Technology to help you live independently at home is becoming increasingly common. It provides a convenient, discreet way to get help when you need it or to monitor your health.

This factsheet looks at:

- Telecare
- Telehealth
- Smart technology
- Assistive and inclusive technology

Call FREE on 0800 319 6789  Visit www.independentage.org

Last reviewed: October 2019
Next review date: October 2020
About Independent Age

Whatever happens as we get older, we all want to remain independent and live life on our own terms. That’s why, as well as offering regular friendly contact and a strong campaigning voice, Independent Age can provide you and your family with clear, free and impartial advice on the issues that matter: care and support, money and benefits, health and mobility.

A charity founded over 150 years ago, we’re independent so you can be.

The information in this factsheet applies to England only.

If you’re in Wales, contact Age Cymru (0800 022 3444, ageuk.org.uk/cymru) for information and advice.

In Scotland, contact Age Scotland (0800 12 44 222, ageuk.org.uk/scotland).

In Northern Ireland, contact Age NI (0808 808 7575, ageuk.org.uk/northern-ireland).
In this factsheet, you’ll find references to our other publications. You can order them by calling 0800 319 6789, or by visiting independentage.org/information
Contents

1. What is telecare? 5
2. How does telecare work? 8
3. Is telecare right for you? 11
4. How can I get telecare services? 13
5. How much does telecare cost? 18
6. What is telehealth and how do I get it? 22
7. What is smart technology and how can it help me? 26
8. Should I get smart technology? 31
9. Assistive and inclusive technology 34
10. Useful contacts 38
1. What is telecare?

Many people are using technology to make their lives easier. For people with care needs or long-term health conditions there is now a growing range of assistive technology services. These services can promote independence and minimise risk without intruding unnecessarily on your dignity and privacy. A range of technologies, including telecare are sometimes referred to as ‘technology-enabled care’ (TEC).

Telecare can help you manage risks at home, and provide you and your family with reassurance that you can get help in an emergency. Telecare devices include sensors that trigger alarms to call for help, wearable alarms and reminders to take medication. You can use telecare to:

- reduce the chance of problems occurring. For example, a bed sensor can raise an alarm if you get out of bed in the night and don’t return after a certain time, reducing your risk of not being found after a fall

- reduce the risk of harm. For example, a device such as a sensor worn on the body that can
detect a fall, a heat sensor that can identify extreme temperatures or smoke or carbon monoxide detectors can all trigger an automatic call for help quickly

- monitor problems. Telecare systems can monitor what is happening in the home and highlight patterns that may be of concern. For example, if an activity monitor shows a pattern of you needing to go to the bathroom during particular hours of the night, this may indicate a problem with your medication. Asking your GP for a review of your medication and how you take it could help you get a better night’s sleep.

Telecare devices can include:

- portable, wearable alarm pendants. If you live with someone who could benefit from having one, you can ask for one for them as well

- fixed alarms, such as pull cords

- movement sensors – for example, to detect when someone has fallen out of bed or to trigger a check-up call if they don’t move for a long time
• gas shut-off devices to decrease the risk of someone forgetting to turn off a gas ring or fire

• pill dispensers to release medication at the appropriate time and trigger an alarm if it isn’t removed from the dispenser

• incontinence sensors to trigger a call if bedding becomes damp

• temperature sensors or fire and smoke alarms that trigger calls for assistance.

Telecare doesn’t have to involve specialist equipment. If you have a smart phone or a voice-controlled virtual assistant (such as Amazon Echo (Alexa), Apple HomePod (Siri) or Google Home), you could use these to help you stay independent at home. Some councils are trialling these instead of telecare, or you could simply set yours up to remind you to take medication at certain times or to call for help if you need it. See chapter 7 to find out more about smart technology, including voice-controlled smart speakers.


