

Got the urge to go Wireless? Here's all you need to know.

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Spring is here, summer's on the way. Are you ready to enjoy your laptop outdoors? Wireless is the way to go.

Okay, so you haven't looked at the wireless instructions since you unwrapped your laptop gift at Christmas. So, what's stopping you? Afraid the technology is too complex or don't know where in Nashville you can easily connect? Not sure what to do next? Read on.

Nashville's hotspots are popping-up all over, as you've probably noticed.

If you want to pick your stops based on known wireless access, rather than take your chances, keep in mind that numerous national Internet registries exist, and many include information about charges. Check out mobile.yahoo.com/wifi; jwire.com; ezgoal.com/hotspots; nmvglobal.com; wi-fihotpotlists.com or hospothaven.com.

There are many more hotspot listings. Businesses offering access have to register to be listed, and new lists are always popping up, so be sure to check your destination with several registries to find your options. Many offer search by zipcode or city. Even in your own backyard, you'll find the national registries most comprehensive.

Once you find a great spot to hang out wirelessly, you'll find one of a few types of arrangements. The business may transmit a signal for free, they may ask for a daily connection fee, or they may require that you have one of several types of wireless accounts with a third-party provider like T-Mobile, Boingo, iPass, and others. In the latter case, you'll have a daily, monthly, or annual account with the third-party provider and not pay anything directly to the business you visit.

Be aware of this when choosing your hangouts. A few local wifi hotspots include Kinko's, Barnes & Noble, and Borders Books (with T-Mobile & iPass), Bongo Java (with Boingo), Bean Central and The Mouse Pad Tech Center in Cool Springs (independent).



To make the jump and cut the cord, you basically need two things. Your laptop needs an 'antenna' to 'hear' the internet signal, and you need to know where to find a signal. (You may be regularly amused, but puzzled when a pop-up window on your laptop announces whether or not it has detected a wireless signal. Your machine is just trying to help you get started!)

Many laptops can now be purchased with a wireless card (internal or external) already installed. Otherwise, if you have a slot open and available in your laptop, you must add a

card. If you have no slot in your older laptop, but have a USB (2.0 preferred) slot available, then you'll want to consider getting an external USB network adaptor.

Be careful to get the newest protocol: 802.11g is the wireless protocol to look for when purchasing your card or adaptor. The protocol defines how your laptop's antenna deciphers the signal sent from the signal broadcast device (also known as the wireless router from which you'll be receiving wireless access) and how fast the data can be transmitted by air.

Many places of businesses that transmit a wireless Internet signal do so for free, but some do encrypt the signal. Be sure when making your laptop or adaptor purchase that you look for a card or adaptor that specifies it will navigate the increasingly common 64-bit and 128-bit Wireless Encryption Protocol (WEP) used for security. Then, when you need to deal with an encrypted hotspot, you'll be ready to enter the 10- or 26-character code given you when you visit your favorite sites.

The passcode you need to enter into your PC to connect to the Internet may or may not be posted in plain sight -- either way, it's usually best to check in with a shop employee to eliminate uncertainties. You may find that access is free and unlimited; there may be on-site charges; and, there may be a requirement that you have your own wireless subscription account with a provider.

The good news: You'll be using wireless routinely and will soon know all the ground-rules for the venues you frequent.

If you decide to use a wireless router at home, you may or may not want to encrypt your home signal. Just keep in mind that it is not uncommon these days for wireless users to prowl apartment parking lots with their laptops, looking for dwellers' unsecured wireless connections, which can be detected and used from some distance, if not encrypted.

Also, if you're shopping for a laptop, wireless card or adaptor, keep in mind the pace of tech change and always get bigger and faster products to ensure fast, clean transmission, whenever you can afford it. While most data is now transferred wirelessly at 54 megabytes per second (mbps), newer wireless cards anticipate transmission at 108 mbps, and that trend will continue.

Enjoy the great weather while you stay connected, and don't let your laptop get a sunburn!

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