

VPN Basics Cheat Sheet

Cheat Sheet · What VPNs Actually Do, When To Use One, How To Pick.

VPNs are useful but oversold. This sheet separates the marketing from reality — what a VPN protects against, what it doesn't, and when one is actually worth using.

What A VPN Does

- **Encrypts your traffic** between your device and the VPN server. Anyone on your local network (coffee shop, hotel) can't see what you're doing.
- **Hides your IP from the sites you visit.** They see the VPN server's IP, not yours.
- **Hides your DNS lookups from your ISP.** Your ISP can't easily see which sites you're visiting.
- **Lets you appear to be in another country** for streaming or geo-flexible browsing.

What A VPN Does NOT Do

- **Stop tracking by Google, Facebook, and ad networks.** They track via cookies and accounts, not IP.
- **Make HTTPS sites more secure.** The site you visit already encrypts your traffic via HTTPS regardless.
- **Prevent malware.** A VPN encrypts. It doesn't scan downloads or block phishing sites.
- **Make you anonymous.** If you log into your real Gmail through a VPN, you're still you.
- **Hide your activity from the VPN provider itself.** The VPN sees everything your ISP would have. Pick a no-logs provider.

When You Actually Need A VPN

- 1 **Public Wi-Fi** — coffee shops, airports, hotels. The biggest legitimate use case.
- 2 **Travelling** — accessing your home country's banking/streaming from abroad.
- 3 **You don't trust your ISP** — to hide browsing patterns from them, or in countries with heavy ISP surveillance.
- 4 **Geo-restricted content** — accessing services or news sites blocked in your region.
- 5 **Working from a country** — meeting employer requirements for VPN-based access.

How To Pick A VPN

Criterion	What To Look For
No-logs policy	Provider explicitly states they don't log activity, IPs, or DNS queries. Bonus: independent audit.
Jurisdiction	Privacy-friendly country (Switzerland, Panama, BVI). Avoid 14-Eyes intelligence-sharing countries if it matters to you.
Audit history	Has the provider been independently audited in the last 2 years?

Criterion	What To Look For
Payment options	Accepts crypto or anonymous payment methods if you want maximum privacy.
Speed & locations	Servers in the countries you need. Multi-gigabit speeds on premium tiers.
Multi-device	Number of simultaneous connections — most allow 5-10.
Kill switch	Cuts internet if VPN drops, so you don't accidentally leak. Essential.

Trustworthy Providers (At Time Of Writing)

- **Mullvad** — privacy-purist favourite, flat €5/month, accepts cash by mail.
- **Proton VPN** — Swiss, has free tier, strong privacy ethos.
- **IVPN** — small, audited, privacy-focused.
- **NordVPN** — large network, frequent audits, mainstream choice.
- **Avoid:** 'Free' VPNs you've never heard of. They sell your data to fund themselves.

PRO TIP

Set Your Phone To Auto-Lock In 30 Seconds.

Single biggest defense against opportunistic device theft. iPhone: Settings → Display & Brightness → Auto-Lock. Android: Settings → Display → Screen Timeout.

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