2. How does telecare work?

Telecare should be discreet and easy to use. You will usually need a control box (also called a base unit or telecare unit) which plugs into the mains and into either your telephone line or internet connection. Depending on what services you need, you’ll get sensors to place around your home and/or a pendant to wear. Pendants can be worn as a necklace, watch, or clipped onto clothing. Depending on what they are designed to detect, sensors can be placed in different rooms, on doors or on furniture such as a bed or chair. The sensors, pendant and control box communicate by radio signals, so there aren’t any trailing wires to worry about.

The control box is connected to a support centre, which offers help 24 hours a day. When you press the pendant button or one of the sensors is activated, the box automatically dials the support centre. Help may be sent straight away or an operator may speak to you through the telecare device. They will have your details, so if you can’t speak to them, they will know who you are, where you live, and who to contact in case of an emergency – your ‘nominated people’. Your device must be within range of the control box to
work, so check the range if you have a large house or big garden.

You could give a nominated person a spare key to let themselves in and/or consider getting a key safe installed. This is a small box that can be discreetly attached to the wall near the main entrance of your home. It is locked with a code that the support centre can also give to the emergency services if they need to get in to help you. A key safe should be in a place that’s out of site and fitted correctly. If possible, get a key safe with the ‘Secured by Design’ logo, as these have been independently tested and are less likely to affect your home insurance.

Most telecare services will notify a support centre, which can provide help at any time. However, some privately bought equipment will only contact your nominated people.

**Good to know**

There are also telecare services that you can use on your mobile phone. These are sometimes referred to as mHealth. Talk to your GP or local council about what’s available in your area if you’re interested. You can see some case
studies of people who have used telecare services on their mobile phones on the TEC Services Association (TSA) website (tsa-voice.org.uk/campaigns/telling-the-tec-story/tec-stories).
3. Is telecare right for you?

If you’re not used to using technology, the idea of telecare may be daunting. However, some people find that telecare can be a cost-effective way of keeping them safe and providing reassurance, without being overly intrusive. You shouldn’t worry about triggering calls to the support centre by accident – the staff will be used to this and will reassure you that it isn’t a problem.

Telecare can only alert you or your nominated person to something that needs attention – it can’t replace one-to-one care and support from another person. However, in some cases telecare services may reduce the need for some home care visits. For example, if you use a telecare device to prompt you to take your medication or eat and drink, you may no longer need a carer to do this. If you receive care through your council they must reassess your needs before any services can be replaced by telecare services.

Think carefully and realistically about whether telecare is right for you. Telecare won’t necessarily improve your quality of life, reduce your need for home care or make it less likely
you’ll need to go to hospital. It may be that other equipment or services are better for you. For example, you might benefit from small adaptations around the home, such as a bath seat, handrails, chair raising blocks or a perching stool.

Any aids and minor adaptations (those that cost up to £1,000 to install) that you’re assessed as needing must be provided free of charge. Our factsheets Adapting your home to stay independent and Choosing disability equipment have more information.

**Reviewing how your telecare is working**

If you receive telecare as part of a care and support plan produced by social services following a needs assessment, this plan must be reviewed to see if it works for you. Social services should do a light touch review after six to eight weeks to spot any teething problems, and then a full review every year. A review is a good chance to take stock of what is and isn’t working for you, so do let them know if telecare isn’t right for you.
4. How can I get telecare services?

Help from the council

Your local council should offer some telecare services, but the options and criteria for getting help will vary from area to area. Contact your local council’s adult social services department to find out what’s available in your area (gov.uk/find-local-council).

The first step is to ask the social services team for a care needs assessment to see if you meet the criteria for getting care and support services. Tell them that you would like an occupational therapist to be involved in your assessment, because they can identify what aids and equipment might be appropriate for you. For more information, see our factsheet First steps in getting help with your care needs.

If the council assesses you as needing support services (including telecare) they will give you a financial assessment to see how much you should contribute towards the help you need. Charges may vary from area to area. In some areas, some telecare services may be free of
charge, while other councils will install the devices free of charge but ask you to pay a weekly charge for the service.

