

## BROADBAND OR DIAL-UP?

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In case you haven't noticed, we're in the middle of a broadband price war. And with the prices of entry-level broadband services now as low as many dial-up accounts, you may be tempted to take the plunge into broadband.

Unfortunately, there are many traps, but as long as you shop around and read the fine print of ISP plans carefully, you'll end up with a great-value Internet connection that's at least five times faster than a dial-up account.

What's the cause of this broadband price war? Well, it all started with the introduction of ADSL technology a few years ago. Unlike cable broadband, which requires the cable used by pay TV, ADSL uses your existing phone line to provide a fast Internet connection.

So suddenly, a lot more people could have access to broadband (although a telephone line does not guarantee access to ADSL). It also meant that a lot more Internet Service Providers (ISPs) could offer ADSL services, by buying access to phone lines and other infrastructure from Telstra ([www.telstra.com](http://www.telstra.com)) and other telecommunications companies.

Telstra has gradually lowered the costs of access to its infrastructure, which the growing number of broadband providers quickly passed onto customers. Most recently, Telstra's main competitor, Optus ([www.optusnet.com.au](http://www.optusnet.com.au)), has entered the ADSL market. Not surprisingly, Telstra lowered its broadband prices. BigPond's entry-level plan has been slashed to below \$30 a month – quickly followed by a raft of other ISPs.

### **Why go to broadband?**

Speed is the most obvious reason to move to broadband, with even entry-level plans offering five times the connection speed of a dial-up account. High-speed ADSL and cable plans can offer 30 times dial-up connection speeds or more.

The other major benefit touted is the “always on” connection. No longer will you have to wait for your modem to dial up and connect to the ISP every time you want to go online. Gone will be the session limits of around four hours that you get with a typical unlimited dial-up account. Busy signals and line drop-outs will generally be a thing of the past.

However, there are also hidden cost benefits to moving to broadband. If you got a second phone line for your dial-up connection, you can ditch that straight away. By cleverly using the unused bandwidth of your phone line, ADSL allows you to use the one phone line to make calls or send faxes while you are connected to the Internet. And, of course, because it's “always on”, you'll save the cost of the phone calls a dial-up modem makes every time you go online. These same savings apply to cable broadband too.

### **The traps**

As mentioned earlier, there are traps for the unwary. If you're not careful, you can easily be hit by hidden costs and conditions.

*Traps to watch for:*

- Monthly download limits. With broadband, you can easily exceed the restrictions on budget plans if you're not careful – so choosing the right limit (or no limit) is critical.

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- Data limits that include uploading. Most limited plans apply download restrictions only, but some, such as those from BigPond, count the data used in both directions in the data limit. It's not a huge problem for most people, because the average user downloads far more than they upload. But if you send a lot of files, such as uploading Web pages and graphics to a Web site, then you could be hit hard.
- Excess penalty fees. Many plans hit you with a fee of around 15c per megabyte if you exceed the monthly download limit. And it mounts up quickly. With some budget plans, you'd only have to download 200Mb beyond your limit to double your regular monthly fee.
- Speed reduction (also known as “shaping”). There's a trend away from penalty fees to speed reduction, typically down to dial-up speed, for exceeding data limits. Unfortunately, some providers have taken to calling these plans “unlimited”, which is yet another reason to read the fine print.
- Contracts and early termination fees. Plans range from having no minimum term to up to two-year contracts. Long contracts usually offer incentives such as a lower (or no) initial connection fee, but you'll be hit with a penalty fee – mostly the cost of the balance of a contract – if you want to cancel the service early. However, even if there's no formal contract period, some plans charge a termination fee if you leave in the first six months or so. And even if you want to change to another plan from the same provider, you often have to pay a charge.
- Regional price differences. Until very recently, it was common to encounter three-tiered pricing, with rural users paying around 20% more than city users. There's still the odd provider that charges rural users more.

### **Look for extras**

Providers vary enormously in what they offer with a plan, ranging from Internet access only to services with up to 15 free email addresses and up to 50Mb of Web space on the provider's servers for your own Web site. Some offer free spam and virus protection for your email, while others offer a free dial-up account for travelling or emergencies.

Sometimes the initial connection fee includes a free modem. This can save you \$100 or more for the cost of a broadband modem, but it's typically a basic modem that connects to a single computer using the PC's USB port. If you have more than one PC at home, you might want to consider getting a combined modem/router, which can share the Internet connection among a few PCs. But it may pay to shop around too. All ADSL modems/routers should work with any ADSL connection (but check with the provider first). However, that's not the case with cable modems and connections.

