

Communicating online

There are now lots of different ways to communicate online, some of which can be particularly helpful if you are deaf or have hearing loss. You'll find this factsheet useful if you want to find out about the online services you can use to chat to almost anyone, anywhere.

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i If you'd like this factsheet in Braille, large print or audio, please contact our Information Line – see last page for contact details.



Getting online

To communicate online, first you need to *get* online.

In this factsheet we refer to the following devices that you can use to access the internet:

- **Desktop computer** – a computer designed for regular use at one location, which sits on a desk or table because of its size. It's well suited for work and home use.
- **Laptop computer** – a portable computer that's small enough to rest on your lap. It has a screen that closes over the keyboard like a lid.
- **Tablet** – a slim, handheld computer that has a touchscreen. It comes in different sizes but is larger than a smartphone. It's ideal for using on the move.
- **Smartphone** – a mobile phone that has many of the features of a computer or tablet; it can do much more than just make telephone calls. Most smartphones have a touchscreen and a camera.

We also refer to these different types of internet connection:

- **Wi-Fi** – this lets you connect your desktop computer, laptop, tablet or smartphone to the internet wirelessly, using radio waves. There is often free Wi-Fi available in public places such as cafes. The alternative to Wi-Fi is mobile broadband.

- **Mobile broadband** – this lets you connect a mobile device, such as a smartphone or tablet, to the internet through a mobile phone network. This means you don't need to rely on Wi-Fi.

Note: While most new computers have a built-in camera and microphone for online communication, older and entry-level devices (suitable for beginners) might not. Ask for an in-store demonstration, if possible. Make sure you're comfortable with the buttons and that the screen is suitable for your needs.

Need some help?

If you're new to the internet and need some help, come along to one of our Online Today drop-in sessions and we'll show you how to get online and make the most of smartphones, tablets and other technology (see 'Where can I get more information about communicating online?', [page 11](#)).

What are the different ways to communicate online?

There's much more to online communication than email. You can send instant messages, make voice or video calls, use forums, join social networks and more. All you need is a computer, tablet or smartphone and a Wi-Fi or mobile broadband connection.

Apps for smartphones and tablets (see below) have made online communication particularly quick and easy. Some can even translate different languages.

In this factsheet we introduce you to the different ways you can communicate online – please let us know how you get on and which apps and online services you find useful by emailing us at reviewpanel@hearingloss.org.uk

What are apps?

App is short for 'application' and refers to a piece of software that runs on a smartphone or tablet. Apps make it easy to use a whole range of online services and websites – for sending messages, video calling, shopping, banking and much more.

To use an app, you usually just click or tap its icon on the home screen of your smartphone or tablet (see picture, above right). Smartphones and tablets come ready loaded with basic apps, but you can get many more for free or at low cost.



Apps for different operating systems

All smartphones and tablets have an operating system, which is the software the device runs on. The two most popular operating systems are:

- **Apple's iOS** – exclusively for Apple devices such as the iPhone and iPad
- **Google's Android** – used in Android devices from companies such as Samsung, HTC, LG, Sony and Motorola.

You can get apps for Apple devices from the App Store, and for Android devices from Google Play. Other operating systems include Blackberry's BlackBerry OS and Microsoft's Windows Phone. Most phones and tablets come with an app for the relevant app shop already installed.

When we describe useful apps later in this factsheet, we let you know which operating systems they are suitable for.

What is instant messaging?

Instant messaging lets you send and receive text messages, pictures and videos over the internet for free. There are now many instant messaging apps that are hugely popular and very easy to use. However, if you have a monthly data limit for your mobile broadband, you'll need to keep an eye on how much mobile data the apps use when you're not connected to Wi-Fi.

Here are some of the most popular instant messaging apps available.



iMessage

This is Apple's standard text messaging service. It allows you to send text, picture and video messages over the internet to anyone else who's using an Apple iOS device or Mac computer with iMessage. You can use it for one-to-one conversations or group chats.



WhatsApp

With more than a billion users, WhatsApp for smartphones and tablets is one of the most popular instant-messaging apps in the world. Now, you can also use 'WhatsApp Web' on your computer, by visiting the website - web.whatsapp.com - and connecting your smartphone by following the simple instructions.

The free app allows you to exchange text messages, photos, videos and voice recordings with other WhatsApp users, in one-to-one conversations or group chats. You can also make voice and video calls to other WhatsApp users free of charge.

Some features, such as voice and video calling, are only available on newer versions of the app, so make sure you have the latest version downloaded to access all the functions.

Available for iPhone, Android, BlackBerry, Windows Phone and Nokia.



GroupMe

You can use the free GroupMe app for group chats on your smartphone, tablet or computer. People who don't want to use the app can still send and receive GroupMe messages through SMS (as a standard text message), if they've been added to the group.

