

SENIOR **RESOURCES** GUIDE

Navigating Life With a Digital Assist



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Senior Resources Guide

Baby Boomers and Digital Media: Older Adults Are Expanding Their Digital Horizons



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Baby boomers feel more comfortable shopping and doing tasks in person, but they are using digital media more and more every day. They may not check their smartphones as frequently as their younger counterparts, but many are checking their phones when they first get up and are quickly overcoming screen time anxieties.

Older adults also are turning to the digital world to monitor their health and make life more convenient, from ordering groceries online to scheduling rides. They are emailing family and friends and playing free video games. And yes, they are scrolling social media,

although they are much more likely to check out Facebook than Instagram.

According to a survey of more than 2,000 people aged 59 to 77 by AddictionResource.net, 35% of respondents are using their smartphones one to three hours a day and another 30% are using them three to five hours a day. Half of the respondents said they check their phones within an hour of waking up.

While they may not spend hours on TikTok or Instagram, it is no longer true that older adults shy away from new technology and the digital world in general. This Senior Resources Guide, which is written by the Jewish Council

for the Aging of Greater Washington, is designed to show that it is no longer true that some people are just too old to use the internet or even send email. It also will provide examples of technology geared specifically for those who did not grow up with a smartphone or tablet in their hands.

According to the Addiction Resource survey, some older adults are even experiencing discomfort when separated from their devices, and about 30% have tried to lessen their screen time without success.

Baby boomers still stick to traditional media when watching movies and television or reading newspapers and

books. However, they are frequent users of YouTube and Facebook, according to research conducted at Colorado State University. Older adults were quite active on those sites, more so on Facebook.

And like everyone else, they are likely to share content they enjoy to their own social networks.

GWI, a global consumer research platform, noted that baby boomers used to confine their browsing to a laptop or desktop computer. Now, they are reaching for the phones, but while younger people tend to be more compulsive about the latest technologies, older adults continue to

be skeptical of the digital world and often wait before downloading the latest app.

The pandemic affected global digital use for just about everyone. For younger people stuck at home, schoolwork and games kept them hooked to their devices for many hours. Older adults basically were forced to communicate with their doctors and book appointments online. This enabled them to become more internet savvy. In a world where restaurants offer ordering by snapping a photo of a QR code, it's hard to stay off the internet.

But it is more than that. According to GWI, the biggest growth in gaming since 2018 was among people between the ages of 55 and 64. Nearly one-fourth of baby boomers have downloaded free video games. Still, members of the older generation are most likely to be hesitant to sign up for new services and continue to fear someone will steal their personal information.

While young people tend to use

Nearly two-thirds of respondents to an AARP online survey of about 3,600 adults said technology enriches their lives by making daily life and aging easier. They are using technology at home and while out, even though they still have qualms about their privacy. Some have even taken to AI, artificial intelligence.

multiple apps regularly, older adults tend to use certain apps more often, especially banking and insurance ones. They check the weather. What they also are turning to are dating apps. Whether single, divorced or widowed, older adults are looking

for companionship and love, just like everyone else.

According to the Pew Research Center, while older adults were not early adopters, their attachment continues to grow. As of 2021, 96% of people between the ages of 18 and

29 own a smartphone, while 61% of those 65 years and older do. That's a 35-percentage point difference. However, back in 2012, there was a 53-percentage point difference.

Older adults are the least likely of any age group to use X/Twitter, Instagram and other social media sites, according to the Pew Research Center. Still, about 45% of older adults reported checking them out. That is a fourfold growth since 2010.

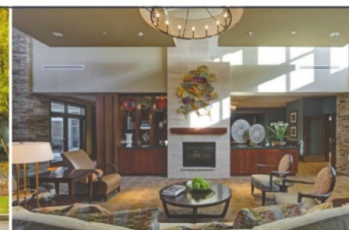
What is apparent in many of the categories that the Pew Research Center studied is that older adults are using the internet at an increasing rate, while the rate for younger people remains fairly constant. Still, young people opt for a diversity of uses as compared to their grandparents. After all, it is hard to beat young people who tend to be constantly checking their phones.

