL geared to businesses. It features equal download and upload speeds, allowing companies to better engage in activities like video conferencing and cloud backups.
- **Upload Speed:** The speed at which you can send information through the internet, such as files to coworkers or video during a video chat.
- **Voice over Internet Protocol (VoIP):** An application that lets you make and receive phone calls using broadband service instead of a traditional telephone line. VoIP may be offered as a bundled service.
- **Wi-Fi or Wireless Network:** A network that lets you connect smartphones, tablets, laptops, virtual assistants, wearables, and other devices to the internet without using a wire or cord. It's created by a router using radio wave technology.


Internet Service Providers

Broadband internet is increasingly important in the home. “It’s not just the internet access anymore. It’s about more applications, more Wi-Fi, connected devices in the home,” explains Bruce Leichtman, an industry authority who leads Leichtman Research Group in Durham, New Hampshire. As such, people increasingly want an ISP that’s not just fast, but reliable and that consistently delivers advertised internet speed.

According to the [FCC](#), more than 94% of U.S. households have three or more fixed broadband providers offering service where they live. Our ratings identify the best ISPs overall, as well as the cheapest internet service plans.

The Best Internet Service Providers





COMPANY	MONTHLY COST	CONNECTION TYPE	DOWNLOAD SPEED	LEARN MORE
Verizon Internet  4.1 out of 5	Starting at \$39.99	Fiber	100 Mbps - 940 Mbps	View Plans »
AT&T Internet  4.1 out of 5	Starting at \$50	Fiber, DSL	0.200 Mbps - 940 Mbps	View Plans »
RCN Internet  4.1 out of 5	Starting at \$19.99	Fiber, Cable	10 Mbps - 940 Mbps	View Plans »
Xfinity Internet  3.9 out of 5	Starting at \$29.99	Fiber, Cable	15 Mbps - 2,000 Mbps	View Plans »
		Fiber, DSL		

COMPANY	MONTHLY COST	CONNECTION TYPE	DOWNLOAD SPEED	LEARN MORE
CenturyLink Internet  3.8 out of 5	Starting at \$49		10 Mbps - 940 Mbps	View Plans »

Expand List

It's essential to choose an internet service that delivers on their promise. We analyzed nearly three dozen internet access providers in the U.S, rating them on a scale of 1 to 5 with 5 the highest possible score. Ten ISPs earned top honors, with Verizon Fios, Xfinity, and RCN rating first, second, and third. Read more in our review of [Best Internet Service Providers in 2020](#).

Cheapest Internet Service Plans

COMPANY	MONTHLY COST
Xfinity Internet  3.9 out of 5	Starting at \$29.99
RCN Internet  4.1 out of 5	Starting at \$19.99
Frontier Internet  3.8 out of 5	Starting at \$20
Cox Internet  3.7 out of 5	Starting at \$29.99

COMPANY	MONTHLY COST
Suddenlink Internet  3.7 out of 5	Starting at \$34.99

**Based on the lowest starting monthly cost*

The monthly cost of internet service is a major consideration when choosing an ISP. We ranked our Best Internet Service Providers according to their lowest starting monthly fee. Five made the cut, with RCN, Frontier, and Cox earning the top three spots. Read more in our guide on the [Cheapest Internet Service Plans in 2020](#).

How We Picked the Best Internet Service Providers

We explain what matters when it comes to internet service by sourcing experts and professional reviewers. Then we provide an unbiased evaluation of internet service providers. Our goal is to empower consumers with the information and tools they need to make informed decisions. More information about our 360 Reviews methodology for evaluating internet service providers is available [here](#).

How Much Does Internet Service Cost?

Consumers say they spend about \$67 a month on average for online service, whether that's cable, fiber, or satellite, says Bruce Leichtman, a broadband industry authority. The average cost of DSL is a little less, about \$61 a month, he says.

Costs vary by internet provider, location, and plan speed. Plans with faster download and upload speeds typically cost more. The key is finding "what works best for my household both from an efficiency standpoint and from a cost standpoint," advises Leichtman for choosing broadband service.

