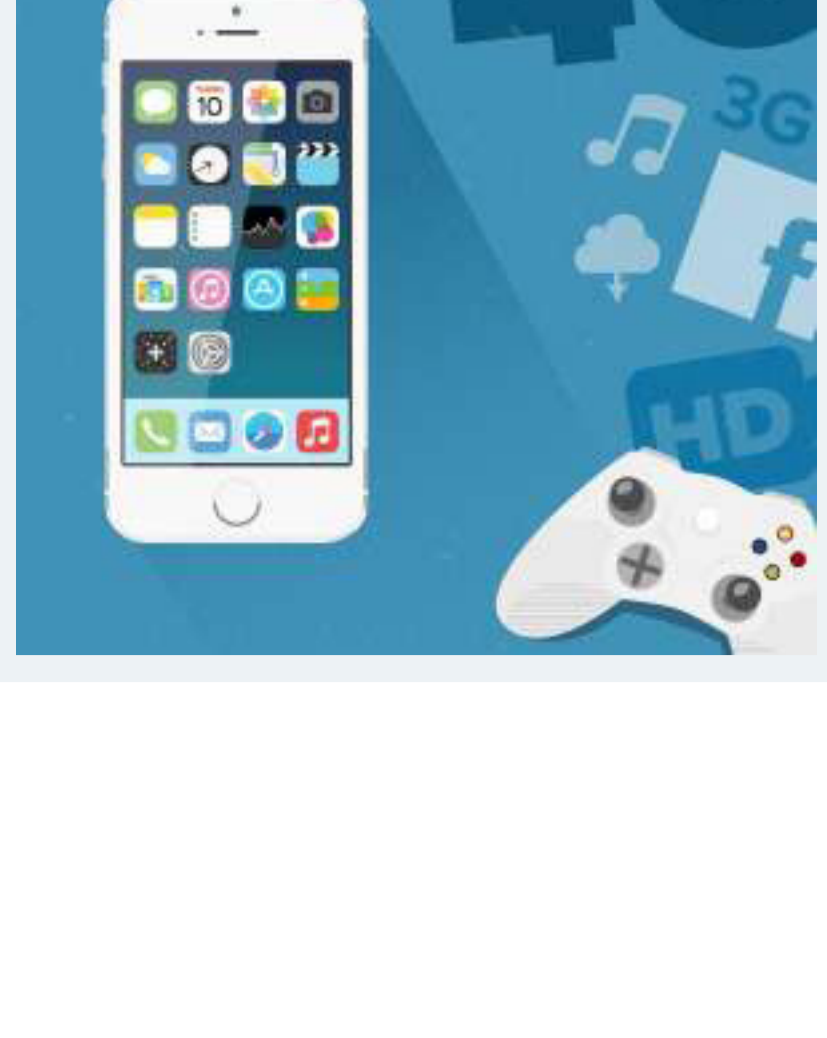


Is mobile broadband any good?

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

Mobile broadband has revolutionised how we use the internet. No longer are we tied to our sofas or desks: we can get online anywhere at anytime to enjoy all the internet has to offer away from home or work.

There's a handful of mobile broadband options, from 3G and 4G SIM cards to dongles and MiFi routers, but are they any good and how do you choose the right one? We review your choices to get online on the go, or even at home without the restrictions of a home broadband contract.



Speeds and coverage

It's getting faster all the time

Mobile broadband is getting faster and faster and looks set to soon rival home broadband on download speeds. The fastest option uses 4G – the fourth generation of mobile technology – which launched in October 2012. Ofcom reports that it is up to five times faster than it's predecessor, 3G, leading to quicker downloads and a more seamless online experience.

Currently, 4G is limited to select towns and cities but as more networks launch their superfast services, coverage is set to grow and should be available in most areas by 2015.

You can choose between 3G and 4G

However, 3G is still the most widely available mobile technology. Coverage from four of the main players – 3 Mobile, EE, O2 and Vodafone – currently stands at 90% of the population, with Ofcom requirements to extend this further.

