

What is Oftel?

The Office of Telecommunications – Oftel – is the independent regulator for the UK telecommunications industry. Oftel wants to see choice and value for money for everyone using the Internet in the UK. This leaflet will help you take advantage of the wide choice of service providers and Internet packages that are available.

Later in 2003 Oftel will be merging with other organisations to form a single regulator for the UK communications industry, the Office of Communications (Ofcom). For more information, see www.ofcom.org.uk.

Why should I read this leaflet?

- You've heard about the Internet, or used it at work, the library or a friend's house, and think you might like to be on the Internet at home for entertainment, information, shopping, education or work.
- You're not sure how to get Internet access at home and what hardware and software you'll need.
- You'd like some basic advice about what to look for to get the best deal and what to consider when shopping around for a service provider.

This leaflet is a simple guide to buying the best service for your needs. It also gives contact details for other useful organisations and sources of information.

The leaflet is mainly about Internet access using a personal computer (PC). But it also mentions different options such as mobile Internet access.

How can I find out more?

Information about the Internet – what it is and what it can do for you as well as where you can get access – is available from UK online, the national campaign to help everyone in the UK make the most of the Internet. Call free on 0800 77 1234 or go to www.letsallgeton.gov.uk.

What do I need to access the Internet from home?

You need a personal computer or another Internet-ready device

Most people use a personal computer (PC) that has Internet-browser software (eg Internet Explorer or Netscape Navigator) and a modem. Most new PCs are 'Internet-ready' but you may need to check older PCs – read your PC's handbook or ask a computer dealer. A PC should give access to the whole of the Internet and the vast majority of websites are designed for access using PCs. But other methods are available too:

- mobile phones give access to mainly text-based Internet services, including e-mail;
- some palmtop computers give access to various levels of Internet services; and
- some of the new games consoles, Internet TVs and digital television boxes also allow the user to access websites and interactive services, though not all offer access to the whole of the Internet.

You need access to the network, eg by telephone or cable

For most home users, this will be via a fixed phone line in the home. This can be the existing phone line into your home but it could be a new line from a different service provider. Access to the Internet is also possible over other networks such as mobile, satellite and fixed wireless. Internet service providers (ISPs) will be able to tell you what they can offer you and what you need to do first.

One question to consider is how fast you want your access to the Internet to be. You can choose from two main types of access:

- dial-up (also known as 'narrowband'); and
- broadband (also known as 'high speed'). See 'What is broadband?' on page 13.

Both are generally available over your fixed telephone line, as well as the other methods mentioned above. However, broadband access for some homeowners may be limited – contact your telephone or cable company for information about availability in your area.

You need an Internet service provider (ISP)

In the same way that companies supply you with gas and electricity services, an ISP is a company that supplies you with access to the Internet. However, many ISPs also offer related services such as e-mail, web space and content.

Many ISPs will give you a CD-ROM that will download onto your PC all the information you need to get online.

In some cases, an ISP's software will already be loaded on your PC – you will then see an icon on your screen enabling you to download the ISP's services. But you don't have to use that ISP's services and it might be worth having a look at what others are offering rather than signing up straight away.

Note that your telephone or cable company may limit your choice of ISP. Any ISP will be able to tell you whether it can give you access.

What should I consider when choosing an Internet service provider and Internet package?

The main things are:

- how much are you willing to pay to use the Internet?
- how long do you think you will spend online each month and at what time of day? For example, surfing during the day is often more expensive than in the evenings and at weekends. Is it worth paying a flat rate each month rather than paying per minute? (See 'How do I pay?' on page 8.)
- do you want fast access to the Internet?
- do you mind if your phone line is tied up when you are using the Internet? (See 'What is broadband?' on page 13.)
- what level of customer support does the ISP offer, and do you have to pay for it? This is particularly worth considering if you are new to the Internet and likely to need reliable advice and technical support.
- is there a minimum contract period that may prevent you switching to a different ISP if you are unhappy with the service?

- does the ISP offer other services, eg free e-mail addresses and free web space so that you can build your own website?

How do I pay?

Internet costs are usually on top of the normal cost of your phone line and phone calls. It is worth checking with your ISP how you will be charged as this can differ from package to package. In most cases, if part of your Internet charges are metered (see 'Dial-up or narrowband' below), the metered part will appear on your normal phone bill. You will pay flat rates and subscription charges direct to your ISP.

You can pay for Internet access in several ways. Choose a package that best suits your individual or household needs. This may depend on how often and for how long you access the Internet, and what you intend to use it for.