In 2024, AARP reported that nine out of 10 Americans who were at least 50 years old owned a smartphone. Three-quarters of them have smart



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televisions and 59% own a tablet. In the previous year, 69% of adults older than 50 years bought at least one tech product, although they tended to take a wait-and-see approach rather than buying the latest tech on the market.

For seniors hesitant to take the plunge into the digital world, there is plenty of help. Local libraries, senior centers, religious institutions and various nonprofits offer workshops and classes, often for free.

COVID, social isolation, loneliness and convenience may have pushed adults into the tech age a little quicker, but in this day and age, it is hard to get by without it. And, anyway, who wants to look old or out of it to their grandchildren and great-grandchildren? Worldwide, there are 5.35 billion internet users, according to *Forbes*. That is out of a world population estimated at 8.2 billion. Regardless of where they live, people are “working, streaming, scrolling and gaming,” according to *Forbes*. By 2029, the number of internet users is predicted to reach 7.9 billion. Not bad for a creation that only started in January of 1983. Users will surely increase greatly as more areas are reached by broadband, and residents of rural areas start clicking away.

Don't think that older adults are just sitting around in their rocking chairs filling their long days perusing the internet. Sure, like everyone else, they definitely can get caught up going down a rabbit hole by clicking away, but the internet also has made — and continues to make — life easier for people of all ages. Older adults still can remember when the remote control made life easier by allowing them to remain on the couch while changing television channels.

For adults who want to stay in their own homes as long as possible, there are so many smart home, shopping and safety devices that make that choice so much easier. Adults who no longer drive don't have to be confined indoors. Nor must they count on the kindness of family, friends and neighbors for transportation. They can just fill out a shopping list on a grocery store website and receive their fruits, vegetables, meats and paper goods at their front door the same day.

Need a ride to the doctor, movie theater or restaurant? Uber and Lyft drivers are waiting for your request. It takes but a few minutes on the internet to make a doctor or salon appointment or to ask for a prescription refill to be delivered, and you don't have to listen to bad music while on hold waiting to speak to a real person.

If you want to stay in your home but feel nervous, there are security devices to hopefully scare away thieves. You can turn lights on and off or change the setting on your thermostat after downloading an app. Many people of all ages turn to Siri or Alexa devices to help them with so many tasks and reminders. Need a phone number, want to see what tomorrow's weather will be, recall the name of that restaurant you loved last year or be reminded when to take your medication? Just ask away. Those devices also can relay the latest news and play your favorite songs just by asking.

Of course, the more you go online or use various apps, the higher your chances are of getting scammed. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, people 60 years and older collectively lost \$4.8 billion to internet fraud. That includes phishing scams, tech support scams, extortion and personal data breaches.

According to the National Council on Aging, older adults are targeted more often as scammers believe they have money to spare. Those same scammers are likely to think of older adults as forgetful and overly trusting. And make no mistake about it, they are good and very convincing at what they do.

The National Council on Aging offers tips on how not to become a victim. First, don't click on emails from unfamiliar senders. They are designed to get personal information that then can be used to steal savings. Don't go to a website because an emailer said to, and don't click on links unless they are ones you chose yourself and are from reputable sites. And remember, there is rarely, if ever, a need to act immediately. Don't succumb to false pressure.

Do not click on attachments unless you are sure you know who sent



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them to you. Be particularly wary of attachments that end in .exe or .zip. Just because you see your friend's name on an email, that doesn't mean that person sent it to you. Hover the cursor over the email address to see if it is familiar.

Don't answer scam calls, robocalls or numbers you don't recognize. Be skeptical, and be aware that police, the IRS and other government agencies do not request social security numbers and other personal information through random email.

If you are dealing with a site you chose — like your bank — do it on your personal computer, not a public one. Your home computer has security safeguards that public computers do not offer.

