

The Solo-Agers Decision Guide

Resource Series



Using Technology Aids

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Technology for the Solo-Ager

This is one topic in the Solo-Agers Decision Guide. The Introduction to this Guide outlines the types of decisions that solo-agers need to make to prepare for their future aging needs. Other topics in the series cover preparing for physical and cognitive decline, developing a support network, housing, finances, health care, and legal issues.

There are many technological devices and services today that are particularly helpful for older adults. AgeTech is a growing category of technology solutions that aim to contribute to longer, healthier lives and empower people to choose how they live as they age. Technology can make it easier to remain socially engaged and to age in place longer. It can simplify household tasks and provide shopping and transportation options for those with restricted mobility. Health and safety can also be enhanced through the use of monitors and aids. Given the rapid pace of progress in this area, it is likely that technology will continue to evolve and create new opportunities for users.

One of the challenges of using technology as you age is that, as new products and features are added, things get more complex at the same time as you may become less able to manage those changes. Adopting new technology is often more challenging for older adults due to lack of confidence, physical and/or cognitive decline. Vision and hearing loss, as well as loss of manual dexterity, can make some devices difficult, or even impossible, to use effectively. The earlier you learn to use smart phone features and other technology aids, the easier it can be for future technology enhancements. You may also consider seeking out devices that are specifically designed for older users, e.g. with big buttons, voice activation, connectivity to hearing aids, and easy tutorials.

Since continued innovation and change is inevitable, the focus in this Guide is not on the specific products or services that are currently available, but rather on helping you develop a plan for using technology now and in the future. Generally, the more you use technology now, the easier it will be to use it in the future and adapt to future changes.

Technology Planning Steps for Solo-Agers

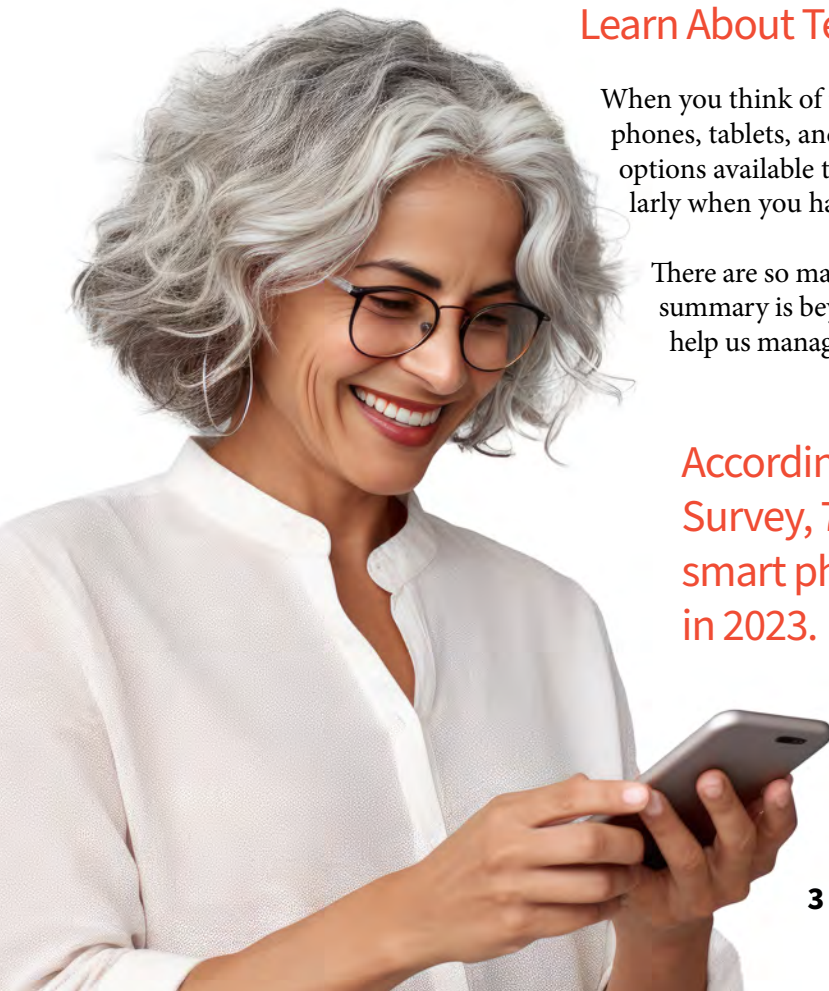
- Learn about technology for seniors
- Match technology to your needs and capabilities
- Increase your technology “savvy”
- Obtain help with selection, installation, and maintenance
- Keep track of usernames and passwords

Learn About Technology Designed for Seniors

When you think of technology, you may first think of smart phones, tablets, and computers. But there are so many other options available that can make your everyday life easier, particularly when you have limitations.