Dial-up or narrowband

Metered or 'pay-as-you-go'

You pay per minute spent online, with the charge typically between 1p and 4p per minute – often based on the cost of a standard local call. These charges will appear on your normal phone bill from your telephone or cable company. Some ISPs charge a monthly subscription fee on top of this. Your ISP should set out clearly what charges apply and when. *Worth considering if you use the Internet infrequently and when local call charges are low, eg at the weekend.*

Unmetered off-peak

You pay a monthly subscription that includes free calls at certain times of the day – usually evenings and weekends. To access the Internet outside these times you pay per minute online. *Worth considering if you use the Internet in the evening and at weekends.*

Unmetered 24/7 (all the time or anytime)

You pay a monthly unmetered or 'flat' rate for access to the Internet at any time without any call charges. With no call fees to pay, you know what your monthly bill is going to be. Worth considering for heavier users – eg more than 4 hours per week. Work out how much you think you'd be paying with a metered package each month (number of total minutes per month x pence charged per minute) and see whether it would be worth your while paying a flat rate instead. Note that unmetered does not necessarily mean 'unlimited, and your ISP may limit the number of hours you can spend online in one day.

Broadband (also see 'What is broadband?' on page 13)

Broadband tends to be more expensive than dial-up or narrowband, but check with the ISP. All broadband access is currently unmetered. This means you pay a monthly unmetered or 'flat' rate to access the Internet at any time without any call charges. With no call fees to pay, you know what your monthly bill is going to be. However, there may be installation costs that are worth checking out before signing up. Worth considering for frequent users who want faster access to the Internet (see 'What is broadband?' on page 13).

Do I need a second line?

If you choose a dial-up connection to the Internet, you may want to consider getting a second line installed in your home so you can use the Internet and telephone at the same time. If so, it is worth letting your telephone company know that you intend to use the second line for Internet access. If you choose a broadband connection, there's no need for a second line (see 'What is broadband?' on page 13).

Tips on choosing an Internet service provider and Internet package

Information on ISPs is available from several sources:

- independent computer magazines and consumer publications publish regular reviews of ISPs, scoring them on price, customer service and network reliability;
- if you can get access to the Internet, eg at a friend's house, at work or at a local library, several good websites offer useful advice on choosing an ISP and Internet package. You could try searching for a mixture of words like 'ISPs', 'prices', 'performance' and 'reviews'; and
- ask your friends and family about their experiences and what ISPs they would recommend – but remember that their needs may differ from yours.

Can I change my Internet service provider or Internet package if I'm not happy?

Yes – you can change from one ISP to another or ask your ISP to move you onto a different type of Internet package, eg from pay-as-you-go to unmetered.

But check your ISP's terms and conditions first. Your contract may tie you in for 12 months. It's worth checking this before you sign up.

Also, before moving to a new ISP you may want to ask them whether you can use the same e-mail address, or if they can take over the provision of web space for your own website.

What is broadband?

The different types of dial-up packages are explained on page 8 under 'How do I pay?'.

Broadband is different to standard dial-up Internet access in several ways:

- broadband offers faster access to the Internet (typically ten times faster than narrowband). This means that web pages will appear on your screen much more quickly;
- broadband services are 'always on' so there's no need to dial up to the Internet or to log off and you can receive e-mails immediately;
- broadband access is unmetered. You pay a flat fee each month (or in some cases each year) and there are no call fees to pay; and
- broadband splits your telephone line into two channels. This means using the Internet doesn't tie up your existing phone line. So you can surf the Internet and talk on the phone at the same time without needing a second fixed line in your home.

There are different ways of accessing the Internet using a broadband connection. Most people use a connection that involves upgrading their existing telephone or cable line (known as an ADSL or cable modem connection). An engineer from your telephone company or ISP will fit new equipment in your home (in most cases just a small box) to speed up your existing phone line and give you faster access.

Increasingly, you will have the option of installing the equipment yourself (known as 'self-install' or 'plug and play').

Broadband services are also available over new networks, for example satellite and fixed wireless. ISPs will be able to tell you what networks they can use and what equipment you need in each case.

Broadband access may be limited – contact your telephone or cable company, or your ISP, for information about what's available in your area.

There is more information on broadband on Oftel's website at www.oftel.gov.uk/publications/consumer/consguides/index.htm

Other questions about the Internet

How can I make sure my children are safe online?

The Home Office, in partnership with the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) and UK online, has published a detailed booklet of help and advice for parents. For your copy, call free on 0800 77 1234 or download the booklet from www.wiseuptothenet.co.uk.

Children are encouraged to visit www.thinkyounknow.co.uk, a website that has been designed specifically to help them stay safe when they are using the Internet.

What can I do if I find illegal material on the Internet?

If you see something you believe is illegal, you can contact the IWF. The IWF was set up to deal with the problem of illegal material on the Internet, with particular reference to illegal pornographic and racist material. Go to www.iwf.org.uk.