You can easily attach and send pictures, videos and web links. You can also send private messages through GroupMe, but only to others with the GroupMe app.

Available for iOS, Android, BlackBerry, Windows Phone and desktop computers.

How do I make phone calls online?

You can make free or inexpensive phone calls online to almost anywhere in the world.

Many instant messaging services, like WhatsApp ([see page 4](#)), include voice calling, so you can chat to your friends and contacts when you have an internet connection. Other online phone services, such as Skype (see opposite), go a step further, allowing you to call any phone number.

To make phone calls from your computer, you'll need a microphone and speakers. These will be built in to many modern computers. You may find it easier to hear the phone call if you use a headset with a microphone. You can also buy adapters that allow you to connect a regular phone to your computer or Wi-Fi router (a small box provided by your internet provider that you plug in to your phone line socket – this allows you to connect to Wi-Fi).

How do I make video calls online?

In addition to allowing you to make voice calls, services such as Skype allow you to make video calls too. And you're no longer limited to making video calls from a desktop computer with a webcam.

Thanks to video-calling apps and services that you can use with your smartphone or tablet, you can communicate face to face with others wherever you are.

This can be particularly useful if you use sign language or lipread. Some apps just allow you to make video calls, while others let you combine video and text.



You can use Skype for free video calls, video messages, voice calls and text messaging with other Skype users. You can use it on your desktop computer, smartphone or tablet. However, video quality will depend on the strength of your internet signal. Using Skype with secure Wi-Fi, or 4G mobile broadband, tends to give a clearer video than public Wi-Fi and 3G connections. Skype also has a function called Skype translate, which allows you to translate languages and view them as captions on your screen. You can also use this, when speaking English, for English subtitles.

 For more information on this function, visit the Skype website – skype.com/en/features/skype-translator/

Available for most mobile and desktop devices.



If you like video calls, try out this free video instant-messaging service for smartphones only. You can record and share videos of up to 40 seconds with individual friends and groups.

Available for iOS, Android and Windows Phone.



Google Hangouts

This is another free instant-messaging service that lets you make voice and video calls too. You can use it for one-to-one or group conversations.

Available for iOS, Android and desktop.

What is social networking?



'Social networking' online is a great way to stay in touch with friends and family, and connect with people who share similar interests. The most popular social networking services are Facebook and Twitter. You can access them on your computer by visiting the websites [facebook.com](https://www.facebook.com) and [twitter.com](https://www.twitter.com). And you can access them on your smartphone or tablet by downloading Facebook and Twitter apps. You can also visit the websites on your smartphone or tablet, if you prefer.

When you join a social network, you'll need to create a profile. You can then start posting whatever it is you'd like to share, whether that be your thoughts, questions, updates about what you're doing, photos, links to online articles, videos or anything else. Posts on Facebook are called status updates; on Twitter they are called tweets.

Using social networks lets you communicate with a lot of people at the same time, but you can choose who sees your posts – for example, everyone or only your friends and family – by adjusting the privacy settings.

You can also send private 'direct messages' to others and join groups. Both Twitter and Facebook have groups for people who are deaf or have hearing loss or tinnitus.

You can follow Action on Hearing Loss on Facebook and Twitter:

- **Facebook** – [facebook.com/actiononhearingloss](https://www.facebook.com/actiononhearingloss)
- **Twitter** – [twitter.com/actiononhearing](https://www.twitter.com/actiononhearing)

We'll give you up-to-date information on events, news and services, and you can share experiences and information with others.

How do translation apps work?

Translation apps can help you communicate with people who speak different languages. They're useful at work, social events and appointments, and on holidays.

It's important to remember that translation apps are not always 100% accurate. Their accuracy really depends on the quality of the sound you wish to translate and your internet connection. For example, if you are speaking into a device to get it to translate into text, your speech will need to be clear, with no or very little background noise. Also, home or business Wi-Fi connections tend to provide a better internet signal than public Wi-Fi and 3G connections.

Here are some translation apps that you may find helpful:



NGT Lite

NGT Lite is an app owned by the Next Generation Text (NGT) service, which replaced the Text Relay service. You can use the NGT service in the same way you used Text Relay if you have a textphone and wish to call other textphone or telephone users. You can also use it if you have a telephone and wish to call someone who has a textphone.

Thanks to the NGT Lite app, you can now use the text relay service to make a call over your smartphone, tablet or computer that's connected to the internet – wherever you are. You simply type your message and a relay assistant will translate it into speech for the person you're calling – or they will translate your speech into text. If you're texting your messages, the relay assistant will type the person's reply for you to read on your display. You can also use the app just to text and read, like an instant-messaging app.

Available for iOS, Android and Windows.



Find out more at ngts.org.uk and see our factsheet *Text relay services*.



