



Consumer Guide

Cell Phone Unlocking FAQs

When cell phone users change between compatible wireless service providers, they have the option of "unlocking" their phones to use on their new service provider's network, giving consumers greater freedom and flexibility while increasing incentives for service providers to innovate. Here are several FAQs to help you better understand cell phone unlocking and how it relates to you.

What is mobile phone and device locking?

Mobile phones and device locks are meant to ensure that devices can only be used on the networks of specific service providers.

Which service providers implemented the standards on unlocking mobile devices?

CTIA-The Wireless Association maintains a list of participating wireless carriers along with its standards on unlocking as part of its Consumer Code for Wireless Service (<https://www.ctia.org/the-wireless-industry/industry-commitments/consumer-code-for-wireless-service>). If your wireless carrier is not one of the participating service providers, please contact them directly regarding their device unlocking policy.

Why do providers lock mobile wireless devices?

Locking software is meant to ensure devices will be active for a certain period of time or amount of usage on the network of the provider that sold that device (perhaps with a subsidy or discount) or with a device installment plan.

Is my cell phone currently locked?

Unless you purchased a phone or device specifically sold as "unlocked" at the point of purchase, you should assume that it is locked to a specific service provider's network. This is true whether you purchase the device from a service provider, a retail outlet or through a third-party.

How can I unlock my mobile phone?

Contact your mobile wireless service provider. Devices can be unlocked with unlock codes or other software updates offered to you by your provider. Some providers will complete the unlocking process in-store, others will unlock your device remotely.

Are mobile devices besides phones locked, too?

Yes, tablets and other mobile devices can be locked to networks. The CTIA unlocking standards cover mobile wireless devices, including tablets. You should check with your service provider to see if your mobile device is locked and what terms and conditions you have agreed to.

Will my provider unlock my phone?

All service providers who signed onto the CTIA Consumer Code for Wireless Service have fully implemented the standards on unlocking. 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 unlock requests.

Will my postpaid phone be unlocked on request?

Yes, participating providers will unlock your postpaid phone provided the terms and conditions of your service contract are met and you are in good standing. You should speak with your service provider to understand the terms and conditions of your agreement and the provider's policies on unlocking mobile devices.

When is my device eligible for unlocking?

Your postpaid device is eligible to be unlocked by a participating provider after you have fulfilled the applicable service contract, completed the device installment plan or paid an early termination fee.

Will my prepaid phone be unlocked on request?



Yes, participating providers have agreed to unlock prepaid devices within one year of initial activation, consistent with reasonable time, payment or usage requirements.

Will my phone automatically be unlocked when my service contract has been fulfilled?

It depends on your service provider. Participating providers will notify you at the time your postpaid device is eligible for unlocking if the device is not automatically unlocked. For prepaid devices, participating providers will notify you when your device is eligible for unlocking at the point of sale, at the time of eligibility or through a clear and concise statement of the provider's policy on its website. When your device is eligible, some providers may automatically unlock it remotely. In this case, providers of postpaid devices are not required under the adopted standards to notify you at the time when the device is eligible for unlocking. Other providers may require you to formally request to have your phone unlocked. Under the adopted standards, participating providers have agreed to unlock eligible devices, provide you with unlocking instructions, or initiate an unlocking request to the device manufacturer – or provide an easily understood explanation of denial – within two business days of receiving an unlock request.

Will I be charged fees to unlock my device?

Participating providers may not charge existing or former customers additional fees to unlock a device if it is eligible to be unlocked. Providers may charge a fee to unlock eligible devices for non-customers and former customers.

Are there military exceptions to allow devices to be unlocked early for deployments?

Yes. If you are deployed internationally or receive orders for international deployment, providers must unlock your device upon verification of deployment under the adopted standards. Contact your mobile service provider, provide verification of your deployment, and request that your device(s) be unlocked.

Can my mobile service provider refuse to unlock my phone because I owe them money or am currently under contract?

Yes. Providers do not have to unlock devices for existing or former customers that are not in good standing. You should contact your mobile service provider to understand the terms and conditions of your agreement and your provider's unlocking policies.

Will my unlocked mobile device work on all networks?

No. Network technology (GSM, LTE, CDMA, etc.) varies between different regions globally and across the United States. Device technology varies to ensure it works with compatible networks. Your device technology must be compatible with network technology to enable access and functionality. Technologies differ, so your device will not work across all networks.

Also devices are optimized to work with service providers' networks for which they're sold. Although your mobile device may work on a compatible network, certain features on your unlocked phone may not work optimally, and some features may not work at all.

Will unlocking my device enable it to work on international networks?

Whether your device is locked or unlocked, you should check with your mobile service provider before you travel internationally to find out if your mobile device will work abroad. Mobile networks differ from country to country, and your device 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.

Consumer Help Center

For more information on consumer issues, visit the FCC's Consumer Help Center at www.fcc.gov/consumers.

Accessible formats

To request this article in an accessible format - braille, large print, Word or text document or audio - write or call us at the address or phone number at the bottom of the page, or send an email to fcc504@fcc.gov.

Last Reviewed 07/06/18

