

# Wireless Phones

Tips on using  
Cellular and Personal  
Communications Service

State of Wisconsin

## When it comes to your phone service, we know you have many questions. The State of Wisconsin's TeleWatch program will give you plain talk about your telephone service.

Cellular telephone and Personal Communications Service (PCS) technology enable users to make and receive telephone calls virtually anywhere they go, within wireless coverage areas. In recent years, costs have gone down as these phones have become more popular. While wireless phones offer convenience, many customers have been surprised by unexpected charges. Here are some things you should know if you are considering purchasing a wireless phone or changing your service.

### Saving on airtime charges

- People use their cellular phones in different ways. Some people travel and need their phone on the road and others never leave their home service area. Some people use their phones for a few minutes a day and others for hours a day. Match a plan to your needs and budget, because it may be harder to change once you're signed up.
- Get a good deal to begin with. Comparison shopping can help you find a service plan and phone that fit your needs. Look for promotions, which typically give you more calling minutes for the same price, a good price on a phone, or both.
- Estimate your usage before signing up. Remember that you're paying for calls you receive as well as those you make. You'll minimize your costs if you use up the included minutes in the calling plan without going over the limit. Extra minutes are usually much more costly. Some wireless phones can be set to keep track of minutes used.
- Evaluate your needs before signing up for extra-cost calling services such as call waiting, three-way calling, caller ID and call forwarding. Some plans may include these services at no additional charge.
- If you're cut off during a call, or couldn't hear the person on the other end, call your carrier at 611 or \*611 and ask for a billing credit for that call.
- Some consumers may qualify for a lower-cost calling plan if they are members of an organization or association or employed by a certain company.
- If your calling plan is not working for your calling needs, ask your provider if there is another plan which would be better for you. Most providers have numerous options, and many companies are willing to make changes from one plan to another free of charge.

### Other factors to consider

- **Call quality:** Some carriers may provide higher-quality connections and fewer dropped calls than others. Ask other wireless phone users in your community about the quality of their calls.
- **Service area:** Which plan gives you the largest calling area? If you travel frequently, a larger service area can save you plenty.
- **Free incoming calls:** Some carriers don't charge you for the first minute of incoming calls. If you receive a lot of incoming calls, this could save you a bundle.
- **Billing by the second:** A few carriers bill you by the second after the first minute of a call, rather than rounding your calls to the next full minute. Again, the savings can be significant.
- **Peak calling hours:** Plans with anytime minutes or the shortest peak calling period are more attractive. The difference in airtime charges between peak and off-peak minutes is often so steep that it's worth checking your carrier's exact hours.
- **Included services:** Many plans offer free voice mail, but some offer other useful services, such as data transmission capabilities.
- **Buckets of off-peak calling minutes:** Some carriers offer packages of inexpensive minutes of weekend and/or evening calling.
- **Cancellation fees:** Look for the smallest penalty for changing carriers.

## The Prepaid Option

Prepaid wireless plans are becoming more popular with people who don't want long-term contracts, want to strictly control their spending, or have bad credit. With prepaid wireless, a consumer buys blocks of calling minutes. Typically, these blocks come in \$25, \$50, or \$100 increments. The user has no long-term contract or credit commitment to the carrier and no monthly statement. You simply use your phone until the prepaid amount is used up. New blocks of time can be purchased at any time.

The prepaid option costs significantly more per minute of use and some carriers require a minimum spending level per month. Prepaid buyers usually, but not always, pay full retail price for the wireless phone. Still, prepaid wireless works well for many consumers.

## Questions & Answers

### What kinds of charges will I see on my bill?

In addition to your monthly service charge, and fees for any airtime used over and above your plan's included minutes, you can expect to see charges for any roaming, long-distance or directory assistance calls you make. You may also see federal, state, county or city taxes on your bill, as well as miscellaneous charges, such as a connection charge for calling a landline phone.

### What is roaming?

Cellular "roaming" allows customers to use their phones to place and receive calls in cities outside their "home" service areas. This feature is useful when traveling outside your home coverage area. Each provider offers different home coverage areas. There is usually an additional charge for roaming, which is normally in addition to long distance charges.

### Should I sign a long-term contract?

Many wireless plans require you to sign a long-term contract for the service and/or the equipment. Think carefully before you sign. While carriers usually offer better deals if you sign a long-term contract, there are disadvantages:

- You may not be able to switch providers or cancel service until the contract expiration, unless you pay a cancellation fee, which can often be hundreds of dollars.
- If wireless prices continue to drop, you may be tied into a fixed price.

### How do I pick a carrier with the best reception?

Reception varies inside a carrier's coverage area because of obstructions such as buildings, tunnels, and hills, and the number and placement of cellular towers. Ask your friends and neighbors who have wireless service for their opinions about carriers' coverage and call quality.

