

## Cell Phone Unlocking

Thinking about switching to a different cell phone service provider, but want to keep your phone? If your phone is “unlocked” you may be able to use it with a new provider.

Unlocked phones are able to be used on compatible networks both within the United States and abroad. Unlocking provides greater freedom and flexibility by allowing you to keep your cell phone and move to a provider offering a better priced monthly service plan or coverage that better meets your needs.

Many cell phones sold in the United States contain software that prevents them from being used on different mobile networks even when those networks are technologically compatible. This software “locks” the phone to a provider’s network, preventing it from being used on another company’s network. Locking can apply to both physical SIM cards and electronic SIMs, or eSIMs.

Locked phones are often sold at a reduced price or as part of an installment plan. They remain locked until all the installments are paid, or for a certain period of time to ensure the phone is used on the network of the provider that sold the phone at a discount. Even when paying full price for a cell phone, it may be locked for a short period of time, such as 60 days, to help prevent theft and certain types of fraud. Providers may have different unlocking policies for their prepaid and postpaid monthly service plans.

**Postpaid plans** are billed at the end of the month after service has been provided and often require a credit check when starting a new account. These plans may include a contract and require an early termination fee. Postpaid plans often include shorter waiting periods before a phone can be unlocked.

**Prepaid plans** require the consumer to pay for service upfront at the beginning of the month, before service is provided, and typically don’t require a credit check. These plans often come with a discounted or free phone and may require the phone to be “locked” to the service provider for a longer period of time.

Unless a phone, or other wireless device, is specifically sold as “unlocked” at the point of purchase, it is probably locked to a specific wireless provider’s network. This may be true whether you purchase the phone from a service provider, a retail outlet or through a third-party. When shopping for a new or used phone, be sure to ask if the phone is locked or unlocked.



**Technological Compatibility:** A device that works on one wireless provider's network may not be technologically compatible with another wireless provider's network. Unlocking a phone refers only to disabling software that would prevent a consumer from attempting to activate a phone designed for one wireless provider's network on another wireless provider's network. Phone companies typically use different frequencies and air interface technologies to provide mobile wireless network access and not every phone is technologically compatible on every network. In other words, unlocking a phone designed for one network may not make the phone technologically compatible with another wireless provider's network.

**Traveling Internationally?** Whether your phone is locked or unlocked, you should check with your mobile service provider before you travel internationally to find out if your mobile phone will work abroad. Mobile networks differ from country to country, and your phone may be incompatible with the networks where you are traveling. Also, if your phone works for voice calls, some other functions – such as sending and receiving mobile data or text messaging – might not work.

The unlocking process typically varies by phone and by provider. Once a phone is eligible for unlocking, a provider may automatically unlock the phone, send instructions to customers on how to unlock the phone upon request, or complete the unlocking process in-store. If you owe money to your provider or are under a contract, they may not unlock your phone until you have paid the balance due or met the terms of the contract. Keep in mind, tablets and other mobile devices can also be locked to networks. Contact your wireless service provider to learn more about the policies that apply to your phone, or other wireless device, and what steps you may need to take to unlock the device.

CTIA -The Wireless Association includes standards on unlocking as part of its [Consumer Code for Wireless Service](#). Participants include all nationwide service providers, as well as a number of regional providers. Each participating provider has posted its unlocking policy on its company website and will respond to unlocking requests. Participating providers have also agreed not to charge existing or former customers additional fees to unlock a device if it is eligible to be unlocked. If your wireless provider is not a participating provider, contact them directly regarding their phone unlocking policy.

## What is the CTIA Commitment?

On February 11, 2014, CTIA-The Wireless Association adopted six standards on mobile wireless device unlocking ("the commitment") and incorporated these commitments into the [CTIA Consumer Code for Wireless Service](#):

1. **Disclosure.** Each carrier will post on its website its clear, concise, and readily accessible policy on mobile wireless device unlocking.
2. **Postpaid Unlocking Policy.** Carriers, upon request, will unlock mobile wireless devices or provide the necessary information to unlock their devices, for customers and former customers in good standing and individual owners of eligible devices after the fulfillment of the applicable postpaid service contract, device financing plan or payment of an applicable early termination fee.
3. **Prepaid Unlocking Policy.** Carriers, upon request, will unlock mobile wireless devices no later than one year after initial activation, consistent with reasonable time, payment, or usage requirements.
4. **Notice.** Carriers that lock devices will clearly notify customers that their devices are eligible for unlocking at the time when their devices are eligible for unlocking or automatically unlock devices remotely when devices are eligible for unlocking, without additional fee. Carriers reserve the right to charge non-customers/non-former-customers a reasonable fee for unlocking requests. Notice to prepaid customers may occur at point of sale, at the time of eligibility, or through a clear and concise statement of the policy on the carrier's website.
5. **Response Time.** Within two business days after receiving a request, carriers will unlock eligible mobile wireless devices or initiate a request to the original equipment manufacturer (OEM) to unlock the eligible device, provide an explanation of why the device does not qualify for unlocking, or why the carrier reasonably needs additional time to process the request.
6. **Deployed Personnel Unlocking Policy.** Carriers will unlock mobile wireless devices for deployed military personnel who are customers in good standing upon provision of deployment papers.

Signatories to the CTIA Consumer Code for Wireless Service ("participating providers") implemented all of these principles on or before February 11, 2015. The CTIA unlocking standards cover cell phones and tablets.



## Consumer Help Center

For more information on consumer issues, visit the FCC's Consumer Help Center at [fcc.gov/consumers](https://www.fcc.gov/consumers).

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