There are so many examples of useful technologies that a summary is beyond the scope of this Guide. Technology can help us manage our household more easily, turn on our lights,

According to a 2023 Pew Research Center Survey, 75% of Americans age 65+ had a smart phone and broadband access in 2023.



automatically vacuum, let someone know if we have fallen, manage our medication, and improve our eyesight and hearing. For seniors who travel a lot, home technology sensors can notify you if you have a water leak or a drop in temperature in your home. Wearables, like the Apple watch, Fitbit band, and Oura ring, are now used for disease management, monitoring daily activity levels, sleep quality, oxygen levels, heart rate, blood pressure, and other measures to reduce the risk of complications from illnesses. Home security cameras allow you to see and speak to visitors and delivery people at your front door without leaving your sofa.

With more widespread usage, technology products designed for seniors have become more affordable, and developers have focused on improving ease of use. Many are controlled by apps that are linked to a cell phone or computer, so that makes it even more important to develop and keep up your skills on those devices.

Types of Technology that Can Benefit Solo-Agers in 2024



Tech for Communication

- Social media groups for common interests or hobbies
- Photo-sharing
- Video calls with friends and family
- Texting for quick conversations
- Voice activated devices (TVs, speakers, Siri/Alexa)
- Hearing aids



Tech to Expand Entertainment Options

- Listen to music
- Listen to books on tape
- Play games and work puzzles
- Watch movies/TV
- Virtual reality tours and experiences



Tech to Enhance Wellness

- Telehealth
- Disease management apps and devices
- Fitness and health apps and devices
- Proactive medication dispenser
- Robot companion or cyberpet
- Games/puzzles to improve cognitive functioning and memory skills
- Hearing and visual aids



Tech to Improve Safety and Security

- Fall detection with 24/7 emergency response
- Motion sensors
- Electronic trackers to find lost items (keys, TV remote)
- Security cameras
- Disability aids (talking clocks, medication reminders, smart plugs)
- Identity theft detection
- Voice-activation

Determining which products you need or want will require some research. There are many sources for this information, but a good starting point is an internet search for “best tech for seniors.” If you have a specific type of technology in mind, you can search for more specific ratings and reviews. Although there are special publications focused on technology, personal recommendations that are based on experience or professional expertise can be very helpful. Senior centers and other community organizations often offer educational programs focused on technology, and in some cases, provide connections to individuals or businesses that provide installation services. Consumer-oriented publications such as the AARP and Consumer Reports regularly provide recommendations and reviews.

Since technology is always changing, it is very important to stay current. Even if you found a good source of information about technology for seniors, you would want to revisit this topic every year or two to see what new products are available.



Match Technology to Your Needs and Capabilities

The usefulness of specific technology depends on your situation and your capabilities, such as sight, hearing, cognitive functioning, and physical dexterity. For this reason, you should take the time to research options that will work within your limitations. Once you have identified potentially available technologies, your adoption decision should be based on an assessment of affordability, and how well it matches with your needs and capabilities, including the ability to maintain and update as needed.

At a minimum, a computer (or tablet) and a smartphone are essential for information-seeking, financial management, and communication. Within your home, this will usually require setting up a router for wifi and arranging for internet service. As a solo-ager, you may not have family to keep in touch with, but you still need to communicate with friends, helpers, and healthcare providers. Many will find that using a smartphone for mobile banking, ordering food, and arranging for transportation (e.g. UBER) can make it easier to age in place.

Given the many useful smartphone features for older adults, including apps that connect with other devices, it is important to find a phone that works within your individual limitations.

