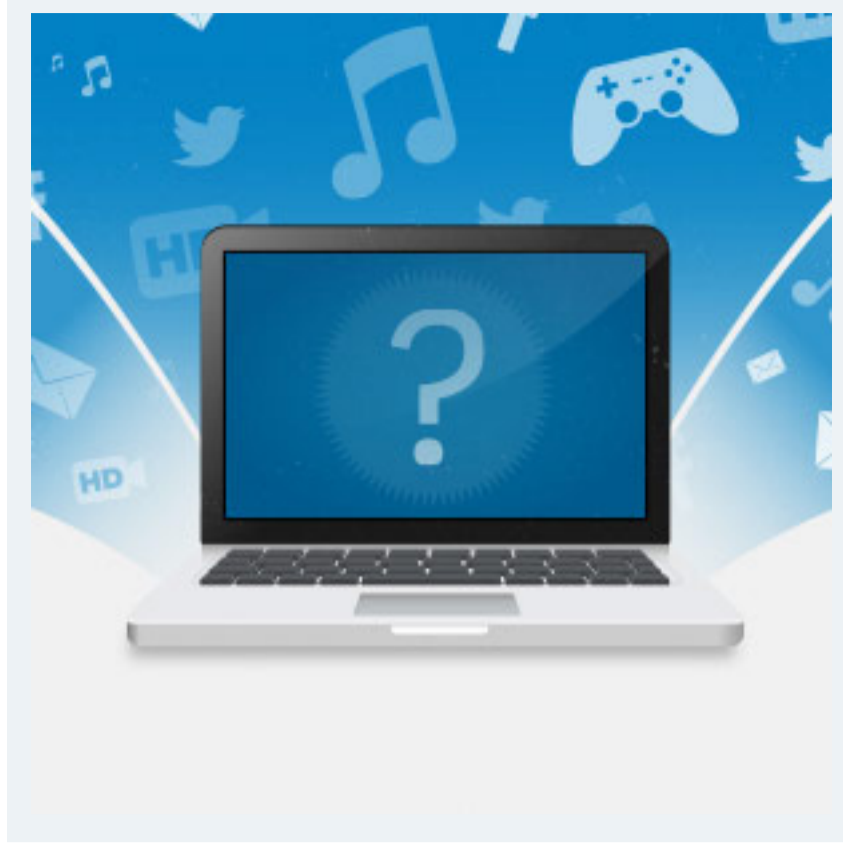


# Internet data usage explained

Written and researched by Hannah Langston of [Cable.co.uk](http://Cable.co.uk), which offers Ofcom-accredited broadband, TV and phone price comparisons.

Data usage is affected by activities such as downloading movies, photographs, music tracks, uploading videos and photographs or even simply browsing the web.



Capped usage plans are generally cheaper than unlimited usage plans, but if you cross the prescribed data limit you could be charged extra. Therefore it's wise to know what kind of user you are, whether you're a light user, moderate user, or a heavy internet user, to determine whether a capped package is right for you.

Here's everything you need to know about internet data usage, from the types of user to the plans available for broadband and smartphones.

## What types of data usage are there?

### Broadband data usage

When you access the internet at home via a landline or satellite broadband connection, any data that you consume via downloading or uploading will count towards the limit on your home broadband plan.

### Broadband providers offer a range of usage limits

Different broadband providers offer different levels of data allowance on their broadband plans. For example, Primus Saver and Plusnet have low data caps – around the 10GB to 20GB mark – while John Lewis and Zen have data caps at the higher end – 100GB and 50GB, respectively.

### Mobile data usage

Data limits on smartphone and SIM-only plans are usually more restrictive than home broadband usage limits. You may only have 3GB or 5GB to use within a month, and if you intend to stream video and music from the internet through your mobile, you'll find that it won't last long.

### More limits to consider

There's more to consider with mobile data than just the usage limits. Some providers may ban you from using file transfer services, VoIP (voice over internet protocol) services, or from tethering.

### Unlimited mobile data and capped limits

Some mobile providers offer unlimited data plans, but not all. Giffgaff and Virgin Mobile both have unlimited data plans, while providers such as Vodafone, O2 and EE have data limits in and around the 5GB mark.

### Sharing photos and videos counts too

Uploading photos, videos or similar content to the web all counts towards your monthly data limit. This is something to bear in mind if you think you might be a light user, yet put hundreds of family photographs onto Facebook. If you're not careful with how much you share, you could end up crossing your data limit and incurring a hefty fee. .