Here's what you can expect to pay for a plan from one of the Best Internet Service Providers:

- Cable internet costs between \$29.99 and \$69.99 per month
- Fiber internet costs between \$19.99 and \$299.99 per month
- DSL runs \$27.99 to \$50 per month
- Satellite internet costs \$50 to \$150 per month

“One thing to keep in mind is that the advertised price often doesn’t include taxes and fees which can add up and vary by ISP,” says Mark Lubow, a veteran cable and telecommunications expert who heads the [Cloud11](#) consultancy in Atlanta. A recent [Consumer Reports investigation](#) found fees add \$450 to the average cable customer’s bill each year. For a complete list of fees, read the ‘understanding your bill’ section on the ISP website.

Tips to Save Money on Internet Service

- **Only buy what you need:** Don’t pay for a plan with the highest speed and unlimited data if you really don’t need it. Match the plan to your internet use. Upgrade the plan later if your needs change. See our [What Internet Speed Do I Need?](#) section below.
- **Shop ISPs:** If you have more than one internet service provider in your area, shop around to find the best deal. Compare connection types, available speeds, data caps, costs, and service consistency.
- **Ask for discounts:** These may include a free month of service, free installation, or a lower rate for agreeing to a long-term contract versus paying month-to-month.
- **Bundle service:** Buying more than one service from the provider can lower your monthly internet fee. It may be possible to bundle your internet service with your home phone, TV, home automation, and security. “In addition to the cost benefit there’s the convenience benefit. The other advantage of the bundle is the consistent, known price,” says Leichtman.
- **Call to negotiate:** New customers often get a year-long promotional rate. When the term ends, the monthly rate increases significantly. Put that end date in your calendar as a reminder to call and negotiate a lower price. The longer

you've been a customer, the more likely your success, but it's worth trying even if you're relatively new to the company.

- **Buying equipment vs. renting:** Internet service requires equipment, namely a modem and router. Buying this equipment upfront will save you money long term instead of paying a monthly fee for as long as you have internet service.
- **Get free access:** If you only go online once in a while, you may want to skip getting internet access to your home altogether. Public Wi-Fi hot spots include those at coffee shops and free internet access is available in many public libraries. Don't use these services for tasks requiring sensitive personal information if you can help it, like checking your bank statement. The FCC and most internet providers offer assistance programs for low-income households, and some free or lower priced plans are available for students.

What Internet Speed Do I Need?

1 USER ON 1 DEVICE	BASIC	BASIC	MEDIUM
2 users or devices at a time	Basic	Medium	Medium/Advanced
3 users or devices at a time	Medium	Medium	Advanced
4 users or devices at a time	Medium	Advanced	Advanced

*Basic Service = 3 to 8 Mbps. Medium Service = 12 to 25 Mbps. Advanced Service = More than 25 Mbps. Mbps (Megabits per second) is the standard measure of broadband speed. It refers to the speed with which information packets are downloaded from, or uploaded to, the internet. *Speed usage data from FCC website.*

If you're only emailing and browsing websites, a download speed of 3 to 8 Mbps will work.

A download speed of 12 to 25 Mbps is best for basic tasks plus streaming video or playing an online game, or if you have two or three internet users in your household.

A download speed of 25 Mbps and higher is best for four or more people who use the internet at the same time for basic and high-demand applications. Telecommuters who share large files and videoconference need a plan with a higher upload speed.

Most ISPs deliver their promised broadband speed, says the FCC in its [Eighth Measuring Broadband America Fixed Broadband Report](#), which was released in December 2018. "Overall 17 different ISP/technology configurations were evaluated in this report. Out of these only two performed below 90% for actual-to-advertised download speed," it states.

You may experience slower speeds when internet traffic is heavy and or when using Wi-Fi. The advertised speeds are for wired or fixed-line connections.

Super-fast plans, some reaching gigabit-level speeds, are available. But at some point, speed "ultimately means nothing to a consumer," says Bruce Leichtman, a broadband industry authority. "The reality to a consumer is that it works; that it's a consistent quality when you're trying to use it," he says.

In fact, the benefits gained from paying for more than 100 Mbps of download speed were marginal for the typical household, found a study by the [Wall Street Journal](#) (available behind a paywall). "Faster speeds don't necessarily mean a better streaming experience: Picture quality doesn't improve much, and video content doesn't load more quickly," it states.