Aging-related physical issues can make phones and computers difficult to navigate. Although smartphone screens have increased in size, individuals with visual impairment often find that normal fonts and screens are too small. Both smartphones and computer screens have accessibility features that can be used to adjust the display and text size. Some phones are designed specifically with seniors in mind: less cluttered home screens, easier to navigate, with larger fonts and buttons.

For those with hearing loss, smartphones can connect directly to hearing aids, thus reducing the likelihood of missed calls, but these features are often difficult to use and may require maintenance. There are major differences in products and cost, but an audiologist can make an assessment and recommend the equipment that will best fit your needs, resources, and capabilities.

Many older adults are no longer able to make precise movements with their finger, stylus, or mouse due to reduced function in their hands or arms. Settings are available on most smartphones that allow alternative inputs such as voice control or gestures. Facial identification eliminates the need for password entry.

If you experience significant cognitive decline in the future, you may eventually be unable to use a phone or tablet, which may place limitations on your ability to live on your own. Without this technology, it may be difficult to communicate with others, manage your household, take care of your finances, and make healthcare appointments.

Obtain Help with Setting Up and Learning New Devices

To increase your technological savvy, it's helpful to work on gaining confidence so that you will be able to continue to use your devices, and add new ones, as you age. Don't be afraid to ask for help. There are certainly some seniors who feel that it's easier just to avoid new tech rather than to try to learn something new, but solo-agers can find it beneficial to stay current. Appropriate technology usage has become an essential ingredient to aging well.

About 17% of those aged 65-74 and 29% of those over age 75 say they lack confidence in using electronic devices to access the Internet. (Pew, 2024).





Many people need help getting started with new technology. In contrast to younger people, seniors report needing more help setting up and learning to use new devices. Lack of technology confidence is greatest for those who were not exposed to computers, smartphones, and the Internet at young ages. You can ask for help from friends or sign up for one of the many technology classes designed for seniors.

When you buy a new smartphone, the sales person will usually be willing to spend some time with you setting up the phone and explaining commonly used features. Although this is a good start, you will likely need more training than that. There are many inexpensive or free classes available through senior centers and local aging offices, and various nonprofits have developed programs to match up seniors with volunteers. Examples include [Cyberseniors.org](https://www.cyberseniors.org), Candoo Tech (support@candootech.org), and Older Adults Technology Services ([oats.org](https://www.oats.org)), a pilot program sponsored by the AARP in some areas of the country. For those who prefer print media instructions, there are many self-help books online or in your local bookstore.

Update and Maintain Your Technology

Updating and maintaining equipment includes making software updates, charging batteries, replacing outdated devices, and keeping equipment clean. Software is regularly updated to add features, fix bugs, or address security issues. With older versions of software, you are more susceptible to fraud, so you need to be sure to update the software when required. For smart phones, this will often occur when you are charging your phone overnight, but computer updates may require an action on your part.