Help from the NHS

The NHS may pay for telecare as part of a NHS Continuing Healthcare or intermediate care package, if you’re eligible. See our factsheets Continuing healthcare – should the NHS be paying for your care? or Hospital stays to find out more.

Buying telecare privately

If you don’t meet the council criteria for services, or the council doesn’t offer the type of telecare service you want to use, you may want to look into the costs of arranging telecare privately. Shop around and research as many options as possible to make sure you get the best service for you. Ask if you can have a trial before you commit to a particular device or service, so you can make sure it works for you.

If you arrange telecare privately, the company usually charges an initial set-up fee and a weekly or monthly monitoring fee. Your local council should be able to provide details of companies
who offer telecare in your area (gov.uk/find-local-council). The TEC Services Association (TSA) is the representative body for technology-enabled care, and they can provide you with the details of local providers (01625 520 320, tsa-voice.org.uk/service-provider-directory).

The Disabled Living Foundation provides information about the different kinds of telecare service and the costs that could be involved (0300 999 0004, dlf.org.uk/factsheets/telecare).

**Try before you buy**

Trying out telecare services before you buy it is a good idea. You can do this at Equipment Demonstration Centres, Disabled Living Centres and Independent Living Centres. Contact your nearest centre to book an appointment and find out what telecare equipment you can try. Contact the Disabled Living Foundation (0300 999 0004, livingmadeeasy.org.uk/contacts_edc.php) to find your nearest centre, or ask your local council (gov.uk/find-local-council).
Check expert opinions

Before choosing your telecare service, compare prices and read consumer reports from organisations such as:

- the Disabled Living Foundation (0300 999 0004, dlf.org.uk)
- Research Institute for Disabled Consumers (020 7427 2460, ridc.org.uk).

You might also find it useful to read information from the TSA, and they can provide you with details of certified TEC service providers who meet their Quality Standards Framework (01625 520 320, tecquality.org.uk/certified).

Try to get at least three quotes to compare prices before making a purchase. Find out if the price includes any extras such as maintenance and aftercare.

Good to know

If you get telecare provided by the council, they should change the batteries automatically when they need changing. Some private service providers won’t do this, so make sure
to ask and have them show you how to replace the batteries if so.
5. How much does telecare cost?

Most councils charge something for telecare services. You may have to pay for telecare in full, or contribute towards the cost depending on your income and savings.

Councils may charge different rates depending on which telecare service you wish to use, or they may charge a flat rate for all their telecare services. The council may provide the telecare devices free of charge, and charge you a weekly amount to cover the cost of maintenance and the response centre costs. Every council must provide clear information on how they charge for their services.

If you’re buying telecare privately, shop around to look for the best prices.

Things to consider

When considering telecare, think about the following:

• Have you had a care needs assessment from your council’s adult social services department?
It may show that you’re entitled to other forms of support in addition to a telecare service.

- Do you understand how the telecare service will work? Will telecare make your daily life feel safer, or will it make things feel more complicated?

- If you’re paying for the service, do you feel you’re getting value for money? Or would you be better off spending your money on a home carer, for example?

- Do you have friends or relatives who can be your nominated people (see chapter 2)?

- Who will set up and maintain the equipment?

- Will you need to change the batteries yourself? If so, do you know how to change them?

- Have you checked compatibility? If you use your council’s provider or have already privately arranged telecare, you may have to continue using the same company if you want to add additional devices.

- How long will it take for your nominated people to get to you when you need them? Do they have other commitments or have to travel a
long way, which may make it difficult for them to get to you in an emergency? If so, consider if there are any more practical options.

- Do you have a key safe? If the emergency services need to get into your home, how will they be able to get in to help you if you can’t open the door? See page 6 for more information on key safes.

- Can you afford the initial cost and ongoing charges?

