

How to Choose the Best Wireless Phone Service



Communities for Telecom Rights

Before signing up for any cellular phone plan, think about your calling habits. Will you use a cell phone for emergencies? Is it for personal or business use? Do you travel? Try to estimate how many minutes you will use per month.

What type of plan will work best for you?

Local plan. This type of plan is limited to your home area and can be very cheap. However, if you make a call from outside your home area, you could be charged expensive “roaming fees*.” If you make long distance calls, you may be billed long-distance charges and you are always billed for airtime*.

Regional Plans: This type of plan offers a larger calling area. For some companies, these plans could cover all of California along with several other states. The benefit is that you have one rate that includes minutes for roaming and long distance calls. If you choose this type of plan, have the carrier show you a coverage map showing the service areas.

National Plans: This type of plan lets you use your phone anywhere in the country for a single per-minute price. There should be no roaming or long distance charges.

Consider all of the fees and rates, not just the advertised rate.

Monthly Fees or Monthly Service Charge: You must pay a monthly fee to use a company’s cell phone services. Usually, the monthly fee includes a limited amount of “air-time,” or minutes you can use to make calls.

Ask yourself: Are the minutes of airtime you receive for this monthly fee enough for you? If not, how much will you need to pay for additional minutes?

Time restrictions: Cell phone companies offer packages that are made up of “peak*” and “off-peak*” minutes or unlimited nights and weekends. It varies for different companies. Peak hours are usually between the hours of 6 am and 9 pm Monday through Friday. Off peak and unlimited nights and weekends are usually Monday through Friday 9 pm to 6 am and Friday from 9 pm on Monday 6 am.

Once you have used up your minutes, you must pay extra for making more calls.

Roaming Charges: If you are too far away from your “home calling area*” or “home service area*,” you will have to pay extra “roaming charges” to make calls.

Tip: Find out how big your home calling area will be. Some companies may give you a home calling area that includes almost all of California plus neighboring states. Also find out how much you would pay for roaming charges when making calls outside of your home calling area.

Long-Distance and Toll Charges*: You may need to pay additional long-distance charges or toll charges for making long-distance calls from your cell phone. Some cell phone companies allow you to make calls to many areas, even areas outside the area code of the wireless phone, without paying any long-distance or toll charges. Find out where you can call without paying extra charges.

Dead Zones*: There may be gaps, called “dead zones” where a connection cannot be made and you cannot make or receive a call. Ask your carrier where these areas are located.

If a building blocks a connection, it will create a small dead zone.

For example: Many cell or wireless phones were never designed for in-building coverage. You may find that you cannot use your phones at work or at home. Also, very isolated areas, like the desert, may be large dead zones because there are no transmitters nearby. Make sure you test the phone extensively during the 15 or 30 day return period.

Continued...

Contact your local Community Based Organization(CBO)

* refer to the glossary on the next page

Take Action!

Tip: Find out if the company's dead zone will affect you. If your home is in or near a company's dead zone, you will have difficulty making calls.

Be careful when you sign up with a wireless phone company

Service Contracts: When you sign up for cell phone service you usually sign a one or two year contract. Usually, there are "termination fees*" (often about \$150 to \$200) for ending service with that company before the contract is finished.

Tip: Find out if the phone company will allow you to change calling plans during the time of your contract without paying extra fees or adding an extra time to the contract. Some phone companies will add one or two years to your contract if you change calling plans.

Misleading sales: Because wireless service is so complicated, it is easy to misunderstand the terms of service. In addition, many wireless companies are very aggressive in trying to sign up customers, and may mislead people to sign them up. If you feel you have been treated unfairly or misled, you can do something about it. (See the Fact Sheet about "Misleading Ads & Telephone Service.")

Prepaid Cell Phones

Prepaid cell phones allow you to buy wireless phones with a prepaid amount of minutes.

Advantages :

- ◆ no contract to sign
- ◆ no long-term commitment like a one or two year contract
- ◆ no credit check
- ◆ there might not be a security deposit required

Disadvantages

- ◆ there is usually an activation fee*
- ◆ pre-paid minutes can expire: 30 to 90 days after activation and you will need to pay for additional minutes
- ◆ you pay more per minute

- ◆ you cannot accept collect calls or third-party billed calls

Emergency cell phone calls

Any cell phone that still works will complete a "911" emergency phone call, even if the phone's wireless service contract has been terminated or the prepaid minutes have expired.

Tip: You can keep a working cell phones as an "emergency" phone.

Glossary

Roaming fees - These are charges you must pay when you make wireless telephone calls while you are outside of your home calling or service area.

Airtime - "Airtime" is the amount of time that a wireless phone is being used making or receiving calls.

Peak - "Peak" hours are the time of day that most people make telephone calls. Generally peak hours are weekdays after 6:00 a.m. and before 9:00 p.m. Sometimes calls are more expensive to make during peak hours.

Off-Peak - "Off-peak" hours are when less telephone calls are made. Usually off peak hours are after 9:00 p.m. and before 6:00 a.m. on weekdays, and all-day on the weekends. Sometimes calls are cheaper during off-peak hours.

Home calling/service area - This is the area in which you can make wireless phone calls without paying additional roaming charges.

Toll charge - Toll charges are billed to you when you make calls to nearby cities.

Dead zones-Dead zones - Gaps in the service territory of a wireless phone company where you cannot connect your cell phone to make or receive calls.

Termination Fees - These are charges you must pay to end telephone service with a company. Usually, you only pay termination fees if you sign a contract for service for a certain length of time (for example, one year) and you end the service before the time is up.

Activation Fee-These are charges you must pay to begin telephone service with a company.

Terms of service - These terms control how your telephone service works, how you are charged for your service, and other issues related to your telephone service.

General Tips:

- ◆ **Read the fine print.** Look at the fine print on any written materials related to telephone service. It may contain terms of service* that you do not know about. Ask questions if there is something that you do not understand.
- ◆ **Immediately check and save your bills.** As soon as you receive your bill, check it over carefully to see if there are any charges that you do not agree with. Save your bills for several months, in case you need to dispute charges.
- ◆ **It is your right to question charges.** If you think there is a charge on your phone bill for something you did not do, you have a right to question the charge.
- ◆ **Be careful about giving personal information over the phone.**
- ◆ **Ask if the company offers information in your native language.**

