



Making mobile telephone calls in Germany

What refugees and those helping them should know

Making mobile telephone calls in Germany is easy. There are tens of thousands of outlets where you can buy starter sets with mobile phone SIM cards. These SIM cards are available at places such as supermarkets, drugstores and petrol stations. Many small shops and kiosks also stock SIM cards. In addition, you can order cards online through providers' websites. Also see our table of information on providers at:

www.test.de/handytarife-fluechtlinge

Contracts. Refugees and asylum seekers can, in theory, also take out fixed-term contracts, but providers have to first check their customers' creditworthiness. Often having a German bank account is a prerequisite for taking out a fixed-term contract, and refugees seldom have one. As a result, most refugees rely on what are known as „prepaid cards“, for which they also need to conclude a contract. Important: only sign contracts if you completely understand them. You should show the contract to someone who speaks German well before signing it. Do not sign in the shop or with mobile network agents visiting refugee centres.

Registration. You need to specify your address when activating your SIM card. If you are not yet registered in Germany, you can provide the address of the reception centre for the first three months after your arrival.

Re-registration. Registration with the address of the reception centre is only permitted on a temporary basis. Once you have moved into new accommodation you must inform the mobile network provider of your new address. If you do not, the provider will send you an SMS after three months, asking for a new address. You will then have 14 days to provide your new address. The deadline will be extended for refugees that are still living at the reception centre. If you do not reply to the mobile network provider within 14 days, there is a risk that the prepaid card will be disconnected.

Prepaid. You must top prepaid cards up with credit, which you can then use to make phone calls, send SMS or surf the web. If you would like to use a prepaid card, you first need to obtain a starter set. This usually costs around 10 euros. The purchase price of the starter set is almost always allocated as credit for you to use. However, there are also free starter sets.

Topping up. You can also get credit vouchers from shops that sell prepaid cards. These are often hanging on stands near the till, and have providers' logos on them. Once you have paid, you will get a receipt or small card with a long code number, which you type into the phone. You can also top up your credit over the telephone, using an app, or at a terminal, among other options. Generally you can only use these methods if you have a German bank account.

Locking. All over the world, mobile phones are sold with what are known as „SIM locks“. These phones can only be used with the SIM card with which they were purchased. It is therefore possible that a phone that you bought in your home country will not work in Germany.

Connection fee. With almost all special foreign tariffs, a connection fee is charged for each call – usually 15 cents. If you make a lot of short calls, your credit will soon be used up.

Add-ons. Mobile network operators also offer „add-ons“ for prepaid tariffs. For example, for a monthly package price of just under ten euros customers could get 300 or 500 free minutes for calls abroad. These add-ons are often worthwhile for those that phone home on a regular basis. There are also special add-ons for data usage.

Mobile data. If you have a smartphone, you will also be able to use the internet with a prepaid card. However, be aware: on some tariffs you will be charged up to 49 cents per unit of data (MBit/s), meaning that your credit will be used up rapidly.

WLAN. You can use the internet on your smartphone free of charge via WLAN networks. Public WLAN is only seldom available outdoors in Germany. However, some cafés and shops offer their customers free WLAN, and you can sometimes also surf the web for free in public buildings such as libraries and universities. It is at the discretion of the operators of accommodation for refugees to decide whether they will provide WLAN networks.

Chat services. Chat services such as Whatsapp, Viber and Skype allow you to telephone worldwide for free via WLAN once you have signed up. Signing up to Viber and Skype is free; with Whatsapp you pay an annual subscription fee of 89 cents after the first year, which is free. However, data privacy experts have discovered security loopholes in chat services in the past, whereby some photos, videos and location information were transmitted unencrypted. In such an event it is easy for strangers to access your data.

Switching. Providers' tariffs can change. If another provider is offering cheaper tariffs for calls to your home country, it is often worth switching. To do this you must terminate the old contract and take out a new one. If you want to keep your old telephone number, you can register this within four weeks of terminating the old contract. Normally you will have to pay a fee of 25 euros, however this fee, or part of it, will often be covered by your new provider.

Assistance. If you have problems with your provider, you should go to one of the German consumer advice centres (Verbraucherzentralen). The staff there will be able to advise you and provide you with legal assistance if required. You will find more information at: www.verbraucherzentrale.de