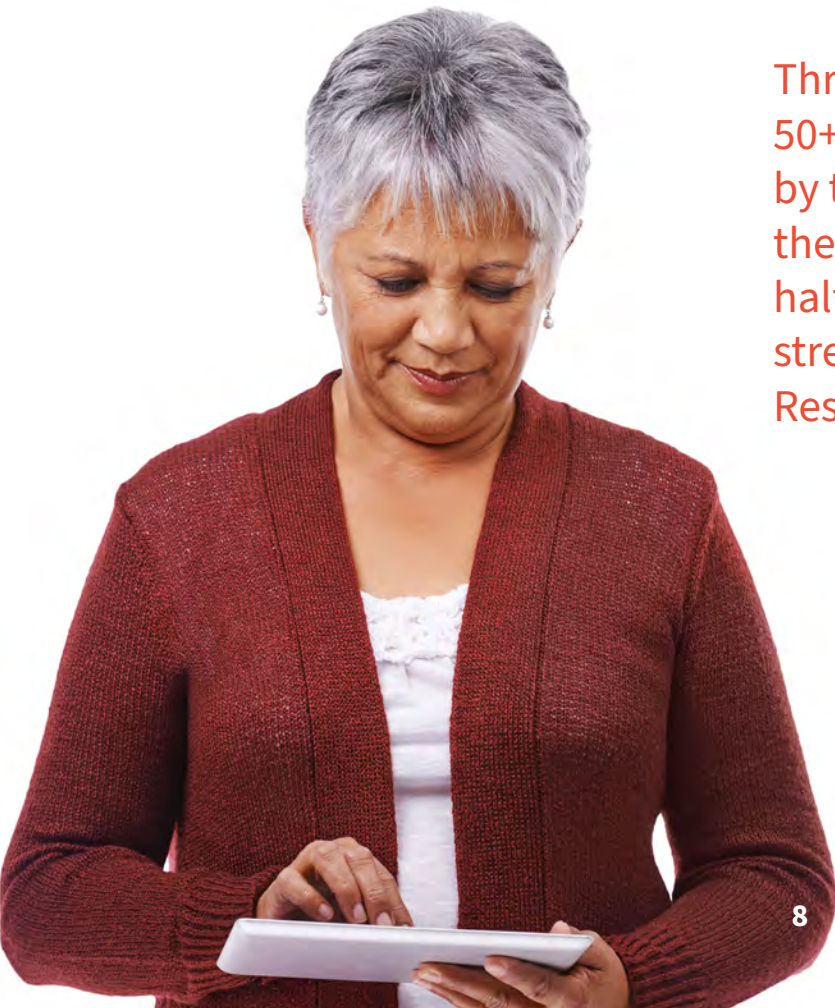
Although it isn't usually necessary to have the newest models, you also shouldn't let your devices get too out of date. You should plan to get a replacement before the old one fails. Your choice to update will depend on whether the existing product still meets your needs, whether there are any new features you need, and how much an updated version will cost you. If you are not tech-savvy, find someone who can help you evaluate whether you need to invest in an upgrade.

If you primarily use your computer for email and basic word processing, you don't need the higher processor speeds or video resolution offered by newer models. Unless you are an aspiring photographer, you probably don't need a smart phone with the latest top-of-the-line camera. However, certain apps won't work on older models, and software updates may eventually be unsupported by the manufacturer. For health-related technology, such as hearing aids, you may want to update sooner rather than later to ensure that you get the best results. For televisions, many seniors find that smart TVs available today make it much easier to navigate the increasing array of entertainment options and offer beneficial features such as voice-activated search functions, internet connectivity, and features for the hearing and sight impaired.

Some devices require routine maintenance as well, so you should have a plan for doing this as needed. Maintenance examples for some devices include charging/replacing batteries, cleaning equipment, and changing filters. For a computer, tablet, or cell phone, maintenance can include reorganizing files and deleting those no longer needed.

One of the biggest challenges to new tech is that devices often come with remote controls and chargers. Keeping track of them and understanding their usage is difficult for many people, but when you live alone, there isn't someone else to go to for help. You should clearly label remotes, cords, and chargers. For example, you can write the device name on blue tape and affix each to the appropriate cord/remote. It is also a good idea to consistently store them in a logical location. You may also find it helpful to write out simple instructions for accessing commonly used services such as Netflix or Hulu. For people who tend to misplace their remotes, there are attachable trackers that send a Bluetooth message to your phone.

Three out of four people age 50+ say they feel overwhelmed by the number of passwords they have to keep track of, and half are concerned about their strength and security. Pew Research (2023)



Manage Usernames and Passwords

Many Americans are stressed about the number of passwords they must keep up with. Each additional device or app usually requires a username and password.

Your technology plan should include an easy system for keeping track of passwords. The worst thing you can do is to use the same password for many different accounts and websites since this increases your risk of fraud. It is good practice to use different usernames and passwords for the applications you use and sites you visit. An option you may find helpful is to use a password manager app that can be securely accessed across all of your devices. You will only need to remember a single access password, and it can provide additional security for your account information. To investigate your password manager options, check out the descriptions and ratings in a recent *Consumer Reports* or *Buyers Guide* review.

The many advantages of technology should be weighed against increased risks of hacking or financial mistakes that can result from online activity. As discussed in the manage your finances topic in this series, various types of phone and internet scams are aimed at seniors. It is therefore advised that caregivers monitor online activity of those who are experiencing cognitive decline.

Resources for Technology Aids

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