Latency, or the delay between sending and receiving data, affects the online experience. So does packet loss, which happens when packets of data fail to reach their destination causing choppiness and jitter.

What Is Throttling?

Throttling is when an internet provider slows down your internet speed on purpose. Reasons that your provider throttles your internet include:

- You've used a lot of data and have gone over your data cap
- You're using lots of data during peak internet use time, which is typically in the evening
- You're suspected of illegal activity, such as torrenting or illegal file sharing
- The internet provider has reduced speed to a specific website, such as a streaming service. (This practice became legal with Net Neutrality's repeal in 2018.)

The easiest way to tell if you're being throttled is to run an online speed test and compare the result to your plan's advertised speed. It's best to perform this test during non-peak hours, like in the afternoon. Turn off or disconnect any devices connected to your internet to get a more accurate measurement.

To determine if the speed to a specific website is being choked, run the speed test using a [VPN or virtual private network](#), which encrypts data so the ISP doesn't know it's you.

To reduce throttling, upgrade your data plan. Keep data-heavy tasks like sharing large files and updating applications for non peak hours. Use a VPN to circumvent the throttling of specific websites, though a VPN can sometimes slow your overall speed when it's in use.

How Do I Speed Up My Internet?

1. **Disconnect:** Every connected device uses internet bandwidth. Turn them off when not in use. Exit streaming apps when you're done watching videos or listening to music and turn off automatic updates for devices, including gaming consoles.
2. **Reboot:** Restart your modem and router. This is called power cycling and it helps fix connection and speed issues. Unplug the power cord, wait one minute, and plug it back in. Restart devices, such as computers, smartphones, and tablets, on a regular basis.

3. **Analyze data use:** Internet providers sometimes throttle speed if you exceed your data plan. If this happens often, upgrade to a plan with a higher data limit. Monitor data use using your online account or app.
4. **Upgrade equipment:** Invest in a high-capacity modem and router (or a combined gateway device) that support faster connection speeds. Make sure all equipment is working properly, is up-to-date, and is compatible with your internet company and service plan. All connections to and from this equipment must be snug to keep speeds as fast as possible.
5. **Optimize your Wi-Fi signal:** Place the router in a central location, up off the ground, and where it isn't obstructed. Password-protect your Wi-Fi network to keep poachers from hopping on to your network without your knowledge, which can slow your speeds down. Install Wi-Fi extenders or repeaters in areas of the home where the Wi-Fi signal is weak. Eliminate devices causing signal interference. "Nothing kills Wi-Fi quite like an old baby monitor," says veteran cable and telecom consultant Lubow.
6. **Maximize satellite reception:** Satellite internet users should trim bushes and tree branches to ensure the satellite dish has an unobstructed view of the southern sky. Ask your online service provider to send a certified technician, who can install an in-line amplifier, move the dish closer to the house, or reposition the dish to improve your internet connection.
7. **Update software:** Make sure devices are running the most current operating system and security software. Check for viruses and malware that may be sapping speed and install and configure an ad blocker, which helps websites load faster and prevents malware ads. Clear your browser cache and cookies on a regular basis.
8. **Call for service:** The slowdown may be outside your home at the junction box or in the cables, telephone lines, or satellite dish. A technician can run tests and address these issues, as well as recommend the best place to put equipment for an optimal connection.
9. **Switch providers:** Change to an internet provider that delivers speed more consistently. For instance, the companies in our rating of the [Best Internet](#)

Service Providers earn high marks for delivering fast, reliable high-speed internet.

How Much Internet Data Do I Need?

To pick a plan with the right level of data, consider your normal online activities. According to AT&T's [internet data calculator](#), sending an email uses hardly any data, estimated at 20 kilobytes (KB). Add an email attachment and you're up to 300 KB. One minute of online gameplay uses 200 KB and surfing the web takes 250 KB. Downloading one song is 4 megabytes (MB) and uploading one photo to social media uses 5 MB.

Video is a data hog. Streaming just one minute of standard-definition video uses 11.7 MB, high-definition video uses 41.7 MB, and 4K ultra high-definition video consumes a whopping 97.5 MB, the equivalent of sending about 4,875 emails.

