

A broad look at what the internet can cost you

SALVATION ARMY FINANCIAL COUNSELLOR MARIA TURNBULL EXPLAINS THE DIFFERENT TYPES OF INTERNET SERVICES.

AS EVERYONE'S INTERNET usage requirements and budgets are different, it's important to understand what the terminology means to make sure you sign up for the plan that best suits your needs.

What is broadband?

Broadband internet refers to high-speed internet services, such as ADSL, cable and satellite. The speed of these services is usually much higher than that of a basic dial-up connection, and most forms of broadband internet allow simultaneous use of the existing telephone service.

What are the types of broadband services?

ADSL uses an ordinary phone line to allow use of the normal telephone service and internet at the same time. ADSL is not available to every home in Australia, but it is currently the most widely-used form of broadband internet in Australia.

Cable internet is available to a more limited number of homes, and often uses the same fibre-optic cable used by cable television providers. Cable internet services usually operate separately to the standard telephone service, and always allow simultaneous use of telephone and internet services.

Satellite internet services can be operated in one or two directions. A one-way satellite connection requires use of a telephone line to upload to the internet.

Broadband internet services are normally billed according to usage, not time. Some plans will have limits that refer only to the amount of material downloaded by the customer, while others will include both upload and download. Upload and download are measured via a single basic unit of measurement, such as a megabyte or gigabyte.

Upload and download

Download refers to material 'received' via the internet. While download does include files actively 'downloaded' from the internet, it also includes any other information that may be accessed, such as web-pages and emails received.

Upload refers to material 'sent' via the internet. This includes any emails sent or requests made to the internet for information (such as when you enter a web address).

File sharing

Any files taken from your computer via your internet connection by another user (for example, file sharing of music or video) will count for upload.

Megabytes and gigabytes

(1,000 megabyte (mb) = 1 gigabyte (gb)). Detailed information regarding these measurements is usually available from your internet service provider (ISP). In general terms, text files/web pages will take up less 'space' than those that include pictures or sound. To put things into perspective, a music CD of around 70 minutes duration in some formats can take up about 650 megabytes.



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Questions to ask when signing up to a broadband account:

What are my usage requirements?

You are well advised to select a plan with a limit substantially higher than what you may have used previously on a dial-up account. Due to the speed and convenience of broadband internet, many users access much more data via the internet than they used to with their dial-up accounts. You will often be better off to select a plan with a higher limit that you don't use, than to select a plan with a lower limit and incur excess usage charges if you exceed the limit.

Am I able to change plans during the course of the contract if the plan I've chosen proves unsuitable?

Once you become familiar with your own 'habits' as a broadband user you may find that the limit on your plan is either too high or too low. You should check before you sign up what your options will be if you decide to upgrade or downgrade your plan later on.

How is usage calculated?

If the plan you are considering includes free sites, you should make sure that you know which they are, and whether they are likely to change. You should also clarify whether your plan limit includes both upload and download, or download only.

What additional charges will be levied if I exceed my plan limit?

The charges for excess usage will vary depending on your provider. You should familiarise yourself with the costs, and be aware that, due to the high speeds associated with broadband internet, it is very easy to exceed your plan limit.

What tools are provided for monitoring my usage?

Many ISPs provide usage meters or give warnings when you are nearing your plan limit. It is important that you make yourself familiar with these tools.