### **BEST BUDGET BROADBAND PLANS**

Budget plans have a connection speed of up to 256 kilobits per second (kbps) for downloading and 64kbps for uploading. That means the download speed is over five times faster than a dial-up connection.

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You'll find plenty of these plans for less than \$30 per month. However, the trap is they typically have a download limit of 200Mb or even less – you'd only have to download two decent-sized game demos to break this limit.

### Examples Of Plans

Dart Economy 5000

Web [www.dart.net.au](http://www.dart.net.au)

Monthly fee \$48

Download/upload speed 256/64kbps

Monthly download limit 5Gb with speed drop beyond limit

The best of Dart's entry-level deals offers a large 5Gb monthly download limit for just \$48 per month.

What's more, you'll get no nasty surprises on your credit card, as the penalty for going beyond the download limit is a drop in download speed to 64kbps rather than a fee. The download quota also excludes data from other Dart users, Dart games servers and some other sites.

The initial connection fee is \$143, with a modem extra, starting from \$185. The minimum term is six months, with early cancellation requiring payout of the remaining period.

Extras include five email addresses and 10Mb of Web space. Technical support is available seven days a week, making this plan very good value for most users.

EFTel eDSL Freedom 256

Web [www.eftel.com.au](http://www.eftel.com.au)

Monthly fee \$49.95

Download/upload speed 256/64kbps

Download limit None

This plan is genuinely unlimited, unlike some so-called “unlimited” plans that allow a certain number of gigabytes at top speed but then drop back in speed beyond that limit.

There are “acceptable use” guidelines, which entitle the ISP to request customers to reduce their usage and, in extreme cases, remove users who cause network congestion. However, you'd have to do an awful lot of downloading to even get a warning.

The other great thing about the plan is that there's no minimum contract period. The connection fee is \$125, although a modem is an additional cost. Extras are quite basic with just two email addresses and 10Mb of Web space, but options such as anti-spam or anti-virus are available at low rates.

Technical support is available every day, rounding out a great-value service with no hidden costs or restrictions.

OzEmail OzE256

Web [www.ozemail.com.au](http://www.ozemail.com.au)

Monthly access fee \$49.95

Download/upload speed 256/64kbps

Monthly download limit 12Gb with possible speed drop beyond limit

OzEmail claims this is an “unlimited” plan, but says in the fine print that “during peak periods, download speed may be slowed after 12Gb usage”.

The minimum contract period is six months, and if you terminate early you'll be in for a line disconnection fee of \$189 plus three months of the standard monthly fee. For the six-month contract, the connection fee is \$99, plus an additional \$129 if you want a modem. On-site installation is available for “about \$220”.

OzEmail includes a whopping 15 email addresses per account and 5Mb of Web space. But best of all is the inclusion of a free dial-up account for travelling or emergencies and phone support 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Even if 12Gb is the maximum you get at full speed, this plan is great value for under \$50.

TPG Broadband Value 256

Web [www.tpg.com.au](http://www.tpg.com.au)

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Monthly fee \$19.95

Download/upload speed 256/64kbps

Monthly download limit 200Mb with 14c per Mb excess fee capped at \$40

We aren't usually in favour of these cheap broadband plans with very low download limits, but factor in the cost of the phone calls required for dial-up access, and you'll be better off under this plan than any dial-up plan – as long as you use the account for basic browsing and email.

Just remember that you would only have to download a couple of large game demos to exceed the download limit. However, TPG has capped the penalty for excess downloads at \$40, so you'd never have to pay more than \$59.95 in total in any month.

The connection fee is \$129, which includes a free USB modem. On-site help is available at \$150 per hour in business hours. The plan requires a six-month contract and has an early cancellation fee of up to \$350 (pro rata for the remaining length of the contract).

If you're looking for the cheapest way to get broadband, this is it.

TPG Home Unlimited 256

Web [www.tpg.com.au](http://www.tpg.com.au)

Monthly fee \$49.95

Download/upload speed 256/64kbps

Monthly download limit None

Like TPG's entry-level plan above, this one includes five email addresses and 10Mb of Web space, with telephone support available every day. However, this plan requires a 12-month contract, with an early cancellation fee of up to \$350 (pro rata for the remaining period of the contract).

Note that TPG's Home plans are restricted to USB modems only, and not routers for sharing the connection with multiple PCs. However, if you just want to get into heavy downloading with a single PC, you'd be hard-pressed to find better value.

### BEST-VALUE HIGHER-SPEED PLANS

If you really want to experience broadband at its best, then you should consider taking the next step – a plan offering 512kbps download and 128kbps upload speeds.

That will cost at least another \$10 to \$15 more per month above a 256/64kbps plan, but with double the download speeds of a 256kbps connection.

