

How to use 'smart home' technology



The Internet of Things, or IoT, refers to the billions of digital devices around the world that are connected to the internet, all collecting and sharing data. IoT includes 'smart home' technology. This uses your internet connection and wireless (Wi-Fi) home network to make your devices work with each other. The devices have to be compatible, which means they are designed to 'talk' to each other.

The easiest way to control smart home devices is with a 'smart speaker' with a built in 'voice assistant' that understands you and responds when you speak to it.

A smart home can make your life easier in many ways, but it's important to set up the devices safely.

The benefits of smart home technology

Convenience – You can manage all your devices from a smart phone or tablet, switching them on and off and adjusting them wherever you are. This includes any equipment fitted with compatible smart technology, such as your home security system, lights, air-conditioning, vacuum cleaner and television. You can even buy smart plugs for old appliances.

Safety – You can control equipment like door locks and lights from your phone or tablet while you are away from home, or use voice commands when you are near the speaker. The voice assistant allows you to make calls and send messages even when you do not have your phone or tablet in reach. For example, if you have a fall you can still contact a family member, friend or neighbour.

Accessibility – Smart home devices are very useful for anyone with mobility issues or vision impairment. For example, you can change the channel on your smart TV, turn up the heating or make medical appointments without having to move around the house. You can also connect your email account so your smart assistant reads the emails out loud.

Hands free – Voice assistants allow you to control devices and equipment while you are using your hands for other things. For example, you can adjust your music, do your online assistant or ask the voice assistant for information while you are working, cooking or looking after someone else.

What you need to get started

- Home internet with a wireless connection (Wi-Fi) and a data allowance that is large enough to run the smart speaker as well as your other internet activities
- A smart speaker linked to an account with a voice assistant service (the account is usually free)
- A mobile device such as a phone or tablet, usually installed with an app (program) for setting up the smart speaker

Tip: Make sure you position the smart speaker where you have a strong Wi-Fi signal.

The smart speaker

- The smart speaker controls your smart home by connecting with other devices over the internet.
- It responds to voice commands using software called a voice assistant.
- The voice assistant is activated by a command word or phrase.
- It can search the internet for answers to your questions.
- It can give you reminders and updates about important things throughout the day.
- It can be trained to respond to commands from more than one person.

There are three major brands of speakers and assistants: Amazon and Alexa, Apple and Siri, Google and Google Assistant. The assistants also work with compatible smart speakers made by other companies.

When choosing a speaker, check that it works with the operating system on your mobile phone or tablet and with the smart home devices you want it to

control. Also check if it has a switch that allows you to turn off the microphone and if it can be used to dial Triple Zero (000) emergency calls, if these features are important to you.

Using the voice assistant

There are a some simple things you can do to ensure the voice assistant works for you:

- **Start with the activation phrase** – this makes your smart speaker pay attention.
- **Use direct questions or commands** – you can add ‘please’ at the end of a question or command if you like, but a voice assistant won’t be offended if you don’t!
- **Use plain language** – simple, easy to understand sentences work best, so try not to use slang.
- **Speak clearly** – make sure your voice is loud enough and there is no background noise.

Security and Privacy

Know when the voice assistant is listening

A smart speaker (or a voice assistant app on your mobile device) is always listening, but only starts recording when it hears an activation phrase (for example, 'Ok Google'). It sends the voice recording to a voice assistant service through the internet. The app Terms and Conditions should explain how your voice is recorded, when and where it is stored, and how long it is kept. Often your voice is only kept long enough for the voice assistant to process it, then it's deleted to protect your privacy.

Learn how to switch off the microphone

At times you may want to make sure sensitive information is not picked up by your smart speaker. Many smart speakers have a switch on them which lets you disable the built-in microphone. This means it cannot record you, even if you speak the activation phrase. To make the smart speaker work again, simply turn the microphone back on.

You may also be able to change the settings to switch off the voice and audio activity, delete your voice history and set up automatic deletions of your recordings. The settings are adjusted using the app on your phone or tablet or by logging into your account on the manufacturer's website.

Check the privacy policy

When you download the apps for the smart speaker and voice assistant you may be asked for personal data such as your email address and location. Voice assistants

can also send voice recordings to the manufacturer and data that tracks when and how you use the smart speaker. Some manufacturers share this information with other companies. You should check the default settings and change them to protect your privacy.

Before you buy a smart speaker, check the Privacy Policy on the manufacturer's website to see what data it collects from customers. If you have already bought a smart speaker and you are uncomfortable with the personal information it requests, check if you can return the smart speaker and get a refund.

Keep your account secure

Be careful about who can use your voice assistant, especially if you have linked it to your financial, shopping or email accounts.

Create a strong password for the app or account that controls your voice assistant. Make sure it has a mix of uppercase and lowercase letters, numbers and symbols. Avoid common words, phrases, or information in your passwords. And do not reuse existing passwords from other accounts.



You can also use multi-factor authentication where possible. This makes it harder to hack into your account, even if a hacker gets your password. To use multi-factor authentication, you need both your password and an additional piece of information, such as a code sent to your phone or a random number generated by an app.

For more information about creating strong passwords visit the Be Connected website:

beconnected.esafety.gov.au/topic-library/essentials/safety-first

TIP: You can learn more about smart home technology in a Be Connected short online course: beconnected.esafety.gov.au/topic-library/introduction-to-smart-homes



Take the time to discover Be Connected

Be Connected is a comprehensive website with free resources specifically designed to support older Australians to connect online safely and navigate the digital world confidently. The site is also useful for families and community organisations who want to help older community members access all the benefits of the internet.

beconnected.esafety.gov.au

