

A Consumer Guide to Cellular Phones

consumer**brief**

Whether you call them cell phones or mobile devices, it seems like everyone has one. A mobile phone is a device that can make and receive telephone calls over a radio link while moving around a wide geographic area. In addition to being used as telephones, modern mobile devices also support a wide variety of other services such as text messaging, Multimedia Messaging Service (MMS), e-mail, Internet access, short-range wireless communications (infrared and Bluetooth), business applications, gaming and photography. Mobile phones that offer these and more general computing capabilities are referred to as smartphones.

Mobile phone services are unregulated but, as stated, they are very popular with consumers. Many consumers use their cell phones as their home phones. Before you buy a cell phone plan, consider the following:

CONSUMER TIPS

- Shop around to find a plan that best fits your needs.
- Find out about the monthly access fee and the charge for air time during peak calling hours.
- Ask about charges for dialing “800” numbers and directory assistance. Generally, they are charged as calls made outside your “home calling area” and may result in additional expenses.
- Check on “per-call” surcharges and whether you will be charged if you reach a busy signal or if your party does not answer, and if there are costs for incoming calls.
- Inquire about all fees associated with a service plan. Some plans contain charges for “air time, roaming, and universal funds.” There are also taxes associated with wireless service.
- Check the contract for an automatic renewal provision. Ask if there are any cancellation fees. Some long-term contracts may offer lower rates, but will lock you into a plan that may not be suitable for you in the future. The contract you are signing is binding so the phone service contract is yours for the duration of the contract.
- Inquire about “dead zones.” All services have gaps in their coverage areas.
- Read the contract carefully and make sure that you understand all of the terms before signing it. Get everything in writing.
- Remember to review your bill every month for mistakes and to see if new programs have been added without your knowledge.
- Do not forget to check once in a while how many minutes of your approved time you have used. Extra minutes over your approved time can be very costly.

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- If you do not want to receive telemarketer calls on your cell phone, call the **National Do Not Call Registry** at **888-382-1222** from the cell phone you wish to register. *Registration is free.*

TALKING AND TEXTING WHILE DRIVING

Texting or talking while driving is a distracted, dangerous activity that diverts a person's attention away from the primary task of driving. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, in 2010 alone, over 3,000 people were killed in distracted driving crashes.

Almost every state in the nation has some type of restriction about using a mobile device while driving. Visit www.ghsa.org/html/stateinfo/laws/cellphone_laws.html.

New Jersey has one of the toughest laws in the nation about the use of cell phones while driving:

- Drivers must use hands-free devices while talking on cell phones (\$100 fine plus costs).
- Text messaging and the use of video games are prohibited while driving.
- School bus operators are prohibited from using cell phones while driving.
- Drivers under the age of 21 with learner's permits or probationary licenses are prohibited from using cell phones, texting devices and other hand-held or hands-free wireless electronic devices while driving (including iPods).

New Jersey also has adopted a law allowing prosecution of cell phone users if they drive recklessly and cause serious harm or death. Penalties could include prison time and fines up to \$150,000, similar to drunken driver punishments. The legislation, A1074, was tagged as "Kulesh, Kubert and Bolis' Law," after New Jersey victims of distracted driving accidents. Hand-held cell phone users causing serious crashes while driving would be prosecuted under criminal homicide or assault-by-vehicle laws. Visit Handsfreeinfo.com or www.distraction.gov for more information about distracted driving, or write to or call:

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration

200 New Jersey Avenue SE

Washington DC 20590

1-888-327-4236 | 1-800-424-9153

CELL PHONES AND RADIATION SCAMS

The increase in cell phone use has generated concern about possible health risks related to radio-frequency electromagnetic fields from this technology, and a market for shields as possible protection against the radio waves the phones emit. There is no scientific proof that these shields significantly reduce the exposure. In fact, these shields may interfere with the phone's signal, causing it to draw even more power to communicate with the base station and possibly emit more radiation. The Federal Trade Commission (www.ftc.gov) has some practical tips to help you avoid scams and limit your exposure to electromagnetic emissions from your cell phone:

- Increase the distance between you and your phone by using an earpiece or the speakerphone feature.
- Consider texting more and limiting your cell phone use to short conversations.
- Wait for a good signal. A weak signal makes your phone work harder and emit more radiation.
- A phone's specific absorption rate (SAR) reveals the maximum amount of radiation the human body absorbs from the phone while it's transmitting. SAR testing ensures that the devices sold in the U.S. comply with the Federal Communications Commission's SAR exposure limit. For more information about SAR you can view "SAR For Cell Phones: What It Means For You." by visiting www.fcc.gov.
- For information on cell phone and health issues, go to the National Cancer Institute's (www.cancer.gov) fact sheet about cancer risk and cell phones.

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