- Are you claiming Attendance Allowance? This is a disability benefit for people of State Pension age. You may be entitled to it if you need help with personal care. Our guide Attendance Allowance has more information.

- If you’re arranging telecare privately, have you considered all the features you’ll need and researched the different services? Have you considered what will happen if something goes wrong with the device, and what it may cost to call out an engineer? Is general maintenance included in the price and, if so, how regularly should the equipment be checked?

- If a carer or family member is arranging telecare for you, make sure you understand
how it will monitor you. If necessary, call our Helpline on 0800 319 6789 to arrange to speak to an adviser about the situation, or explore other options which may be more suitable for you.

- Consider what would happen if you don’t like the service once it’s installed – check if there a cancellation period or trial period. Is there a minimum charge that may tie you in to the service for a period of time, even if you don’t want to use it?
6. What is telehealth and how do I get it?

Telehealth is designed to help people living with certain long-term health conditions which need to be monitored to live a more independent and healthy life. As with telecare, telehealth is sometimes called ‘technology-enabled care’. It uses a combination of equipment and technology and can allow you to monitor your health or manage your treatment without having to visit your GP or hospital.

Telehealth devices can transmit readings and information directly to your health professional, a nominated family member or a carer. This can allow them to track and identify any changes in your condition. Here are some examples of telehealth devices.

- If you need help to remember to take your medication, attend appointments or perform regular health checks, a telehealth system can send automatic reminders to your mobile phone.

- If you have high blood pressure, a telehealth device can monitor your blood pressure at
home and send the results automatically to your doctor, nurse or blood pressure specialist. This can help them manage your medication or alert them that urgent action needs to be taken if your blood pressure gets too high.

- If you’re taking warfarin, you can use a telehealth device to monitor the levels in your bloodstream from home. This device can replace the need to attend a blood clinic for regular checks. You will be prompted at regular periods to do the test and submit the data using a keypad on the device. The warfarin clinic will then advise if any change in dosage is required.

- If you have a respiratory condition such as asthma you can get a telehealth device that monitors oxygen levels in your blood. Your doctor, nurse, or asthma specialist can check the readings and intervene if your condition deteriorates. This could mean that action is taken early to prevent a serious asthma attack from occurring.

- If you’re diabetic and use insulin, you can get a telehealth device to monitor your blood sugar levels. The device can alert you if your blood sugar gets too high or too low so you can
adjust your insulin dosage. This helps prevent episodes of hyperglycaemia or hypoglycaemia.

- If you have epilepsy, you can get sensors attached to your bed that monitor a number of things including heart rate and breathing patterns while in bed. If they detect that you’re having a seizure, they send an alarm message to your carer and the monitoring centre.

**How can I get telehealth services?**

Many telehealth devices are provided by a health professional, who should also show you how to use it and explain how it will help them support your health condition.

If you’re interested in telehealth – for example, because you have to have frequent appointments and check-ups for a particular long-term condition – speak to your GP or the health professional who supports you with this condition. They can advise you about whether your condition can be supported by telehealth and what is available in your area. This can often involve monitoring by district nurses. If it’s provided by the NHS, the service may be provided free of charge.
For further information, contact the Disabled Living Foundation (0300 999 0004, livingmadeeasy.org.uk) or the TSA (01625 520 320, tsa-voice.org.uk).

Check with a healthcare professional if you’re considering buying telehealth privately. They may want to be involved with any information or monitoring the telehealth device can provide. If possible, try to find services that are run locally and monitored by a skilled professional, eg a GP.
7. What is smart technology and how can it help me?

Some devices aren’t designed specifically for people with health and care needs, but can still be very useful. Smart technology, or devices connected to each other via the internet, can make tasks around the house much simpler. Many use voice recognition, which can make them easier to use and allow you to get help quickly in an emergency. Here are a few examples.

**Smartphones/tablets**

You can download extra software called apps to both tablets and smartphones. These are programmes that perform specific functions. Some apps can be useful if you have memory or mobility problems. For example, some let you set reminders to take medication, or connect to other devices so you can control them remotely.