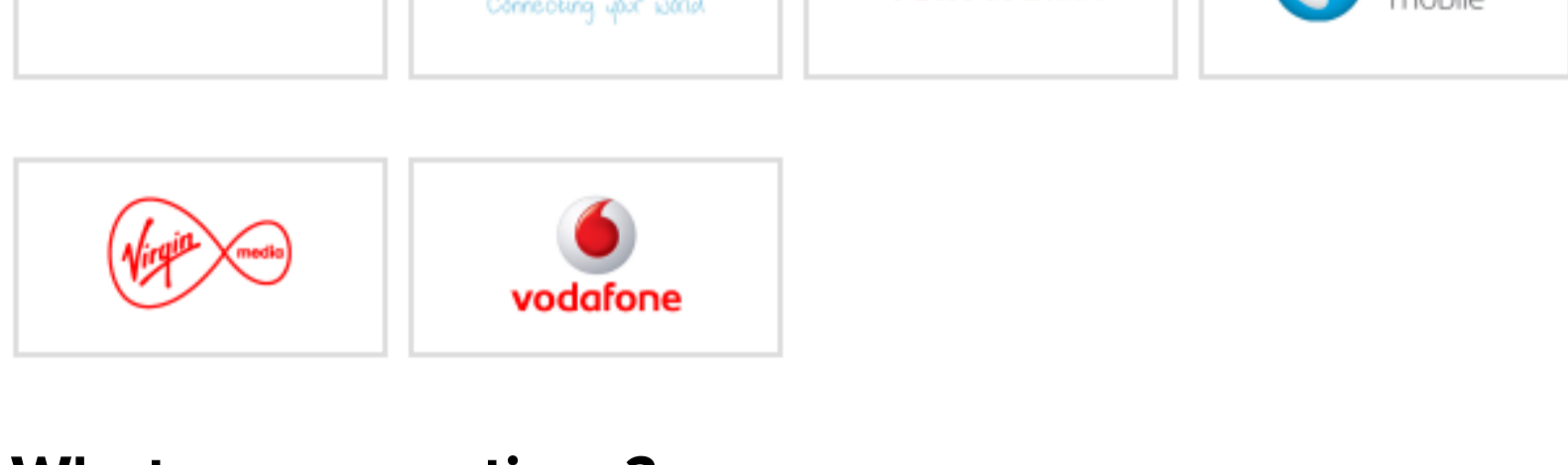
Check mobile broadband coverage in your area

It has a maximum download speed of 7.2Mbps, although actual speeds vary depending upon where you live and could be far lower than this. Ofcom is due to publish the results of its 3G and 4G speed tests in spring 2014 to give a more accurate picture of mobile broadband in the UK.

What are my options?

In the meantime, you can find out which mobile providers are available in your area by visiting their coverage checkers. We've gathered together links to each respective network's coverage tools in the table below - clicking on the logos will open a new tab and take you to the appropriate page.

Coverage checkers



What are my options?

It all depends on your device and your budget

There's no one size fits all solution to mobile broadband. Each option operates a little differently, so the best one for you will depend upon the type of device you have, plus your budget and ideal contract length. Someone looking to get their laptop online for example, will suit a different option to someone that wants to connect several different devices to the internet at once.

And which provider has the best signal in your area

Just like choosing a mobile phone tariff or home broadband package, the right choice also comes down to network coverage. Most of the mainstream mobile phone brands now offer mobile broadband, but signal varies between providers throughout the country so it's wise to check how your area fairs before committing to a contract.

We'll guide you through the options to help you make the right choice for your device and circumstances.

Dongles

A dongle is a pocket-sized device that slots into the USB port of your laptop or computer, allowing you to access the internet with a 3G or 4G connection.

Pocket-sized gizmos on flexible contracts

Dongles are available on a choice of one, 12 or 24 month contracts. They pose a flexible alternative to home broadband as well as a simple way to access the internet on the move. They come with a set download limit, which renews each month until cancellation, or you can pay-as-you-go (PAYG).

Prices start from £7.50 per month with T-Mobile for 1GB of data on a one month rolling contract and range to £30 per month with Vodafone, for 10GB of data on a 12 month plan.

Pros

- Free when taken out with a contract
- Powered by your computer, so no need to charge
- Same dongle can be used in both laptops and desktop computers
- Improved speed with 4G – the fourth generation of mobile broadband
- Temporary internet solution when moving house or away on business

Cons

- Slow speeds, compared to home broadband
- Small download caps, compared to home broadband
- Higher prices and less choice for 4G
- Expensive to use abroad
- Coverage is dependent on mobile network strength

Verdict

3G dongles are cheap but may be too slow

Dongles are a useful and relatively inexpensive way to access the internet, both at home and out and about. However, since data limits and 3G speeds are pretty slow when compared to home broadband, users that like to download large files or stream video may find it too slow as a viable long-term alternative.

4G is faster but more limited coverage

Fortunately, the arrival of 4G is improving speed – but availability is limited while networks work on rolling out the faster mobile broadband service throughout the country. For most people, dongles are a great quick fix, temporary broadband solution and handy to have around should you need to get online on the move.

Tablet SIM cards

Choice of 3G and 4G options to get your tablet online

Data SIM cards pop into your tablet to provide an internet connection via a 3G or 4G mobile broadband network. They come preloaded with a data allowance, which renews each month until cancellation or your contract runs out, or you PAYG for a bundle of data to use as you need.

Be sure to pick the right size SIM for your device

You can choose from 12 month contracts, or shorter one month deals than offer much more flexibility. Tablet SIM cards come in three sizes – standard, micro and nano – so it's important to pick the right size for your device.

Mobile broadband can be more expensive than traditional broadband. To get 4G you'll need to live in an area with sufficient coverage – if your mobile phone signal is weak then it's likely your broadband will be the same. You'll also need either a dongle (a USB device that you plug into your laptop or computer), or a 4G tablet.

