

How to use a telephone IP relay service

IP relay services are the next generation of traditional TTY

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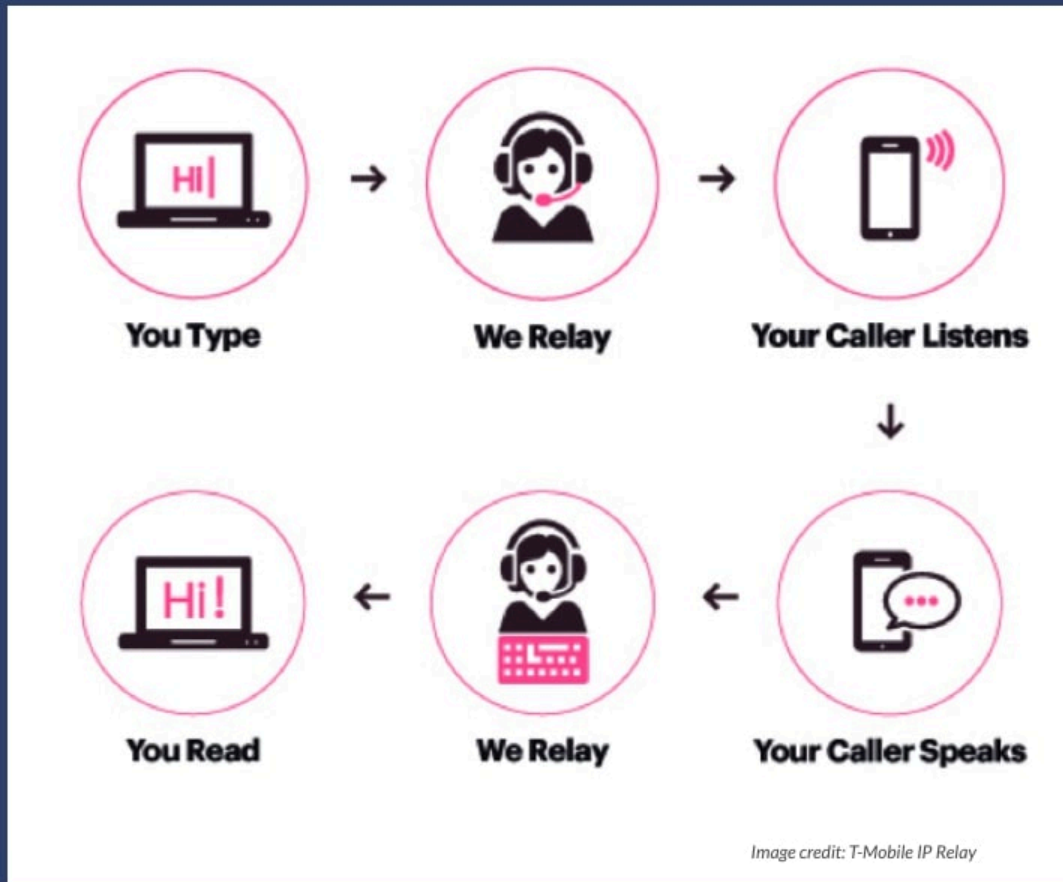


Hearing loss can make communicating by phone difficult or impossible—and yet there are times when phone calls are necessary. If you need to call a plumber, make a doctor’s appointment, or check if an order is ready for pick-up, there are often no text or e-mail options available. And sometimes it’s just more expedient to make a phone call than to wait for back-and-forth communication online or by mail.

In the 1980s and 90s, your only option was a teletypewriter (TTY) device, which was a dedicated landline phone with a keyboard and small screen to type and read messages. Although TTY devices still exist, they’ve largely been replaced by Internet Protocol (IP) relay services, which are more convenient, portable—and free.

Communication options for people with hearing loss

IP Relay service: How it works



What is IP relay?

IP relay is a service that allows people with hearing and speech disabilities to make and receive phone calls using an operator (also known as a communication assistant) as an intermediary. The user types messages on a smartphone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer with an Internet connection, and the operator reads those messages aloud to the

other party. Then the operator listens to the responses and types back to the user, which looks like text messaging. The operator continues passing the messages back and forth until the conversation is over.

Where do you get an IP relay number?

In the United States, T-Mobile offers free 10-digit IP relay phone numbers, funded by federal and state government, to those who register, verify their identity, and attest that they have a hearing or speech disability. You can register online at www.tmobileiprelay.com.

How do you get started?

In the 1980s and 90s, your only option was a teletypewriter (TTY) device, which was a dedicated landline phone with a keyboard and small screen to type and read messages. Although TTY devices still exist, they've largely been replaced by Internet Protocol (IP) relay services, which are more convenient, portable—and free.