InterpreterNow

This is a free British Sign Language (BSL) online interpreting service owned by the charity SignHealth. InterpreterNow lets businesses and public services communicate with BSL users in face-to-face meetings or over the phone.

Through video relay, a BSL user can sign their message and the interpreter will translate it into speech for the non-BSL user, and vice versa.

The cost of the service is paid for by the business or public service using InterpreterNow. The Access to Work scheme may agree to pay for InterpreterNow, so you can do your job.

You can only use the app to call services that have signed up and agreed to pay for the calls, including a growing list of hundreds of GPs, dental practices and hospitals across the UK.

You can download the app for free on computers, smartphones and tablets.



Find out more at interpreternow.co.uk For more information on Access to Work, visit actiononhearingloss.org.uk/accesstowork



Google Translate

This free app allows you to translate text, speech, text in images, or real-time video from one language into another. It currently supports more than 90 languages at various levels – but not BSL.

To use the app, your device must be connected to the internet. You can save previously converted speech and text to use offline.

Available for iOS, Android and Windows.

Do smartphones and tablets have accessibility features?

Most smartphones have key accessibility features designed to make things easier for people with sight loss or hearing loss, and for those who have difficulty using their hands.

People with sight loss can enlarge texts and emails, and zoom in on web pages.

For people with hearing loss, including hearing aid users, there are settings to improve the audio (sound) for phone calls. If your hearing aid is on the hearing loop setting (formerly called the 'T' setting), a loop or telecoil setting on the smartphone or tablet (sometimes called the 'hearing aid setting') transmits what's being said on the phone directly into your hearing aids, while reducing the background noise.

If you don't know about the hearing loop function on your hearing aid, ask your audiologist to activate it for you and explain more about how it works. Hearing loops can help you to hear over background noise in many public places, and you can buy loop systems for the home.

Accessibility features are not switched on automatically, so you'll need to activate them. To do this, go into the 'Settings' folder on your smartphone or tablet and find the 'Accessibility' folder. It will contain all the accessibility features. Just switch on the ones you need.

If you have trouble finding the 'Accessibility' folder, you should find the answer in the user manual that came with the device.

 To find out more about hearing loop systems, see our factsheet [Assistive listening devices](#).

Are there apps to help me communicate over background noise?

Yes, there are apps designed to reduce background noise and pick up the speech sounds that you want to hear by using your smartphone or tablet's microphone. However, you'll need to use these apps with assistive listening devices such as headphones and neckloops, or wireless streaming devices for your hearing aids.

It's important to check what equipment you need before you download an app, to make sure you can use it. The apps can help you to maintain or improve your social life in noisy situations that you may normally avoid, such as bars and restaurants.

 **BioAid**

This free app for iOS devices allows you to use the microphone on your iPhone or iPad as a basic amplification device. It works by processing sound from the microphone and then playing it back over headphones in real time. You can control the overall sound level and adjust the rejection level of background sounds.

You can use the app with any kind of headphones or earphones. To benefit fully from the 'Loudness' and 'Control' features, you'll need to use earphones that reduce external sounds.

Available for iOS.

 Find out more at bioaid.org.uk

AUD1 Aud-1

This is an advanced version of the BioAid app, which costs £4.99 from the Apple App Store. You can adjust the settings for each ear for improved sound quality, and can better filter and control sound levels and pitch.

Available for iOS.

 To find out more about equipment to use with these apps, see our factsheet *Assistive listening devices*.

How can I keep safe online?

You can now do all kinds of everyday activities quickly and easily online. As well as keeping in touch with your loved ones, you can shop, bank and pay your bills online, anytime, anywhere. While using the internet in this way is extremely useful, it's vital that you protect your personal details, to protect yourself from identity theft and keep your bank account safe from hackers.

Fortunately, there are some simple steps that you can take to keep safe online.

Choose safe passwords

- Your Wi-Fi router will come with a password already set up – change this to a password of your own. This will make it harder for someone to hack into your internet connection (get unauthorised access to the information on your computer, smartphone or tablet).
- Have a unique password for each online account and make it as strong as possible with a mix of lower and upper case letters, numbers and special characters such as # _ *. If someone is able to hack into your connection and discover your email password, and you use the same password for online banking and all the stores you shop at, they'll be able to hack into all of those as well.
- Try to remember your passwords instead of writing them down. If you need reminders, note down clues to the passwords rather than writing them out in full. If you do forget any passwords, banks and online stores usually have simple procedures for letting you re-set them, so don't worry if you do forget one.
- Only give your Wi-Fi password to those you trust (the Wi-Fi signal in your home travels very short distances – but your neighbours next door or across the road may still pick it up).

Make sure you have security software installed

- Different types of security software are available for desktop computers and laptops. It's best to speak to the retailer when buying your device to see which one is best for you. Keep security software updated and renew your license (usually every year) to make sure you are protected.
- Smartphones and tablets have regular software updates, which include updates to security settings. Individual apps will also have similar updates, so make sure you download and install all updates to keep yourself safe. Devices usually let you know when updates are available.