"Cord-cutter or internet-only households use an average of around 400 gigabytes per month," says Lubow. "Households with bundled TV/internet use about half that amount since they balance usage consumption across both services."

Some Internet providers have interactive calculators to help you estimate your monthly data needs. You can track data usage through mobile apps and by logging into your online account. The companies in our Best Internet Service Provider rating either limit data to 1 terabyte (TB) per month or offer unlimited data plans.

One TB is a lot of data. It's equal to 1,000,000 MB or 1,000 gigabytes. Over a one-month period with 1 TB of data, you can stream about 15,000 hours of music, watch 700 hours of high-definition video, play 12,000 hours of online games, or upload or download 60,000 high-resolution photos, according to Xfinity.

"Data allowances vary by carriers and service plans so if you expect heavy usage look for the unlimited plans. Otherwise you may be accumulating overage charges for each additional gigabyte over your monthly limit," says Lubow.

What Are Internet Data Caps?

An internet data cap is the limit a service provider sets for the amount of data you can download and upload in a month. The internet provider tracks your data usage and resets your balance to zero at the start of each billing cycle.

If you exceed your monthly data allowance, your ISP may charge you a fee for the overage, such as \$10 for every 50 gigabits of data used beyond the cap. Some ISPs let you add more data to your monthly service plan for an additional fee.

Unlimited data plans don't have a data cap. They may, however, have a monthly data threshold. If you surpass the threshold, the internet company may prioritize the data of other subscribers during peak internet use times, which are typically evening primetime hours. As a result, you may experience slower internet speeds until your data allowance resets.

The data plans of our top-rated ISPs are either capped at 1 TB or are unlimited. Xfinity and Cox have a 1 TB data cap. CenturyLink and AT&T Internet plans offer either 1 TB or unlimited data. RCN, Spectrum, Viasat, Frontier, and SuddenLink have unlimited data.

How Do I Get Internet Service?

1. **Check availability:** Determine the providers that offer service in your area. Ask your neighbors or enter your home address into the FCC's [Fixed Broadband Deployment locator](#).
2. **Choose an internet service provider:** Talk to your neighbors to find out if they recommend their current ISP, or use an unbiased rating, such as our [Best Internet Service Providers of 2020](#) rating. If you're switching to a new company, read our [How Do I Cancel My Internet Service?](#) section below.
3. **Select a plan:** Most internet providers offer several plans, and some have more than one connection type to choose from. Select the plan that fits your household's budget and provides the necessary speed and data.
4. **Consider equipment:** You'll need equipment, typically a modem, router, and potentially other items, to connect to the internet. You may be able to buy or

rent equipment. Learn more about the [equipment you need for internet service](#).

5. **Install and set up:** Depending on the type of connection, you may be able to self-install equipment and set up Wi-Fi, the home wireless network. Professional installation is another option. It is required for satellite internet, for fiber internet, or when your home has not been connected to broadband service in a long time.
6. **Connect devices:** Plug your desktop computer into the modem using an ethernet cable. Configure wireless devices, such as smartphones, laptops, and tablets, so they connect to the Wi-Fi network.

What Equipment Do I Need For Internet Service?

The equipment needed for internet service varies by the type of connection, but may include the following:

- All connections require a modem, which communicates with the internet.
- You need devices on which to use the internet, such as a computer, game console, or virtual assistant.
- If you plan to use wireless devices, say a smartphone or tablet, you'll need a Wi-Fi router, which uses radio waves to create a wireless home network.
- A combo modem-router, called a gateway, is a single piece of equipment that acts as both a modem and a router.
- Ethernet and coaxial cable connect your devices directly with the router. You may want to connect your desktop computer, streaming devices, or gaming consoles using a fixed wire connection to achieve a faster, more stable internet connection.

Some internet connections need special equipment. This may include line filters for DSL, a satellite dish antenna for satellite internet, or an optical network terminal (ONT) for fiber. Extenders and amplifiers are optional pieces of equipment that boost your Wi-Fi signal to areas of your home where the Wi-Fi is choppy.