## What type of user are you?

### Light user (Mobile broadband: 100MB; Home broadband: 1GB)

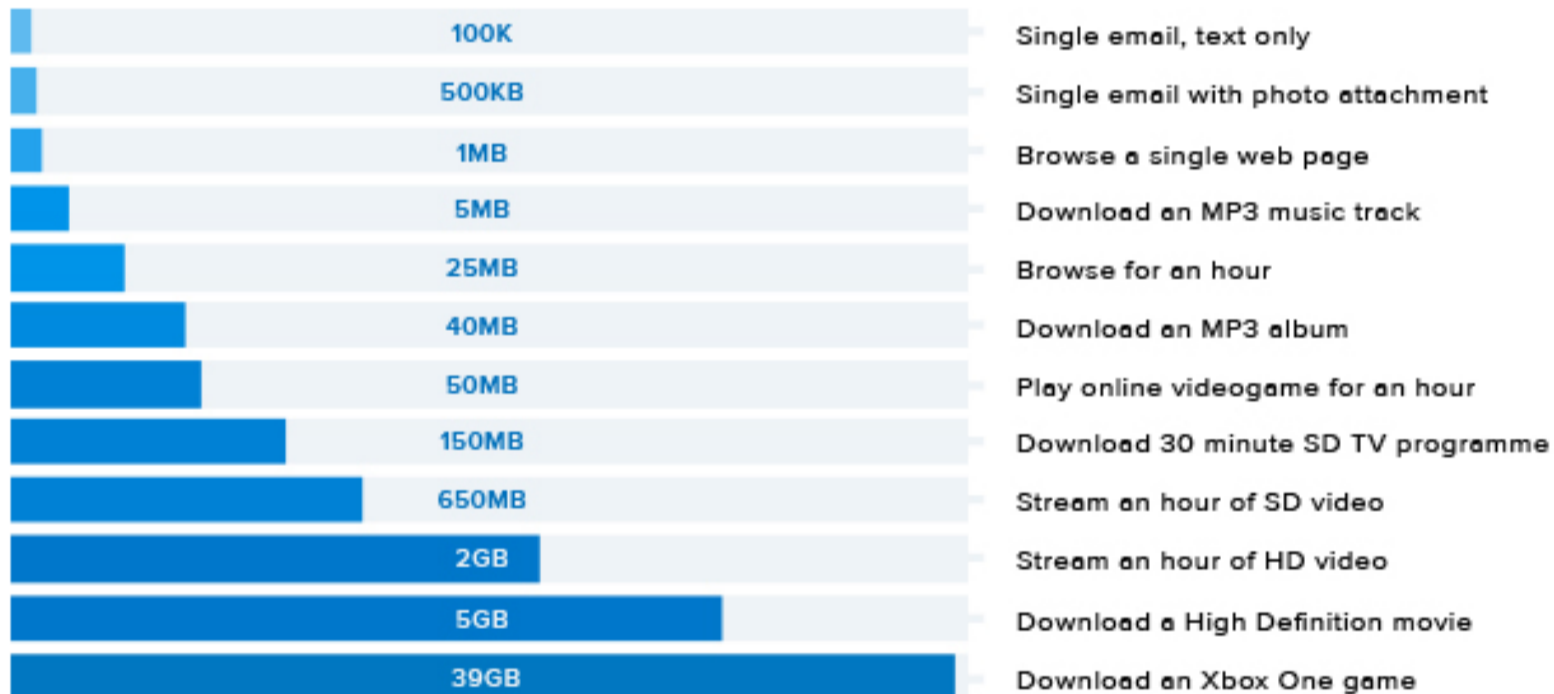
Low data usage caps are fine for light users who don't use the internet all that often. A light user will access the internet around once a day, and will generally perform activities light on bandwidth, such as sending the odd email and browsing a few websites. Light users will rarely download files and stream video or music content off the web.

### Moderate user (Mobile broadband: 200MB; Home broadband: 10GB)

Medium usage caps, such as those in the 40GB range, will be perfect for moderate users. A moderate user will perform slightly more intensive activities than a light user, and may download music, play online games, occasionally watch catch-up TV content and on-demand movies, and may share videos and music online.

### Heavy user (Mobile broadband: 2GB+; Home Broadband: 100GB+)

Heavy users need unlimited data caps. You're a heavy user if you spend a good deal of time on the internet, browsing, downloading music, and streaming HD video onto your home computer or mobile device. If you regularly use file transfer protocol services or peer-to-peer networking then you fall into the heavy user category. Bear in mind that some unlimited packages aren't actually as unlimited as they first seem however...



## Unlimited data usage versus capped data usage

### Unlimited data plans

There are two types of unlimited data plans – standard unlimited, and truly unlimited. Standard unlimited plans may be free from set usage limits, but could have other elements that restrict your usage, such as traffic management and fair usage policies.

### Truly unlimited data plans

Truly unlimited plans are free from any such restrictions. On a truly unlimited plan, you can download as much as you like without having your broadband performance slowed and without incurring any fines for excessive downloading or uploading. Unlimited data usage is always best for heavy users.

### Capped data plans

A capped data plan is any broadband package or mobile plan with a set data usage limit. These limits can be anywhere from 50MB to 100GB, depending on provider and package.

### The dangers of capped data plans

Capped data plans are often cheaper than unlimited plans, and are therefore good options for light users or moderate users on a budget. However, there are a few hidden dangers. Most providers will charge you for going over your monthly data limit. These charges can be preceded by a warning (such as an email from your provider) or with no warning at all. You could be charged by each megabyte you go over the limit, or for a set number of gigabytes. If you're not aware of passing your monthly limit and you do get charged, you could end up with a large bill landing on your doormat the following month.

## Traffic management

Traffic management may be in place on your capped or standard unlimited broadband package. Under traffic management, you may find that your download speed slows down at certain times of the day, usually at peak hours in the evening and late afternoon. Ostensibly, this is to regulate the flow of traffic throughout the broadband network, distributing the available bandwidth fairly and equally. If you're a light user, traffic management shouldn't affect you too much. For moderate and heavy users however, it can often be frustrating.

## Conclusion

When it comes to data usage, it helps to work out what kind of user you are so you can decide exactly what kind of package you need for your home broadband or mobile handset. Unlimited plans are usually the safest bet, especially if you're worried that you may go over the monthly limit by accident. However, if you're on a tight budget, then a capped broadband package may be best.