Smartphones and tablets can make the internet easier to access. The internet gives you access to a wide range of benefits, including being able to find information, read the news and weather
forecasts, and keep in contact with friends and family.

You could use a smartphone to set reminders to take medication, or save your emergency contact information so people will know who to contact in an emergency. Most smartphones also come with a virtual assistant that can operate your phone, and devices connected to it, when given voice commands. This could be useful if you need to contact someone in an emergency, but can’t physically reach the phone.

Most of the rest of the technology in this section requires a smartphone or tablet to use.

**Wearable technology**

Some devices that you can wear could be useful, such as fitness trackers and smart watches. They work when connected wirelessly to a smartphone. These can be helpful in monitoring your overall fitness, including counting your steps, measuring your heart rate, and seeing how well you’re sleeping.

Smart watches can do many of the things your smartphone can, such as make and receive calls and use certain apps, some of which can help you monitor your wellbeing more closely and
give you reminders of when to take medication, for example. They are harder to lose since you wear them. Some models can be voice activated.

**Smart speakers**

Smart speakers are voice activated, meaning you can tell them to do things simply by speaking to them. They can perform similar functions to a smartphone, such as calling or texting people, setting you reminders, playing music, and ordering things from the internet. If you’re less confident using a smartphone, a smart speaker can be simpler to use, as long as you know the right commands.

You can also connect them to other smart technology, such as smart home devices (see page 21) so that you can control other things using just your voice. If you need help and can’t reach the phone, you can call out to a smart speaker to contact someone for you.

They can also be useful to keep you connected, for example by reminding you of birthdays, reading you the news and weather forecasts, and playing music. There is a range of them available such as Amazon’s Alexa, Google Home and the Apple HomePod.
If you have a speech impairment or a quiet voice, a smart speaker may not always understand you. Try a range of models to make sure the one you buy is able to understand what you say.

If you don’t like the idea of having a device that is listening to you all the time, you can also use your smartphone’s voice assistant such as Siri, Cortana or the Google Assistant. However, as this is not always on, it may not be as useful in an emergency.

**Smart home technology**

You can connect some devices to the internet and manage them more easily through a smartphone or smart speaker. You may be able to control your heating, TV, oven, water, lights and even vacuum cleaner. You could also have a doorbell installed that sends alerts to your smartphone, shows you who is visiting, and allows you to talk to them through your phone without having to go to, or open, the door. You can even automate some smart devices. This means they learn from the way you use them to anticipate your needs – though you should be careful to make sure they’re not doing anything you don’t want them to do.
If any of the devices mentioned in this chapter interest you, see chapter 8 for advice on buying smart technology.
8. Should I get smart technology?

It’s important that whatever you buy will be able to help meet your needs. If you’re unsure of your needs, ask the council for a care needs assessment. You can discuss any ideas you have with the assessor. Then you can see where smart technology could help you, or whether you need more specialist help. For more information, see our factsheet First steps in getting help with your care needs.

All of these devices have pros and cons, and may not be right for everyone. If a friend or family member owns a device you’re interested in, ask them if they’d let you try using theirs before you buy. Some shops allow you to return unwanted goods within a certain period, so ask about their returns policy when buying.

To do

Make sure you have read and understood everything you agree to. Many devices and online services require you to agree to terms and conditions before you can use them.
Terms of Service; Didn’t Read is an online service that explains different websites’ terms and conditions, and gives them a class rating from A to E (tosdr.org). If you’re worried that you won’t be able to read or understand terms and conditions you need to agree to before you can use a certain website or app, they may be able to explain.

**How can I get smart technology?**

Large technology and electronics shops will likely sell most of the products mentioned in chapter 7. It is important to shop around, as the precise details of what each device can offer will differ between models. Digital Unite provides guides and advice about different types of devices and apps available (0800 228 9272, digitalunite.com/technology-guides).