How can I avoid receiving unsolicited e-mails?

Various tools are available on the Internet to help reduce the number of junk e-mails you receive. Check what filtering options your ISP or e-mail service provides. If you receive an unsolicited e-mail, you can ask your ISP to block incoming mail from that address, or perhaps set up your e-mail software to do the same. In the meantime, consider carefully who you share your personal details with and whether the information you are being asked for is really necessary.

If you believe your personal details are being used unfairly, contact the Information Commissioner. Call 01625 545745 or go to www.dataprotection.gov.uk.

Where can I find advice about premium rate services on the Internet?

Many websites now offer access to specific content (rather than the whole of the Internet) using premium rate charges. ICSTIS, the Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services, is responsible for regulating all premium rate phone services. You can get its free consumer guide, Premium rate services on the Internet by calling ICSTIS on 0800 500212 or going to www.icstis.org.uk.

How can I keep my computer free from viruses and secure?

A virus is a computer program, usually disguised as something else (eg an e-mail attachment) that causes some unexpected and usually unwelcome event. Viruses are often designed so that they spread automatically to other computers. Use an up-to-date virus checker program to protect your computer from viruses. Anti-virus protection software is widely available from online sites or your local computer store.

The best way to keep your connection secure, particularly if you have a broadband 'always on' connection, is to use a 'firewall'. A firewall prevents others from accessing your computer or network. Software versions of firewalls are available to home users. You can find out more by looking at computer magazines or asking your ISP.

Where can I find advice about shopping online?

The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI), in partnership with UK online, has published a guide called Safe Internet Shopping. This leaflet is available from local libraries and Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Where can I get advice for small businesses?

TelecomsAdvice is an independent website for small UK businesses who need to know about using telecoms and the Internet. Endorsed by Oftel, it is an official partner to the DTI's initiative, UK online for business. Go to www.telecomsAdvice.org.uk.

UK online for business is an industry/government partnership helping small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the UK to make the most of new technologies. It offers expert, impartial, jargon-free help, information and support on the best use of technology for SMEs.

Call 0845 715 2000 for details of UK online for business, or go to www.ukonlineforbusiness.gov.uk

What if I have a complaint about my ISP?

If you are unhappy with the service you are getting, your first contact should be your ISP. It is helpful to keep a proper record of your complaint, listing:

- the date and time you spoke to your ISP;
- who you spoke to; and
- what they said or promised to do.
-

If, after this, you feel you have been dealt with poorly or in an unreasonable way, you can ask for your complaint to go to a higher level. Many companies have high-level teams to deal with customer complaints that cannot be sorted out at the first attempt.

If you are still dissatisfied, you can contact Oftel for advice. However, in most cases Oftel cannot resolve the complaint with your ISP for you.

If you are still not happy with your ISP, try voting with your feet and switching to a new ISP (but check your terms and conditions first).

Contact details

Contacts at Oftel:

Our address
Oftel
50 Ludgate Hill
London EC4M 7JJ

Our website
www.oftel.gov.uk

lo-call rate number: 0845 714 5000
phone: 020 7634 8888fax: 020 7634 8845
textphone: 020 7634 5370
e-mail: advice@oftel.gov.uk

Research and Information Unit
phone: 020 7634 8761
fax: 020 7634 8946
e-mail: infocent@oftel.gov.uk

Important Note:

All of the above contact details will be changing in late 2003 when Oftel is replaced by Ofcom

Other useful organisations:

UK online
free phone: 0800 77 1234
textphone: 0800 085 0853
www.letsallgeton.gov.uk – for more about UK online
www.ukonline.gov.uk – for more information and access to government services

TelecomsAdvice
www.telecomsAdvice.org.uk

UK online for business
phone: 0845 715 2000
www.ukonlineforbusiness.gov.uk

Internet Watch Foundation
5 Coles Lane
Oakington
Cambridgeshire CB4 5BA
www.iwf.org.uk

ICSTIS
phone: 020 7940 7474
fax: 020 7940 7456
to complain: 0800 500212
e-mail: secretariat@icstis.org.uk
www.icstis.org.uk

Information Commissioner
Wycliffe House
Water Lane,
Wilmslow
Cheshire SK9 5AF
phone: 01625 545745
fax: 01625 524510
e-mail: data@dataprotection.gov.uk
www.dataprotection.gov.uk

Disclaimer: The information in this booklet is for general guidance only. We do everything possible to check that the information is accurate and up to date at the time of publication. However, we cannot guarantee any of the information. Oftel is not responsible for content produced by any other organisation mentioned in this leaflet. You may want to take independent advice on legal matters. The

contents of this leaflet should not be seen as endorsing the products or services of any company. For training purposes, we may monitor calls you make to us.
This leaflet is also available in large print and in Braille.