



CUB's guide to Cell Phone Data Plans

Choosing the right data plan

Unlike minutes and text messages, which are relatively easy to quantify, understanding data usage isn't so simple. How many "megabytes" does it take to download a photo anyway?

Information gathered by the CUB Cellphone Saver (www.CUB-CellphoneSaver.com) suggests that the average smart phone user consumes less than a quarter of the data included in his or her plan. This guide explains how data usage is measured, breaks down plans currently being offered by wireless companies, and helps consumers choose the best plan for them.

What's a megabyte (MB)?

A megabyte is a unit for measuring data. Whenever you send an e-mail, download a photo, or view a Web page, your phone is sending or receiving data. When it comes to cell phones, 1 MB of data is equal to roughly one of the tasks below:

- Sending or receiving 50 e-mails (without attachments)
- Streaming 2 minutes of music
- Viewing 6 web pages
- Posting 2 photos to your Facebook page
- Watching 30 seconds of video on YouTube (Sites like Netflix stream higher quality video, meaning you'll use even more data)

What's a gigabyte (GB)?

Even though typical customers use no more than 500 MB of data per month, many pricey data plans offer an even larger amount of capacity, measured by the gigabyte (GB). One gigabyte, which is about 1,000 megabytes, roughly equals one of the tasks below:

- Sending or receiving 50,000 e-mails (without attachments)
- Streaming 33 hours of music
- Viewing 5,600 web pages
- Posting 2,000 photos to your Facebook page
- Watching more than 8 hours of video on YouTube (Higher quality video, like Netflix, uses even more data)



How much data do I need?

According to Validas, the software company behind the CUB Cellphone Saver, consumers with smart phones—such as an iPhone, Android, or Blackberry—use an average of about 456 MB of data per month—far less than the standard 2 GB data plans pitched by cell phone companies. And 500 MB is no small amount. In fact, a quick analysis shows that it's enough data to send or receive 1,000 e-mails (100 with photo attachments), view 500 Web pages, download 10 apps, songs or games, stream 5 hours of music, and watch 90 minutes of YouTube videos. (See page 3 for a more detailed analysis.)

What's a megabyte?

- A. A large mouthful of food.
- B. An attack by a particularly large mosquito.
- C. A source of confusion among wireless customers trying to pick the right data plan.
- D. All of the above.

Answer: D

In an analysis of more than 11,000 Verizon bills, Validas found that less than 4 percent of smart phone owners use more than 2 GB of data per month, and less than 1 percent use more than 5 GB a month.

Consumers with feature phones—phones that have access to the Internet, but are not typically used to stream video, music, or download apps—use an average of 30 MB per month, according to Validas. About 92 percent of feature phone users consume less than the lowest 75 MB tier offered by Verizon (T-Mobile offers a 200 MB plan), and nearly 100 percent use less than 2 GB of data.

These results are typical across the industry, so no matter what carrier you're with, be sure to check with it frequently, at least during the first few months of your contract, to monitor your data usage. You may be able to access your data usage info by texting your provider, logging into your online account, or downloading a cell-phone app.







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How do I pick the right data plan?

If you have online billing with AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile, or Verizon, upload your bill to **CUBCellphone-Saver.com**. In seconds, CUB's free online tool tells you if you're on the best voice, text and data plan, compares your plan to other wireless carriers, and pinpoints unnecessary services. It's saved consumers an average of more than \$300 a year.

What data plans are available?

Below is a sampling of typical data plans currently available from wireless carriers.

	<i>Feature phone plans</i>	<i>Smart phone plans</i>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - \$2 per MB pay-per-use - \$15 a month unlimited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - \$15 a month for 200 MB (\$15 per 200 MB after) - \$25 a month for 2 GB (\$10 per GB after) - \$45 a month for 4 GB (\$10 per GB after). This plan allows tethering (See chart on page 3)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - \$.03 per KB pay-per-use (that's \$30 per MB) - \$15 a month unlimited 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - \$30 a month unlimited (For an additional \$30, you can tether your smart phone to other devices, like a laptop)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - \$1.99 per MB pay-per-use - \$10 a month for 200 MB 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - \$10 a month for 200 MB* - \$20 a month for 2 GB* - \$30 a month for 5 GB* - \$60 a month for 10 GB* <p><i>(T-Mobile recently introduced "Value" plans, which offer lower data prices for those who already have smart phones, or who pay full price for a new smart phone.)</i></p>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - \$1.99 per MB pay-per-use - \$10 a month for 75 MB (\$10 per 75 MB after) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - \$30 a month for 2 GB (\$10 per GB after) - \$50 a month for 5 GB (\$10 per GB after) - \$80 per month for 10 GB (\$10 per GB after)

*T-Mobile doesn't charge extra when customers go over their data limits, but instead throttles down data speeds.

What is tethering?

Tethering allows you to connect your smart phone to your desktop, laptop, or other device, acting as a modem and allowing the device to access the Internet through your smart phone's connection. If you tether, be sure to monitor your data usage closely, as services like Netflix can quickly send you over your plan's data limit.



What data plan should I choose?

CUB created this chart as a helpful guide to define what your monthly usage is.

	E-mails	Web page views	Social media posts	App/game/song downloads	Music streamed	Video streamed	Total
Light User	50 (1 MB)	100 (18 MB)	10 photo posts (5 MB)	0	0	0	24 MB
Moderate User	500 (10 MB)	500 (90 MB)	100 photo posts (50 MB)	10 (40 MB)	0	0	190 MB
Heavy User	1,000 (20 MB)	2,000 (360 MB)	200 photo posts (100 MB)	20 (80 MB)	5 hours (150 MB)	3 hours (360 MB)	1.07 GB
Extreme User	5,000 (100 MB)	5,000 (900 MB)	500 photo posts (250 MB)	100 (400 MB)	25 hours (750 MB)	20 hours (2.4 GB)	4.8 GB

**Data usage varies. The above figures are based on estimates from AT&T Wireless.*

What's the alternative?

Prepaid wireless companies, like Boost Mobile, Cricket, and Straight Talk, offer unlimited talk, text and data plans starting at around \$45 per month with no contract. While smart phones are available, you won't have your pick of the very latest models. For more information, read CUB's prepaid cellphone fact sheet at www.CitizensUtilityBoard.org.

What reforms to the cell-phone industry does CUB recommend?

CUB calls on carriers to implement three reforms to better serve customers:

- 1) Lower tier data plans.** A 500 MB or 1 GB plan would fit the needs of most data users.
- 2) Family share plans.** 2 GB of data per month would be more than enough for four typical smart phone users on the same plan—not one.
- 3) Rollover data.** Consumers paying for data should have every opportunity to use it, or be able to cash in unused megabytes for reward points and billing discounts.