Dart Premium 10000

Web [www.dart.net.au](http://www.dart.net.au)

Monthly fee \$64

Download/upload speed 512/128kbps

Monthly download limit 10Gb with speed drop beyond limit

A great plan if you're after a fast broadband connection with a reasonable download limit. What's more, if you exceed the download limit, the connection simply throttles back to 128kbps – which is still over double dial-up speed. The download quota also excludes data from other Dart users and Dart's games sites.

The connection fee is \$143, with a minimum term of six months. Extras are limited to five email addresses and 10Mb of Web space, but with good technical support hours, this is a great-value plan for everyone except the heaviest of downloaders.

DataCo A512/12gb

Web [www.dataco.com.au](http://www.dataco.com.au)

Monthly fee \$65

Download/upload speed 512/128kbps

Monthly download limit 12Gb with \$6 per Gb penalty fee

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DataCo offers competitive ADSL plans, with this one offering the best value – 12Gb of monthly downloads for just \$65.

There's a penalty fee if you go over the download limit but it's only \$6 per gigabyte instead of the usual 15c or so per megabyte (equivalent to \$150 per gigabyte). DataCo also offers a "SafetyNet" with this plan, allowing you to exceed your download allowance by 1Gb per month, up to four times a year, with no extra download charges.

The connection fee is \$139, which doesn't include a modem, and the minimum term is three months with an early disconnection fee of \$100.

Internode PADSL-512-Unlimited-Red

Web [www.internode.on.net](http://www.internode.on.net)

Monthly access fee \$59.95

Download/upload speed 512/128kbps

Monthly download limit 12Gb with speed drop beyond limit

In all our research for this feature, this was the only 512kbps plan from a major ISP to cost less than \$60 per month and offer a decent download limit. And if you go beyond the 12Gb download limit, there's a speed drop rather than financial penalty. You also get the benefit of Internode's free games and download sites, which aren't included in the download quota.

The connection fee is \$129 (with modem extra) and the only catch is Internode's \$65 early termination fee if the service is cancelled in the first six months. But you get five email addresses and 50Mb of Web space, along with Internode's good technical support hours.

This is the best-value 512kbps plan around.

OzEmail OzE512

Web [www.ozemail.com.au](http://www.ozemail.com.au)

Monthly access fee \$65.95

Download/upload speed 512/128kbps

Monthly download limit 12Gb with possible speed drop beyond limit

As with OzEmail's OzE256 plan, the main concern with this so-called "unlimited" plan is the fine print that says "during peak periods, download speed may be slowed after 12Gb usage".

Still, even if it has a 12Gb download limit, a 512kbps plan for under \$65 is great value, particularly from a big name like OzEmail. You also get plenty of nice extras including 15 email addresses, 5Mb of Web space, a free dial-up account and 24 hour a day, seven day a week phone support.

The connection fee is \$99, plus \$129 for a modem, for the minimum six-month contract. The catch is the hefty early termination fee of \$189 plus three months of the standard monthly fee.

### NO-LIMITS DOWNLOADING

If 12Gb per month is still not enough for your downloading needs, you'll have to be prepared to spend at least \$75 per month for a 512kbps plan with a 30Gb limit or more. Here are some examples:

- EFTel eDSL Freedom 512: \$79.95 per month, no download limit ([www.eftel.com.au](http://www.eftel.com.au)).
- iBlue Cougar 512k/128k: \$75 per month, no download limit ([www.iblue.com.au](http://www.iblue.com.au)).
- iiNet Bliink 512+: \$79.95 per month, 16Gb download limit plus extra 16Gb off-peak ([www.iinet.net.au](http://www.iinet.net.au)).
- Internode PADSL-512-Unlimited-Green: \$79.95 per month, 32Gb download limit ([www.internode.on.net](http://www.internode.on.net)).
- TPG Unlimited 512: \$79.95 per month, no download limit ([www.tpg.com.au](http://www.tpg.com.au)).
- WestNet Premium 512k/128k: \$79.95 per month, 32Gb download limit ([www.westnet.com.au](http://www.westnet.com.au)).

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## SHARING MULTIPLE PCs

For sharing two or three PCs in a typical home, a good 512kbps plan should do the job. However, if you've got a house full of download-hungry users or an office with several PCs, you should consider a 1500kbps ADSL plan. Here are a few examples

- iBlue Cougar 1500k/256k: \$115 per month, no download limit ([www.iblue.com.au](http://www.iblue.com.au)).
- Internode PADSL-1500-Unlimited-Green: \$109.95 per month, 32Gb download limit ([www.internode.on.net](http://www.internode.on.net)).
- iiNet Bliink 1500 Std: \$109 per month, 30Gb download limit ([www.iinet.net.au](http://www.iinet.net.au)).
- WestNet Premium 1.5Mb/256k: \$109.95 per month, 30Gb download limit ([www.westnet.com.au](http://www.westnet.com.au)).

