

The Robocall Scourge

Robocalls (generally taken to mean prerecorded calls that try to sell something or convince the recipient that they need to supply information to avoid some dire event) are on the rise and have become a regular annoyance for millions of Americans. Sometimes the calls are from a real person using a call bank and sometimes they are prerecorded calls that transfer the recipient to a real person. Robocalls occupy the gray area between freedom of speech and the right to privacy and who gets to adjudicate those issues. The telecom industry and policymakers so far haven't made much of a dent in the problem.

The robocall problem is growing.

- There were roughly 4.1 billion robocalls in May, 2018, [according to YouMail](#), which provides call-blocking software.
- There were only 2.6 billion nationwide a year prior.

Consumers are frustrated.

- The Federal Communications Commission receives around 200,000 complaints a year about unwanted calls, a spokesperson said.
- The Federal Trade Commission [reports](#) that in the 2017 fiscal year, there were about 4.5 million complaints about robocalls violating a telemarketing rule.

The financial consequences.

- A study by Truecaller, which makes caller ID software, [estimates](#) that in 2017 the total cost of phone scams was roughly \$9.5 billion.

The bigger picture

Robocalls are hard to combat because of the complexity of the telephone networks—which involve many different phone companies—[reports the New York Times](#). Scammers have also taken to "spoofing" telephone numbers, which is why consumers [see automated calls](#) coming from numbers with their area code.

- The national Do Not Call Registry [failed](#) to head off the recent wave of calls.
- Telecom carriers are planning to roll out a system for verifying legitimate calls soon, [the Wall Street Journal reports](#). The FCC is moving towards creating a standard for authenticating calls.
- The FCC has also created rules that allow phone carriers to block malicious robocalls.

In the Meantime What Can You Do?

Report them to the Feds: Share the callers' numbers with the [Federal Communication Commission](#) — (888) 225-5322, Ext. 4 — and/or the [Federal Trade Commission](#). Although robocalls often get through

even if you've listed your number on the [Do Not Call Registry](#), the FTC uses complaints to assess the scope of the robocall problem, identify trends and aid in investigations.

Some Options for Right Now

Option A: Block Individual Numbers One By One

On iOS, just go to the Phone app, then your Recents, and tap the blue information icon to the right of the number you want to block.

For Android, the process isn't much different: go to the Recents section of the Phone app, long press on the bothersome number, and choose block. On some Android phones, you'll also be given the option of reporting the number as spam.

Again, this will take a lot of persistent work on your part to keep the spammers away — and it's good for absolutely nothing against blocked or private callers.

Option B: Trust (Or Pay) Your Carrier To Protect You

Most of the major mobile providers have taken steps to insert a barrier between you and these annoying callers. Unfortunately, two of them make you pay an extra monthly fee for their effort.

Option C: Protect Yourself With Third-Party Apps

There are a number of services such as Nomorobo, RoboKiller, Hiya, and others designed to prevent robocalls from ever ringing your phone. Most of them require a monthly (or annual) subscription. At their core, these services rely on a constantly updating list of robocallers, spammers, and fraudsters and use that database to stop nuisance calls.

Both iOS and Android have recently given these services more leeway in taking control over your phone app and stopping the calls from ever reaching you. On iPhone, you'll have to enable them in the Settings app and give them caller ID permissions before they can start working. Apple shows you how to do that [step-by-step right here](#).

All are largely well-reviewed by customers, and all offer free trials to get started. One may ultimately be what you need to really fight back against the robocalls. It's just a matter of finding your favorite.

[Nomorobo](#) [RoboKiller](#) [Hiya](#) [TrueCaller](#) [YouMail](#)

Option D: Buy A Phone From Samsung Or Google That Automatically Identifies Spam Callers

Samsung's Galaxy S and Note smartphones automatically flag suspected spam calls right in the phone app as they come in. The company calls this feature Smart Call.

Same goes for the Google Pixel and Pixel 2, which turn the entire screen red as an easy "do not answer!" visual reference whenever a known spammer dials you up. These systems aren't perfect; sometimes they still get fooled by numbers that look like local calls.

Nuclear Option: Use Do Not Disturb To Only Allow Calls From Your Contacts

On both Android and iOS, you can set the operating system's Do Not Disturb mode to allow phone calls from only those people and businesses in your contacts list. This is a pretty drastic solution to the problem of robocalls, and you're almost certainly going to miss calls that you would've liked to have answered. But those calls will go through to voicemail, and then you can add that number to your contacts for the future. This option is for when you're *completely* fed up, though, and only if you're very good and meticulous about keeping contacts up to date.

Why Do More And More Spam Calls Look Like They're Coming From A Local Number?

It's called neighborhood spoofing, and [RoboKiller has a good explainer on it here](#). In short, scammers think that a number matching your area code (and maybe even the first digits of your own number) will trick your brain and make you more likely to answer. And it makes their deception feel even more nefarious. What if it's a family emergency? Maybe it's your doctor's office or the pharmacy?

Thankfully the robocall blocker apps have gotten better at spotting neighborhood spoofing. RoboKiller claims it's been good at doing so since the beginning, and Nomorobo has also made detecting neighborhood spoofing a major focus.

Don't Forget To Add Yourself To The Do Not Call Registry

In theory, telemarketers are supposed to be honoring the [National Do Not Call Registry](#). You can add yourself to the list by visiting www.donotcall.gov. Once you've signed up, your presence on the Do Not Call Registry never lapses or expires, contrary to some recent rumors.

The Do Not Call Registry only covers *sales* calls. Charities, political groups, debt collectors, and surveys are still allowed to call you even if you've signed up. Same goes for companies that you might've recently done business with. Unfortunately, scammers/robocallers don't pay the DNC Registry any mind and just ignore the thing entirely.

Never Let The Robots Know You're A Real Human

Tempting as might be to swear at a robocaller or scammer, your best course of action is to leave them unsure as to whether they connected with an actual person. Don't say anything. Don't push buttons—even if the robotic voice says doing so will prevent further calls. Either just let it go through to voicemail or hang up immediately if you mistakenly picked up.

What have you done that has worked to stop or reduce robocalls? See the Club's message board for a description of what one member has done—and it involves a land line as well as a mobile number. Few discussions of robocalls on the Internet address what to do to foil robocalls to a land line. Many of the options available to mobile numbers don't work for land lines.