

AbilityNet Factsheet – September 2017

Telephones and mobile phones

Nearly one-in-five of people living in the UK have a disability of which a growing proportion are aged 65 or over. Many of these people struggle to use a standard telephone or mobile phone, and would benefit from a suitable alternative.

This factsheet provides an introduction to the various types of telephone and mobile phone that are available to make communication easier for someone with an impairment.

Manufacturers of more accessible telephones and mobile phones include Amplicomms, Doro and Geemarc, and many of the models they produce are readily available form major retail outlets. However, please note that this factsheet is not intended to be exhaustive. Anyone who might benefit from a different kind of phone that would be easier for them to use is strongly advised to seek specialist advice.

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# Landlines

Traditional landline telephones use metal wires or fibre optic cables for transmission, with the phone plugging into a connecting wall socket.

Generally, there are both corded and cordless versions of telephones available to assist people with different impairments. Corded models are attached to the base dialing unit; cordless models are not and usually sit in a base unit to recharge when not in use. Some phones with additional handsets combine both corded and cordless phones, and may also incorporate an answer phone.

A number of phones – including, for example the *Doro MemoryPlus* and the *RNIB Big Button Talking Telephone* – combine many of the features outlined below.

## Big button telephones

Telephones with large numbers can be a lot easier to operate if you have impaired vision or difficulty using your fingers.

A raised dot on the number 5 key may also help you to navigate the keypad. Models with a number redial button make redialing much easier if a line is engaged.

## Telephones with memory buttons

Telephones with memory buttons are especially helpful for people with cognitive difficulties. They allow you to store the most important or frequent numbers you call and, to phone one of those numbers, you simply press the relevant button.

The number and size of the memory buttons can vary between different models. Some allow you to insert pictures or photographs to assist with remembering who each button rings.

## Amplified telephones

For people with hearing loss, phones with amplification can increase the volume of your caller’s voice by around two to four times. Most models have a volume control that can set it at the optimum level for you. Some versions also include tone adjustment to help make your caller’s voice sound clearer. There are also options to add an amplifier to your existing telephone.

While you can usually control the ringing volume of any telephone, you can also get models with amplified ringers or visual call indicators. Again, these can be installed as add-ons to your existing equipment.

## Automatic phone dialing alarms

An SOS button is available on some telephones. When pressed, this panic button will trigger the phone to call a short sequence of telephone numbers. The first person to answer hears your pre-recorded message asking for help.

These auto-dialers usually come with a pendant or wrist strap alarm which the wearer can also use to activate an alarm call.

## Hands free telephony

Many landline phones include a hands-free button that enables you to talk on the phone and listen to your caller without having to hold the handset.

Bluetooth is a wireless technology that enables digital devices to communicate over relatively short distances. You can enhance your hearing experience of hands-free telephony by connecting a compatible landline phone to a Bluetooth headset or external speaker.

## Other features to consider

When choosing a phone to match your particular needs, other possible features and options you might want to consider include:

* installing extra phone sockets – to make the phone more accessible in different parts of your home
* keypad beeps – so you know you’ve pressed the buttons
* an illuminated key pad with clear, good-sized text on screen
* hearing aid compatibility – so that the phone works with the ‘T’ or loop setting on your hearing aid
* using a headset to reduce background noise – or, if you wear a hearing aid, using a neck loop (with a digital cordless phone)
* getting a textphone if you really struggle to hear speech on the phone.

Textphones enable you to have typed phone conversations, either directly or via a relay assistant. Find out more at [www.textrelay.org](http://www.textrelay.org)

# Mobile phones

The vast majority of people today have a mobile phone. These uses radio waves for transmission and signal strength can vary between locations and with different providers. As well as allowing us to make and receive phone calls on the move, mobile phones are extremely useful for text messaging.

An increasingly high proportion of mobile phone users now have a ‘smartphone’. Smartphones are operated by a touchscreen and add the functionality of a small computer to your phone – packing in everything from a camera and web browser to a high-density display and voice control. They also offer access to an almost endless array of specialist ‘apps’.

## Easy to use mobile phones

Many people – particularly those who are elderly or who may have an impairment – prefer a mobile phone with limited features making them much easier to use. These are especially helpful for people with limited mobility or dexterity, memory loss and / impaired vision.

As well as simplified functions (including texting), features on such easy to use mobile phones (such as the *Doro Secure 580*) can include:

* larger buttons
* one-touch memory buttons
* a restricted number of buttons (with pre-programmed numbers)
* an emergency button
* high contrast display with large font
* hearing aid compatibility (with an induction loop facility)
* loud ring tones.

## Smartphones

There are many ways modern smartphones can be adapted to make them easier to use, and a very wide range of apps are available (from the *App Store* and *Google Play*) to help make life easier for people with different impairments.

Intelligent personal assistants – like *Siri* (for iOS devices), *Google Now* (for Android devices) and *Cortana* (for Windows devices) – respond to your voice commands to provide information, send messages, make calls, take notes, schedule appointments and play music.

*My Computer My Way* provides step-by-step advice on how to access and optimise all the accessibility features built into your iOS or Android smartphone. You can use it for free at [www.mycomputermyway.com](http://www.mycomputermyway.com)

## Making smartphones easier to use

Easy-to-use phones, such as the *Doro 8030* or the *Synapptic Diamond* models, offer access to the key features of a smartphone via a simplified and more intuitive interface on a large, clear LCD display.