## WHAT ABOUT CABLE?

Cable broadband is available only in those areas of capital cities where cable TV is available, with Big- Pond and Optus being the only providers.

Cable is generally faster than a 1500kbps ADSL connection – yet cable plans are cheaper (albeit usually with lower download limits). And they're cheaper still if you use the pay TV and/or telephone service of the same provider.

Examples of cable plans are:

- BigPond's Unlimited Cable: \$59.95 per month, 10Gb download/upload limit with speed drop beyond limit ([www.bigpond.com](http://www.bigpond.com)).
- OptusNet Cable Unlimited: \$79.95 per month (\$69.95 with Optus phone service bundle), 12Gb download limit with speed drop beyond limit ([www.optus.com.au](http://www.optus.com.au)).

## UNLIMITED DIAL-UP PLANS

The vast majority of Internet connections are still dial-up – and that will remain the case for some time. There are still many areas in Australia where you can't get ADSL or cable. With a good dial-up account, you can dial in from just about anywhere in Australia (even overseas) without being hit by any extra fees, so it's still the only option if you travel or move house a lot. However, you should shop around from time to time. If you're still on an hourly account, we recommend that you compare the following unlimited plans to what you're paying now.

Aardvark All You Can Eat  
Web [www.aardvark.net.au/dialup](http://www.aardvark.net.au/dialup)  
Monthly fee \$19.95

This plan is a basic unlimited dial-up account that offers only one email account and phone support only during regular business hours, but it includes free email virus and spam protection and 5Mb of Web space. It has no download limits or penalties and a reasonable four-hour session limit, but one thing that might worry some users is the condition “automatic reconnects not permitted”. This appears to cover any immediate redial. However, Aardvark is not currently enforcing it and will only do so if its service starts to degrade because of people automatically reconnecting. You should wait a few minutes before reconnecting.

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Access Only Metro 1 No Strings and National Traveller/Regional

Web [www.accessonly.com](http://www.accessonly.com)

Monthly fee \$13.95 (Metro 1 No Strings) or \$16.95 (National Traveller/Regional)

Access Only offers Internet access and nothing else, not even an email address. Even technical support is by email only, so it's definitely not for beginners.

However, if you want an unlimited dial-up account with no download limits or penalties, these are the cheapest plans we were able to find. Sessions are limited to the typical period of four hours.

The Metro 1 plan covers only the metropolitan areas, however the National Traveller/Regional plan covers the rest of Australia.

Start off with these one-month plans to ensure you don't get hit with an early-exit fee if you decide you don't like the basic service.

Earthlink 56K/64K ISDN SuperUnlimited

Web [www.earthlink.com.au](http://www.earthlink.com.au)

Monthly fee \$18.95

Earthlink offers this plan nationwide with no download limits or penalties and a standard session limit of four hours. Extras include two email addresses, 5Mb of Web space, Web mail and spam and virus protection of emails.

Technical support is available seven days a week. The only downside to this plan is the \$15 once-off registration fee, but otherwise it's good value.

iPrimus Infinity Special

Web [www.iprimus.com.au](http://www.iprimus.com.au)

Monthly fee \$19.95

iPrimus is the only major telecommunications company we found to offer a genuine unlimited dial-up plan for under \$20. The Infinity Special plan has no download limits or penalties, but there are some catches. You pay quarterly in advance and it requires a 12-month contract – you'll have to pay out the rest of the 12 months if you want to stop using the service.

However, unlike most of the no-frills plans reviewed, there are plenty of extras here, starting with the long five-hour session limit and 24 hour a day, seven day a week phone support.

The plan is ideal for families, including five email addresses, 10Mb of Web space, access to iPrimus's games network and Kidz @ iPrimus children's network and an optional content filter.

TPG Unlimited Pack

Web [www.tpg.com.au](http://www.tpg.com.au)

Monthly fee \$16.95

Not only is this plan cheap, there are also no download limits or penalties and it has the standard four-hour session limit. Extras include five email addresses and 10Mb of Web space, and TPG provides phone support seven days a week.

You have to pay quarterly in advance and pay out the balance of your contract for an early exit, but if you pay by credit card, the contract is just three months (instead of 12 months for cheque payments).

This information was taken from the NetGuide website at:

[www.netguide.com.au/useful\\_stuff/tutorials](http://www.netguide.com.au/useful_stuff/tutorials)