Different tariffs to suit different budgets and internet habits

Pros

- Free when taken out with a contract
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- Same dongle can be used in both laptops and desktop computers
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Cons

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- Coverage is dependent on mobile network strength

Verdict

It's the only option to get tablets online without Wi-Fi

If you have a tablet and Wi-Fi isn't available, a 3G or 4G SIM card is the only way to get a broadband connection (bar tethering, see below). There's a wide variety of choice to suit most internet appetites, with pocket-friendly prices starting from just £5 per month. However, since the data limits are pretty small compared to home broadband packages, it pays to use a Wi-Fi connection wherever possible.

Choice is increasing all the time as phablets become more popular

The download speed of these mobile broadband tariffs is growing all the time thanks to the arrival of 4G, although availability is fairly limited at the moment. The amount of deals is growing too, as the tablet market expands and more 'phablets' launch (phone/tablet hybrids), but those with a laptop or desktop computer will need to look at other options.

Mobile Wi-Fi (Mi-Fi)

Creates your own personal Wi-Fi hotspot

A Mi-Fi unit is a palm-sized wireless device that allows several users to share a single broadband connection in a public or private place. Mi-Fi units, or dongles as they're also called, operate a little like home broadband routers by emitting a wireless signal, but tune into a 3G or 4G mobile broadband network instead.

To connect up to 10 devices to the internet at once

Any Wi-Fi enabled device can connect to a Mi-Fi unit, such as laptops, tablets, smartphones, ebooks, even games consoles. The number of devices you can connect at one time varies between providers, with a top limit of 10, and you can set a password to avoid strangers tapping in too.

But the options are limited as it's still relatively new

Pros

- Multi-device and multi-user friendly
- Perfect for travel and commuting
- Useful for business meetings
- Option to Pay Monthly or Pay As You Go (PAYG)
- Choice of one or 12 month contracts

Cons

- Expensive and low download limits, compared to home broadband
- Signal strength dependent on network coverage
- Limited choice, plus high set up costs for PAYG and one month contracts
- Devices require mains charging
- Speeds will slow with the more people sharing a connection

Verdict

It's very flexible but potentially expensive too

Mi-Fi is a new arrival to the mobile broadband market so choice is limited but is set to grow, hopefully followed by more competitive pricing. It's expensive as an alternative to home broadband – which offers larger download limits for less – but offers great flexibility in creating your own Wi-Fi hotspot for several devices while out and about.

You can use it for all mobile devices but it can quickly use up data

A bonus is that it can be used for all gadgets, so you don't need to worry about getting a separate dongle for your laptop plus a SIM for your tablet. However, regular use by multiple devices and users means you're likely to chomp through the data allowance quite fast and may need a larger limit than you would with other options.

Tethering

Uses your smartphone like a mobile hotspot

If you have a smartphone or tablet, you could use the data allowance in your tariff to 'tether' other devices to your 3G or 4G mobile broadband network. Tethering treats your smartphone like a Wi-Fi hotspot or router, allowing you to connect a tablet, laptop – even a computer – to the internet wirelessly, by Bluetooth or using a USB cable.

There's no need for a separate mobile broadband contact

The major bonus is that it's free, since you're using a service you're already paying for rather than an extra mobile broadband service, but there are some restrictions. Namely, many providers forbid tethering in their terms and conditions, so it's simply not an option for some users.

But some providers prohibit it

Check the small print before you tether to avoid penalty, or look out for deals that include tethering when shopping around for a new mobile contract.

Pros

- No extra charge
- Contract-free
- Uses your phone or tablet as a hotspot, so no need for a separate device or SIM
- Quick and convenient: no cables or gadgets required
- Useful in an emergency

Cons

- Many providers prohibit it
- Eats through data and often excluded in unlimited data phone tariffs
- Not a long-term solution
- Wi-Fi connection drains battery life: use Bluetooth or better still, USB
- Potential for slow speeds with Wi-Fi and Bluetooth connections

Verdict

It's not ideal as a long-term broadband solution

Tethering is becoming increasingly popular as consumers wise up to the fact that you can connect multiple devices to the internet at no extra charge. So, why wouldn't you tether? Well the 'cons' above sum it up – as a potential drain on battery and data allowance, and that's if your provider even allows it – it's not a viable long-term solution for most of us.

But is great for a quick fix

However, it's a great quick fix or back up option if you only need to get online while out occasionally, particularly if you have a Wi-Fi only tablet and aren't near a public hotspot.

Summary

Yes, and its getting better all the time

So is mobile broadband any good? We think yes - but with the disclaimer that there's definitely still room for improvement. Thankfully, it's getting better all the time thanks to the advent of 4G, and networks are working hard to expand coverage and launch competitive new plans. As always, remember to check coverage in your area before you sign up to avoid future disappointment.

Be sure to pick the right option from a provider with good coverage

As always, choosing the right option for your circumstances will help to ensure that mobile broadband works for you. Remember to check coverage in your area and try out a one month deal before committing for the long term. If you've recently signed up for a new mobile broadband deal and want to let us know your first impressions, leave us a comment in the box at the bottom of the page.

To read more about this subject, visit our in-depth "Everything you need to know about mobile broadband" feature.