

Using Technology? Positively!

A SERIES OF FACT SHEETS

ON EVERYDAY TECHNOLOGIES AND OLDER CANADIANS

TELECOMMUNICATIONS: PHONES AND MORE

Fact sheet #2 looks at the widening telecommunications field and its impact on the everyday lives of older adults.

The communications field has grown far beyond the telephone to include **fax machines**, e-mail (electronic mail), monitoring devices and other teleservices. The development of voice, fax, video, data and other digital transmission technology has changed how and when we communicate, but not why. Communicating with friends, family, health care providers and the community is as important as it always was. Seniors are benefiting from new communication technologies that allow them to stay in touch with loved ones both near and far.

Everyday Telephone Innovations

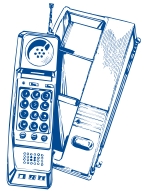
New telephone technologies can provide increased independence, convenience and safety. A wide variety of services

and equipment is available from telephone companies. Be aware that most of them add extra charges to your monthly telephone bill.

◆ **Portable Cordless Phones**

prevent rushing to answer a phone in another room.

Cellular phones (wireless telephones) are portable and operate on batteries. They make it easy to send and receive important telephone calls when you are away from your home and can be helpful in case of an emergency.



◆ **Voice Mail Systems/Answering**

Machines take messages from callers when you are not able to answer your phone. Your telephone company may offer an automated answering service for a monthly fee or you can purchase an answering

machine to plug into your phone. When setting up a recorded message, don't tell callers you are not home, or let them know that you live alone. Simply say "you have reached (your number) and we can't take your call at the moment."

Some seniors have a family member or friend who has a clear, firm voice record the greeting.

◆ **Caller Identification, Call Waiting, Call Blocking, Call Tracing** services are just a few of the features most telephone companies provide for a fee. Look through your telephone directory or call your telephone service to ask for a full explanation of these services.

◆ **TTY (teletypewriter)**, also known as **TDD (telecommunications device for the deaf)**, are services that make it possible for customers with a hearing impairment to use the telephone. **Relay** is the service provided by telephone companies to enable TTY users and non-TTY users to communicate. Customers communicate by typing into the TTY. An operator interprets the message and communicates it to the person they are contacting.

Automated Voice Response Systems (AVRs) are answering systems used by many companies that ask you to press a number on the phone key pad that corresponds to your inquiry from a list of choices. Its purpose is to direct calls to the most appropriate person and/or answer common questions. **AVRs** are cost effective for companies, as they require fewer service representatives. Many people find these systems frustrating if the menu choices do not match their inquiry and/or they would rather speak to a person. But if the system is well designed, it may be convenient and save time.

A well designed **AVR** system should include:

- simple clear choices
- an option to speak to a person
- an option to repeat the menu

If you encounter a poorly designed **AVR** system, tell the company. **AVR** systems should serve, not frustrate, customers.



AVR Tips

- ☎ Make your call when you have a block of time and will not be interrupted.
- ☎ Listen to all of the choices first, writing down any that seem to fit your inquiry.
- ☎ Even if '0' is not offered as an option to speak to a person directly, try pressing it anyway.
- ☎ If the menu choices seem unnecessarily complicated or too long, let the company know. Menus are sometimes poorly designed and the choices not clearly explained.
- ☎ Be patient with yourself and just hang up if you become confused. The machine does not care how many times you hang up or call back!

Telephone Tips

- ☎ Have a pencil and paper handy when you make any call but especially one that you know will be answered by an **AVR** (see above). Beforehand, write down your main points so that if you have to wait until your call can be answered, you won't forget them.

- ☎ Portable cordless phones have become relatively inexpensive. Be sure to read thoroughly the instructions that come with your phone. A welcome feature with most phones is the **locator button** on the telephone base. When pressed, the handset will emit a series of beeps to let you know where you last used it.
- ☎ Talking on a cell phone while driving has been shown to be a major distraction for drivers – in fact, in some jurisdictions, it is against the law. Exercise some common sense.

A word of caution: some cell or portable phones may not be secure; their signal could be picked up by other electronic devices in the area, such as baby monitors or private scanners; so do not use them for confidential calls.

Sources:

- Coughlin, Joseph F. *Technology Needs of Aging Boomers*. Issues in Science and Technology Online. Fall 1999.
- Listening to Canadians*. Communications Survey, Fall 2000.
- White, Jo and Ann Weatherall. *A Grounded Theory Analysis of Older Adults and Information Technology*. Educational Gerontology, 26:371-386, 2000.



Fact Sheets in the Series

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Techno Terms

AVR - an **Automated Voice Response System** is an electronic telephone answering service used by many companies to direct your call to the appropriate person or department and increasingly, by medical and professional offices to book appointments. Most use a 'menu' style, in which you make your choices by pressing the buttons on your phone. This system does not work with a rotary telephone.

Cellular Phone - a wireless telephone.

Fax Machine - sends and receives printed pages or images over telephone lines by converting the printed material to and from electronic signals.

Pound Key - the number sign (#) often used in automated voice response systems (AVRs) to designate a choice in the list of options.

Star Key - (*) often used in automated voice response systems to exit a system.

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