### What's the best service plan for just emergency use?

Choose an inexpensive analog service plan, because analog service provides more coverage area compared to digital service plans. In many rural areas, it's the only service available. With many analog plans, carriers offer free phones. So, buy the cheapest analog plan offered with a free phone and you're set for emergencies.

### Can I use my existing phone with a new carrier?

In many cases, you can activate your phone with a new plan. It will depend on whether the technology your phone uses is compatible with your chosen carrier's technology, and whether the carrier chooses to activate that specific phone on its network. Some carriers will activate a phone only if you buy it from them. Analog phones are the most likely candidates for reactivation. The best way to find out is to call the carrier.

### What's the best service plan for frequent travel in the United States?

People who travel frequently should check out the many flat-rate plans carriers offer. The monthly fee includes all long-distance and roaming charges, but sometimes with restrictions. Flat-rate plans are available in regional and national versions, so compare them to find the one that's best for you.

### Can I use my phone outside the United States?

Some wireless phones will work in some or all foreign countries, while others may not. Check with your wireless company before traveling abroad.

### Can someone fraudulently use my cellular phone?

Your cellular phone can be used fraudulently if someone "clones" the electronic serial number of your phone and uses it to place unauthorized calls without intention of payment. "Cloning" is prohibited by the Federal Communications Commission and can be prevented in the authentication process that occurs after you first purchase your phone. Ask your carrier what steps it takes to protect your phone from cloning. Cloning is when a cellular phone has been programmed to duplicate another cellular phone to place illegal calls without any intention of payment. The scanner uses the fake or "cloned" numbers until detected.

### What are the advantages of digital service vs. analog?

The call quality of digital technology is typically better than analog, and you'll experience less static and fewer dropped (interrupted) calls. With analog, you may experience more fast-busy signals in urban areas, indicating that the network is too busy to handle your call. Digital networks have larger capacity and you'll generally experience fewer fast-busy signals.

Analog calls can be overheard on radio scanners, which is not the case with digital service. Cloning your phone is also very difficult with digital service. Digital phones have more optional data features, such as messaging and paging, than analog.

### Why should I consider buying a dual-mode phone?

Dual-mode phones, which work with both analog and digital networks, allow you to use your wireless phone when you move out of range of the digital network. The phone automatically switches to an analog network, where available. Analog service is available almost everywhere in the United States, so dual-mode phones significantly increase a digital customer's ability to stay in touch.

### Is there a charge for emergency calls?

No. Calls from cellular and PCS phones to 911 are free.

## Who can help?

**The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin** is the state agency that oversees the telephone industry. Most local and in-state telephone billing and service complaints may be directed to the PSC. Call or write to:

P.O. Box 7854  
Madison, WI 53707-7854  
(800) 225-7729 (800-CAL-PSCW)  
TTY (608) 267-1479  
Fax (608) 266-3957  
E-Mail: [pscsecs@psc.state.wi.us](mailto:pscsecs@psc.state.wi.us)  
[psc.wi.gov](http://psc.wi.gov)

**The Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection** mediates and investigates telecommunications complaints, including those regarding mail and phone solicitations, deceptive and misleading marketing, and long distance rate changes. Call or write to:

P.O. Box 8911  
Madison, WI 53708-8911  
(800) 422-7128  
TTY (608)224-5058  
Fax (608) 224-4939  
E-Mail: [datcph hotline@datcp.state.wi.us](mailto:datcph hotline@datcp.state.wi.us)  
<http://datcp.state.wi.us>

**The Wisconsin Department of Justice** enforces state law, including telecommunications. Write to them at:

123 West Washington Ave.  
P.O. Box 7857  
Madison, WI 53707-7857  
[www.doj.state.wi.us](http://www.doj.state.wi.us)

**The Federal Communications Commission** is the federal agency that oversees the telecommunications industry. Call or write to:

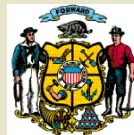
**Consumer Protection Branch  
Common Carrier Bureau  
445 12th St., SW  
Washington, DC 20554**  
Toll-free (888) 225-5322 (888-CALL FCC)  
Toll-free TTY  
(888) 835-5322 (888-TELL FCC)  
[www.fcc.gov](http://www.fcc.gov)

## Bilingual service / Servicio Bilingüe

The Public Service Commission (PSC) is also able to provide customer assistance in Spanish. When calling the PSC, please ask to speak to a Spanish speaking representative.

En la Comisión de Servicios Públicos del estado de Wisconsin (PSC) podemos asistirles en español. Cuando llame a la PSC, pida hablar con un representante de habla hispana.

The Public Service Commission of Wisconsin does not discriminate on the basis of disability in the provision of programs, services, or employment. If you are speech hearing, or visually impaired and need assistance, call (608) 262-8524 or TTY (608) 267-1479. We will try to find another way to get the information to you in usable form.



This brochure was produced jointly by the WI Public Service Commission, the WI Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection, and the WI Department of Justice.