It is fine to use smartphones and computers for personal reasons if you stay alert. Technology is important and helpful when it comes to your health. It doesn't seem that long ago when people had regular weekly or monthly

medical appointments to check blood pressure, blood sugar, cholesterol and other vital signs. Now, machines that can be purchased at the nearest drugstore enable everyone to keep tabs on their own health and let their doctors know the results. Not only is that more convenient, but it also keeps you out of waiting rooms where sick people spread germs. Another benefit is that a change in your health can be caught quickly, limiting the risks of major problems.

Telemedicine, virtual conversations online with a medical professional, enable patients to speak directly to their doctor without leaving home. If it turns out you need to be seen, chances are the doctor will help you make an in-person appointment.

Medically, there are emergency alert devices and other tech apps to monitor health and others to notify loved ones if there is a problem, for instance, if they haven't left their bed in a while.

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According to AARP, the tech industry slowly is beginning to look out for older adults. There are now lightweight tablets that can do everything laptops can, and if you prop up your tablet on a stand, it should feel like you are using a laptop.

For those still attached to their landline phone, don't despair. You can block phone scammers like you can on your smartphone, but you will have to purchase special technology. There are call blockers that pre-block thousands of robocalls and telemarketing numbers. The devices also enable you to hit a button and add an incoming call to your blocked list. Just keep in mind that scammers always seem to be a step or two ahead of security programs.

For those with diminishing hearing, closed captions are available on all devices. There also is a wireless neckband speaker that connects to the optical output of a television set and syncs the audio or the video. These devices usually can also hook up to your phone.

Nearly two-thirds of respondents to an AARP online survey of about 3,600 adults said technology enriches their lives by making daily life and aging easier. They are using technology at home and while out, even though they still have qualms about their privacy. Some have even taken to AI, artificial intelligence. Slightly less than half of those surveyed have house alarms and security cameras.

Like their younger counterparts, older adults use health and fitness apps — often to track their steps and keep track of their medicines. They read books and play games online and find hobbies to pursue, according to the survey. Another great use is listening to podcasts, of which the choices are varied and numerous.

Mobility, a digital advertising and data intelligence company, surveyed baby boomers to see if they continued upping their digital skills following the pandemic. Ordering and getting groceries delivered continues to

increase as does curbside pickups at stores and restaurants. Prior to COVID, only 10% of older adults turned to telemedicine. Now, almost half do. Their use of digital banking, websites and apps also continued to rise.

Overall, "Technology saves the day!", Mobility said of the people who were surveyed about their life during the pandemic. "Eighty-eight percent of baby boomers agreed that technology helped them during COVID-19 — this is only 3% lower than agreement among younger generations."

Besides making life easier, using digital technology helps keep older adults mentally and physically active. According to AARP's Senior Planet, studies show that learning and engaging with digital devices boosts brain health, sparks curiosity, provides a sense of purpose and may even help protect against decline and dementia. So go ahead, learn a new language, explore a hobby and read as much as you can. And remember, there's always an app for that.

While too much time on the internet appears to shrink young people's attention spans, older adults are more likely to turn to websites "for meaningful, sustained knowledge," according to Senior Planet.

While JCA doesn't endorse any apps, here are a few that Senior Planet rated as popular and fun for lifelong learning. BrainHQ is especially designed for older adults seeking to sharpen memory. Duolingo offers short and repeatable lessons where users advance at their own pace to learn more than 40 languages.

Sky Guide enables a user to stargaze. Just point the phone up to the sky and learn about what you are seeing in real time. Blinkist summarizes thousands of books and podcasts into 15-minute audio or text explainers. Senior Planet called it "a trusted way to absorb key insights quickly."

The Mimo app teaches coding and is designed for beginners. Yousician can turn you into a maestro. Learn to play the guitar, piano, ukulele, or bass or singing. This app allows you to listen to yourself and receive feedback. Why not sit down at that piano that has barely been touched in years and start playing?



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Of course, SeniorPlanet recommends its own online classes that range from technology basics to fitness, finance and creativity. And it's free. Many other apps, including the ones mentioned above, charge a monthly fee or a set fee to download. Make sure to understand the costs before signing up.