You can use the T-Mobile IP relay app in either the Google Play or Apple App Store, or connect through the website. It can feel a little overwhelming to make your first call or two, but it's easy to get the hang of it once you've tried it. To make a call, you'll first type the phone number you wish to call and then tap the handset icon to connect to an operator. The operator will immediately dial the number. You can begin typing your greeting while the operator connects and asks the caller if they know what a relay call is.

If the caller says yes, the operator will simply begin reading your message. If the caller says no, the operator will briefly explain how a relay call works before continuing.

The operator will type messages to you verbatim (or as close to it as possible), including anything the other party says to the operator like, “Can she hear me?” The other party is directed to speak as if speaking directly to you, though they often use third person anyway (“Ask her what time she wants to come in”).

What protocols should you know?

There are a few idiosyncrasies and abbreviations to know when using IP relay:

- OPR stands for operator. At the beginning of a call, the operator will tell you their ID number and gender. Occasionally, another operator will take over during a call, which happens seamlessly.
- GA means “go ahead,” and is used whenever the operator wants you to know that the other person has stopped talking and it’s your turn to respond. You can also type GA at the end of your messages to let the operator know you’ve finished and are ready for a response.
- QQ (or just Q) is what the operator types instead of a question mark.
- During a conversation, if you wish to say something directly to the operator that’s not meant to be read aloud (like “thank you for your patience”), put it in parentheses. The operator may also communicate with you this way, including offering their impression about tone of voice (“sounds pleasant” and “sounds unsure,” for

instance) or other notes about the caller, background noise, or problems with the call.

- XXX is what operators will type if they've made a typing mistake and want to correct it.
- Operators will often use common "text-speak" such as "TY" (thank you), "U" (you), and "UR" (your).
- Operators type in all capital letters, but you don't need to.
- SK means "stop keying," and it's meant to indicate that you're ready to hang up. Normally you will type "SK," wait for the other person to say goodbye or for the operator to indicate the other party has disconnected, and then type "SKSK" or simply click "end" to end the call. The operator may also ask you, "GA OR SK" which means "Anything else, or are you ready to hang up?"

What happens when the call is over?

One of the perks of IP relay is that you can save any conversation you want by e-mailing it to yourself or copying and pasting it. Once you hit "end," you'll have the option to do so. If you bypass this screen, you can't come back to it. T-Mobile doesn't save your conversations on their end, though they do keep a log of incoming and outgoing numbers. You can then close the screen or make another phone call.

How do you get incoming calls?

You can give out your IP relay number the same way you'd give out any other phone number. You'll get a notification when a caller is trying to reach you, and if you don't answer, the operator will let the caller know that they can leave a voice-to-text message for you.

What are the limitations?

You cannot make international calls with this service, and 911 calling is potentially clunkier and not guaranteed to work properly. The operator must ask you to type your name, city, and state before connecting to 911.

Common problems

Not all operators are created equal. These are human beings, some of whom type much faster and more accurately than others, and some of whom do a better job of letting you know your options. When facing an automated phone menu with many variables (“Press 1 for appointments, press 2 for billing,” and so on), some operators take the time to type out these options and some simply don’t, leaving you to guess what to ask for or telling you that the machine hung up. In these cases, you can ask the operator to redial, tell you the options, and then to redial again—because by the time the operator does tell you the options and you choose, it’s common for the system to have cut off the call. You may have to repeat this process more than once.

There’s also a problem with the inevitable delays associated with typing back and forth. Sometimes the other party will hang up prematurely or get frustrated with the wait, or will misunderstand what the service is and assume it’s a kind of telemarketer. Sometimes you may also get frustrated by how long it takes to communicate back and forth. For this reason, IP relay calls tend to be more succinct than other calls.

If incoming callers don’t know you have a hearing or speech impairment, they may assume they’ve reached a wrong number and hang up.

Occasionally, just like with other phone numbers, you may get spam or scam callers. It's a good idea to include your IP number on the National Do Not Call Registry.

If you don't use your IP relay number for six months, they'll send you a message asking if you still need it. If you don't respond, you'll lose the number and have to register for a new one.

The bottom line

While there's a learning curve involved with IP relay services, it can also be a major help to those who have trouble communicating on the phone traditionally. There are no limits on how often you call, how long you call, or who you call within the United States, so if you qualify and think it might be helpful to you, give it a try.

IP relay is just one of several assistive communication devices available to people with hearing loss. Your hearing care provider is often an expert in many of these tools. To find a provider near you, use our consumer-reviewed hearing clinic directory of more than 30,000 clinics across the US.

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