You can rent some of this equipment (such as a gateway device) from your internet provider for a monthly fee. Some companies give you the option to use your own modem or router, and you typically have to buy cables and Wi-Fi extenders. Satellite equipment, however, must be rented.

You may be able to install equipment yourself if it's a straightforward job. Professional installation is best for more complex installations, and is required for satellite dish and fiber internet setup.

How Do I Cancel My Internet Service?

To cancel internet service, contact your provider by phone or in person. Plan to spend a good half-hour on the phone, and perhaps longer if you visit a retail store or call during peak hours. Some companies let you make an appointment to minimize your wait time. Only the account owner can cancel the service.

Expect to hear a sales pitch for lower-priced or higher-speed service options: Your internet provider doesn't want to see you go. Be prepared to return any rented equipment or you will be charged a fee. Ask how canceling internet service affects other bundled services (if you're keeping them), as well as your email address, billing, and auto pay.

If you have been paying month-to-month without a contract, you won't incur an early contract termination fee. However, if you have a contract in place and want to end it early, expect to pay. Contract termination fees vary in cost. Starting fees for the companies in our [Best Internet Service Provider](#) rating range from \$9.99 to more than \$180. Some rival companies will reimburse you for your early termination fee if you switch to their service.

Internet Safety

Today, everything is online, including the bad guys. [Risk Based Security](#), a firm that helps companies reduce cyber threats, reported that in 2019 there were 7,098 data breaches, exposing more than 15.1 billion records. The firm called it a new worst year on record.

While data breaches are worrisome, how we conduct ourselves online has an even greater impact on internet safety. Don't click on links from sources you don't know or trust, and use a password manager to create complex, hard-to-guess passwords. Anti-malware and antivirus software can protect your computer. A VPN can also help safeguard your location and information. Learn more about [how a VPN can help you](#) in our guide.

Children need lessons in internet safety, too. A survey from [Pew Research Center](#) found 59% of U.S. teens have been bullied or harassed online. A [Google survey](#) found parents and teachers believe 39.1% of children have seen inappropriate online content, 23.8% have overshared information on social media, and 15.6% were scammed by an email or by a bad link.

How to Protect Your Privacy Online

- **Stay current:** Install antivirus software and download updates for it regularly.
- **Don't overshare:** Whether it's your password or details of your upcoming vacation, don't blab. Make sure your social media privacy settings are active.
- **Use incognito or private browsing:** This browser option prevents the computer from saving your browsing history, temporary internet files, and cookies (although the ISP still tracks your activity).
- **Don't fall for phishing:** Ignore and block emails requesting personal information. "Understand that whatever you are told on-line may or may not be true," says the [FCC](#). Links, attachments, ads, and photos from unknown sources may contain malware that infect your laptop or smartphone, or add hidden pieces of code that record your online activities.
- **Use a virtual private network (VPN):** A VPN encrypts your data before it's transmitted through the internet. It's more secure and you remain anonymous. A VPN may slow your internet speed, however. Learn more in our [VPN guide](#).

Keeping Your Kids Safe Online

- **Be present:** Keep the computer in a high-traffic area of the home. Monitor activity on smartphones, laptops, and gaming devices.

- **Stay open:** Maintain an open dialogue about internet safety and encourage children to tell you or another safe adult when they've made a mistake online.
- **Take control:** Set limits for online use and rules for social media, texting, gaming, and photo sharing. Download a parental control app so you shut down Wi-Fi access at a designated time.
- **Watch for red flags:** Behaviors like switching screens when you come near and secretive behavior may indicate an inappropriate online relationship.

Learn more

Our guides will answer all of your internet service questions and help you choose the best provider and plan for your household:

- [Internet Service Providers: A U.S. News Guide](#)
- [The Best Internet Service Providers of 2020](#)
- [The Cheapest Internet Service Providers of 2020](#)
- [The Best Fiber Internet Providers of 2020](#)
- [The Best Cable Internet Providers of 2020](#)
- [The Best DSL Internet Providers of 2020](#)
- [The Best Satellite Internet Providers of 2020](#)
- [The Best Internet Providers for Gaming of 2020](#)
- [The Fastest High Speed Internet of 2020](#)

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