They can be expensive, though smaller versions of Amazon’s and Google’s smart speakers cost less than £50. Make sure to check prices in a number of places, to make sure you’re not being overcharged. You may be able to save money by buying second-hand devices, but make sure that they work properly and come with a guarantee or warranty.
Remember

Only buy from trustworthy vendors. Cheap deals that seem too good to be true often are. If you’re not sure that the person or shop selling you a device is being honest and fair, shop somewhere else. You could ask friends or family members if they would recommend any shops.
9. Assistive and inclusive technology

If you have vision, hearing or movement impairments, you could benefit from assistive and inclusive technology (AIT). AIT is not necessarily specialist technology, and can be general consumer goods with adaptations that may allow you to use them more easily. AIT could help you if you are finding certain things more difficult to do and you don’t want to stop doing them, or have to rely on someone else to help you with them, or do them for you.

What is AIT?

This term covers a broad range of devices and implements, designed for people with mobility and/or sensory impairments. It can also include adaptations to existing products to allow disabled people to use them more easily. AIT could also refer to devices designed with usability in mind, so people with a range of different requirements can use them. Some examples are:

- mounts that attach to a wheelchair and allows the user to hold a tablet more easily
• devices you can control using head or eye movements

• appliances with a speaker function that repeat back to you the instructions you gave them

• larger computer mice with bigger buttons, for people with difficulties holding and using regular mice

• computer keyboards with high visibility colour schemes, for people who struggle to see individual keys accurately

• clocks with a larger face and hands, or clocks that tell the time audibly

• smartphones with settings that allow you to adjust the contrast, brightness and magnification of the screen easily

• larger computer monitors.

Smart technology can also be considered AIT. For example, if you have problems reading the display on your boiler, setting up a smart heating system would allow you to control it from a device you are able to read more easily. A lot of AIT makes use of voice activation and audio feedback features, which is a key feature of
smart speakers. For more information, see chapter 7.

The Disability Living Foundation has a number of websites with further information. If you would like more information, they have factsheets and a helpline that could help (0300 999 0004, dlf.org.uk). Consult their AskSARA website (asksara.dlf.org.uk) if you’re not sure what sort of devices you could benefit from. Visit their price comparison website livingmadeeasy.org.uk if you already have something in mind, to see products they recommend.


**To do**

If you live with someone else who also has accessibility requirements, make sure that you consider both of your needs together when getting AIT for things you both use. This could be for things like changing the way you control the heating, or adjusting a shared computer. Make
sure something that’s easier for one of you to use is also usable for the other.
10. Useful contacts

If you want to discuss anything you have read in this factsheet, you can contact our Helpline to arrange to speak to an adviser (0800 319 6789, advice@independentage.org).

To find out more about the types of telecare equipment that could help you at home, contact:

- the Disabled Living Foundation (0300 999 0004, dlf.org.uk)
- the TEC Services Association (TSA) (01625 520 320, tsa-voice.org.uk)
- Research Institute for Disabled Consumers (020 7427 2460, ridc.org.uk)
- AbilityNet (0800 269 545, abilitynet.org.uk).
Our publications cover England only. While we make every reasonable effort to ensure that our information is accurate at the time of publication, information can change over time. Our information should not be used as a substitute for professional advice. Independent Age does not accept any liability for any loss, however caused, arising from the use of the information within this publication. Please note that the inclusion of other organisations does not constitute an endorsement from us.

The sources used to create this publication are available on request. Contact us using the details below.

Thank you

Independent Age would like to thank those who shared their experiences as this information was being developed, and those who reviewed the information for us.
How did we do?

To tell us what you think of our information, contact us using the details below. We will use your feedback to help us plan future changes to our publications.

If you would like to be involved in helping us to develop our information products, you can join our Readers Panel. For more information visit independentage.org/readers-panel or call us.

Other formats

If you need this information in a different format (such as audio CD), please contact us.