A growing number of companies also now produce software that makes standard smartphones much more accessible and far easier to use – especially for people that neither need nor want the myriad features that smartphones typically offer. Potential options include:

* *Synapptic* software – combines a simple and straightforward menu structure and intuitive design with voice control to make any Android phone much easier to use for anyone with a visual impairment.
* *Zone V* software – makes text larger and clearer, simplifies menus and optimises contrast and clarity for compatible Samsung smartphones. A *V Case* is also available for the *Samsung Galaxy A3*. This makes the phone easier to handle for people with impaired dexterity, converts the camera into a magnifying lens and makes charging easier through a magnetically-guided cable.
* *Seniors Phone* app – provides an all-in-one replacement for any Android phone’s original interface that is easy to read and navigate, and completely modifiable. It also offers integrated SOS and location services for users and their predefined contacts and carers.
* *Silverline* app – available on both Apple and Android phones to help older adults live well and stay safe by making it very easy for them to communicate with friends, family and carers, to send emergency alerts, and to get reminders when it’s time to take their medication.

## Lost phone

If you cannot find your iPhone or Android phone at home, you can track it down by using a computer to make your phone ring. If you lose your phone elsewhere you can use the same facility to get an approximate location and, if necessary, to wipe it clean.

# Alternatives to the phone

Lots of people now use Voice Over Internet Protocol services (known as VOIP) to communicate with friends, family and colleagues all over the world. These tools are increasingly common and talking over the internet may provide a cheap (or free), practical alternative for anyone who struggles to use a landline or mobile phone. Most VOIP services have the added advantage of including video calls in the basic package so you can also see the people you are talking to.

Popular examples of VOIP services include:

* Skype
* FaceTime (for Apple users)
* Appear.in
* Google Hangouts

# Other useful links and resources

## Living Made Easy

*Living Made Easy* is an impartial website developed by the Disabled Living Foundation offering advice on daily living equipment. Its communication section provides details of a wide range of phones and accessories designed to aid ease of use. You can access it at [www.livingmadeeasy.org.uk](http://www.livingmadeeasy.org.uk/)

For individuals seeking further advice, *Living Made Easy* also provides a free guided advice tool – *AskSARA* – and a Helpline on 0300 999 0004.

## Specialist suppliers

* Connevans – [www.connevans.co.uk](http://www.connevans.co.uk)
* Doro – [www.doro.co.uk](http://www.doro.co.uk)
* RNIB Shop – [www.shop.rnib.org.uk](http://www.shop.rnib.org.uk)
* Seniors Phone – [www.seniorsphone.mobi](http://www.seniorsphone.mobi)
* Silverline – [www.silverline.mobi](http://www.silverline.mobi)
* Synapptic – [www.synapptic.com](http://www.synapptic.com)
* Zone V – [www.zonev.com](http://www.zonev.com)

# About AbilityNet

AbilityNet is the national charity that supports people with any disability, of any age. Our specialist services help disabled people to use assistive technology and the internet to improve their lives, whether at work, at home or in education. We offer:

## Digital Accessibility Services

The AbilityNet team of expert consultants and user testers help businesses, charities and public bodies ensure that their websites, apps and other digital services are usable, accessible and comply with current legislation.

[Find out more about our Accessibility Services](https://www.abilitynet.org.uk/accessibilityservices)

## Workplace Services

Even small adjustments to equipment and work patterns can transform the lives of people with disabilities and have a profound impact on well-being and productivity. Our team of expert assessors identify the Reasonable Adjustments that help employees achieve their full potential.

[Read more about our Workplace Services](https://www.abilitynet.org.uk/workplace)

## DSA/Students Services

Technology can help disabled people of all ages succeed in education. AbilityNet has a network of DSA Assessment Centres and is one of the largest providers of specialist assessments to HE students in the UK. of

[Find out more about our DSA/Students Services](https://www.abilitynet.org.uk/dsa)

## Free IT Support for disabled and older people at home

AbilityNet has a national network of disclosure checked volunteers offering support to disabled people and older people. Our volunteers have relevant IT skills to help people get the most from computer systems, laptops, tablets and even some smartphones.

[Find out more about our IT Can help Volunteers](https://www.abilitynet.org.uk/at-home/IT-support-for-disabled-people)

## Expert Resources

Our free expert resources have been produced for people with any disability of any age, as well as their employers, family, friends, colleagues and anyone else with an interest in helping disabled people achieve their goals.

[Find out more about our expert resources](https://www.abilitynet.org.uk/expert-resources)

## Call the Helpline

**Call our free Helpline on 0800 269 545** to ask anything about how computers can be adapted to meet the needs of disabled people.

## Support us

Visit [www.abilitynet.org.uk/donate](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk/donate) to learn how you can support our work.

## Contact us

* Telephone 0800 269 545
* Email [enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@abilitynet.org.uk)
* Web: [www.abilitynet.org.uk](http://www.abilitynet.org.uk)

We are always keen to help share knowledge about accessibility and assistive technology. If you have any questions about how you may use the contents of this factsheet, please contact us at AbilityNet and we will do all we can to help.

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