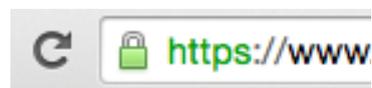
Geotagging

A lot of apps now use geotagging. This means they use Global Positioning System (GPS) – which gives precise information about where you are – to improve how they work. While this can be useful, it is important to read the terms and conditions.

When geotagging is turned on, the app developer can collect information from your device about where you are using the app. Often, this information is used to improve the app further. However, some app developers may sell this information to other companies for marketing purposes, so be sure you know what you are signing up for when you agree to terms and conditions.

Look out for fraudsters

- Beware of 'phishing' emails that ask for personal information or even passwords. No bank or reputable company will ever contact you by phone or email asking for your bank details, passwords or any other personal information. If you contact your bank or other service providers, however, it is normal for them to ask you for details to confirm your identity.
- If you do receive an email or phone call requesting passwords or personal details, hang up immediately or do not reply to the email. Contact the bank or company involved and pass the details of the call or email on to them.
- When using websites for secure information like online banking, make sure you log into the bank's real website, as some fake websites can look very convincing. To check if you are on a secure website, make sure the start of the webpage has `https://` in it and that there is a symbol of a padlock next to this (see below). This code and symbol is used to certify the webpage is reputable.



- **i** You can find out more from [Get Safe Online](#), the UK's leading source of factual and easy-to-understand information about online safety. Visit getsafeonline.org

Where can I get further information about communicating online?

We're supporting a UK-wide project, Online Today, launched by RNIB, to give people with sight loss or hearing loss the skills they need to get the most out of technology and the internet.

Through our free Online Today sessions, we can help by building up your skills so that you have confidence when using your computer, tablet, smartphone or e-reader.

We'll help you to communicate online with family and friends all over the world. We'll also help you to:

- shop and pay bills online
- use comparison websites to get the best deals and save money
- watch TV and films online
- and much more.

You tell us what you want to learn – and we'll show you how to do it. To find out more, visit actiononhearingloss.org.uk/supporting-you/online-today

Other factsheets in this range

The other factsheets in our **Products and Technology** range are:

- *Alerting devices*
- *Assistive listening devices*
- *Enjoying TV*
- *Home telephones*

- *Smoke alarms*
- *Text relay services*
- *Understanding wireless technology for hearing aids*
- *Using mobiles and smartphones when you have hearing loss.*

You can order these from our Information Line ([see last page](#) for contact details) or download them from our website at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/factsheets

Join our online forum

There are increasing numbers of products designed for people with hearing loss. What products couldn't you live without? Join the debate in our **Products and Equipment forum**: community.actiononhearingloss.org.uk/products-and-equipment/f/forum

Information you can trust

We are certified by The Information Standard as a producer of high-quality, evidence-based information. All of the information about the apps and online services in this factsheet was sourced in September 2017 from the service providers' websites.

Did you find this factsheet helpful?

We'd love to know what you think of this factsheet – please email us at reviewpanel@hearingloss.org.uk

If you'd like to join our Readers' Panel, to help us create new publications and improve existing ones, please let us know.

Further information from Action on Hearing Loss

Our expert information covers everything you need to know about:

- hearing loss and deafness
- tinnitus
- ear problems and treatments
- hearing aids and cochlear implants
- useful products and technology
- communication tactics and support
- benefits and grants
- your rights.

Visit our website actiononhearingloss.org.uk or call our Information Line ([see last page](#)) for information, support and publications. You can also find out about services in your area, our hearing research, and how you can get involved.

Please help us support others

We provide our leaflets, factsheets and Information Line service free of charge to anyone affected by deafness, tinnitus or hearing loss in the UK. We rely on the generosity of our supporters to help us do this. We would be very grateful if you would consider making a donation - of as little or as much as you can afford.

Please send a cheque, payable to Action on Hearing Loss, to:

Freepost RTLX-CZKX-BTTZ
Action on Hearing Loss
1-3 Highbury Station Road
London N1 1SE
(No stamp needed)

Donate online at actiononhearingloss.org.uk/donate
Or make a donation over the phone by credit or debit card:

 **0203 227 6182**
 **0203 227 6185**

Thank you.

Our purpose is to help people confronting deafness, tinnitus and hearing loss to live the life they choose. We enable them to take control of their lives and remove the barriers in their way.

To find out more about what we do and how you can support us, go to actiononhearingloss.org.uk

Action on Hearing Loss Information Line

Telephone **0808 808 0123**
Textphone **0808 808 9000**
SMS **0780 000 0360**
(standard text message rates apply)
Email **information@hearingloss.org.uk**

Join us



Action on Hearing Loss



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