

Mobile Hotspot Q & A

Adapted from "Mobile Wi-Fi hotspots: Your questions, answered" -- *here's the thing* by Ben Patterson (<https://heresthethingblog.com/2012/01/26/mobile-wi-fi-hotspots-questions/>) Updated March 2018

What exactly is a mobile hotspot, anyway?

Think of it as a tiny, battery-powered Wi-Fi base station that fits in your pocket. Generally, mobile hotspots come in two forms: either as a dedicated rechargeable gadget (often no larger than a small stack of credit cards) or built into a smartphone.

How does a mobile hotspot work?

Put simply, a portable hotspot taps into 3G and/or 4G cellular networks, just like a smartphone does, and then wirelessly shares its data connection with other nearby (within 30 feet or so) Wi-Fi-enabled gadgets—typically, between three and 8 or more at a time, depending on the device and the carrier.

So what would I need a mobile hotspot for?

Well, here's a question for you: Do you ever use your laptop on the road? If so, you can use a mobile hotspot to connect your laptop to the Internet, without having to hunt around for a public Wi-Fi hotspot. And since multiple Wi-Fi gadgets can connect to a mobile hotspot simultaneously, you could be surfing on your laptop while a friend streams music on her Wi-Fi-only iPad.

Does that mean anyone can connect to my mobile hotspot, even strangers?

Just like your Wi-Fi hotspot at home, any good mobile hotspot will come with a full suite of security tools, including WEP and WPA encryption—so as long as you've enabled your wireless security and set a password, your hotspot should be reasonably safe from hackers and freeloaders.

How much battery life can I expect out of a mobile hotspot?

That depends on the device, of course—but in my experience, you'll typically get about four hours of juice from a stand-alone mobile hotspot. Your mileage will also vary depending on the strength of the wireless signal (the weaker the signal, the more power it takes to lock onto it), as well as whether you're using just a little data (for, say, surfing the web) or a lot (streaming YouTube videos, for example).