Some technological breakthroughs are not new but are still worth mentioning. Enjoy reading but not able to head out to the bookstore or library? Amazon, Barnes & Noble and so many other sites enable you to find a book to your liking and also have it delivered to your home or downloaded to a computer. And speaking of libraries, a library card can open a whole new world for free. Besides books, library users can read newspapers and magazines, download books, movies and music, and even listen to virtual talks by authors.

Virtual reality is a growing field that clearly has older adults in mind. VR

refers to computer-generated imagery and hardware specifically created to bring sights and sounds to people in a way that is totally immersive. It is often interactive, enabling users to feel like they are swimming with brightly colored fish without ever learning to scuba dive or snorkel or even get in the water.

More and more senior living facilities and social day programs are purchasing VR sets so users can "visit" a foreign city, tour a museum or go hiking in the woods. Specially produced programs can return users to their old neighborhoods or vacations they previously enjoyed. Slideshows are fine, but they are only two dimensional. With VR, viewers are thrust into the action, virtually stepping closer to what they choose to examine.

Some viewers choose to watch animals every chance they get. Others seek out memories. Still others strive to check items off their bucket list and virtually go skydiving, ride in a hot air


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balloon or scream their way through a roller coaster ride. Virtual reality works by making what viewers see and hear track with what they are doing. In a trip to Paris, the virtual tourist turns left to see the Eiffel Tower and right to see a group of performing musicians. If the viewer steps closer to a street performer, the music will get louder, while the sound from where they last were will diminish.

Don't fret if your learning curve is larger than you expected concerning all things digital. Sure, your grandchild set up an interesting app for you in two minutes, but remember, the younger generation can text a message in seconds and have played games on their computer since they started walking and talking.

On the Technology for Seniors website, there are reasonable explanations why members of the older generation struggle with technology and can get frustrated or feel overwhelmed. Part of the reason is that some devices are simply not designed for older adults. They may often have complex menus or ask users to change their passwords frequently.

Small screens, smaller icons and hard to read texts can cause frustration although there are easy ways to enlarge type. Still, you have to figure out how to do that. And if you are experiencing vision decline, that could make things even more difficult. Information overload is a real issue, as seniors may struggle to process the sheer amount of data presented on a screen. Hearing decline also can cause issues if your app deals with audio or voice commands.

Technology for Seniors pointed out that some people just don't see the need to keep up with every change. They mastered their smartphone and can write emails and wonder why they must constantly install upgrades and download new features. Some older adults just may not feel the need to hop on the digital technology train. They are comfortable with their landline, television and radio, and see no need to change. For them, going to the store is a social event where they see what else is on the shelf and get to speak with others. They may be on a fixed

income and not able to purchase many medical smart devices, download apps or subscribe to streaming services, especially when living on a fixed income.

Despite these challenges, the digital divide is narrowing. A study by the National Institutes of Health revealed that older adults are willing and eager to embrace new technology — especially when they have the right support and guidance. However, as mentioned earlier in this Senior Resources Guide, according to the study, they may need support as the instructions utilize unfamiliar terms to someone who didn't grow up in the digital age.

With more user-friendly devices and proper education, older adults can enjoy the many benefits of modern technology. Technology For Seniors recommends playing games like Tetris or enjoying brain games and puzzles. Once users are comfortable with these games, they can find other, similar ones easily.

According to the National Institutes of Health, brain games and puzzles help older adults maintain reasoning skills and stay mentally sharp and active. Doing crossword puzzles on paper is fine but doing them on your laptop is even better when you can delete rather than erase a mistake. And there is no reason not to solve puzzles both on paper and computers.

Staying connected is vital at any age but especially for those who are socially isolated. Video calls with grandchildren are almost like being there. Checking Facebook to see your family's latest adventures is more enjoyable than hearing them tell you where they spent their vacation. They can even send you all their photos, although that may be a bit too much. ■

This guide was written by Suzanne Pollak, senior writer/editor at The Jewish Council for the Aging of Greater Washington. Learn more about JCA at accessJCA.org or call us at 301-255-4200 or 703-425-0999. Follow us on Facebook at facebook.com/AccessJCA or X at x.com/AccessJCA.