

Here are a handful of commonly asked questions about Ham radio.

Q. How expensive is it to get into Ham radio?

A. Ham radio is a lot like photography, where there is a wide range of camera prices depending on your needs or wants. Ham radio is much the same and you can spend \$50-\$100 for a small handheld entry level portable radio or many thousands of dollars for an elaborate one.

Q. What equipment do I need once I get my license?

A. Most people will buy an inexpensive 5 watt handheld starter unit that covers the 2 meter and 70 centimeter bands. These handhelds look much like small family radio walkie-talkies but operate in ham radio bands. Some newbies will use their PCs or cell phones to run applications like Echolink to get them started in Ham radio. This is a free app that allows you to use your computer microphone and speaker or your cell phone in a similar fashion to a Ham radio transceiver. This can help you learn how to identify yourself with your call sign and communicate on nets (networking affinity groups) where there are many people present. These apps still require you to have your license and they can be a free stepping stone to figuring out what equipment you want to buy.

Q. Isn't the Ham radio test really difficult to pass?

A. The entry level test is the Technician exam. The FCC Technician Exam consists of 35 questions and you are required to get over 75% (26 out of 35) for a passing grade. This test is regularly passed by people of all ages, backgrounds and abilities. Passing the Technician Exam grants you access to many commonly used frequencies. These frequencies include bands also utilized for Emergency Preparedness and Response.

Q. How can I study for the test?

A. Taking an instructor-led class is the best way. Most classes will be spread out over several weeks on a day on the weekend. It would be common to have about 10-12 hours of classwork. Many people have self-studied and passed the test. If you have a computer, science, engineering or electronics background this may give you some help but it is not a requirement. There are many free and paid resources to help you learn the subject material that you might see on the test. As you get closer to taking the test, there are practice tests you can take online or with cell phone apps (some free and others paid). After you get to where you can pass the practice tests consistently, then you are ready for the real test.

Q. Where do I take the test?

A. The test is administered by teams of three Volunteer Examiners (VEs). This might be available where you take your class or at a testing facility. There are regular testing sessions available at March AFB and in locations south of Temescal Valley. If you are taking the test at a test center it will cost about \$15 for the test.

Q. I don't want to or don't think I can learn Morse Code.

A. The Morse Code requirement was eliminated in 2007. It is still a part of ham radio but no longer a licensing requirement.

Q. What is a radio repeater?

A. A repeater is a combined receiver and transmitter that is usually located on a high terrain location. Users will transmit to the repeater and then the signal amplified and is retransmitted. This means that a radio that could only reach a few miles can communicate with other radios that are many miles away. We have a large number of repeaters in our area. Two major ones are located on Santiago Peak and another near Running Springs on Keller Peak. These repeaters have battery backup capability and in the event of a power outage they could continue operation. These repeaters also are linked to other area repeaters where you might be talking to people very far away – much beyond the reach of your radio's basic range.

Q. Aren't cell phones a better option for emergency communications?

A. Cell phones are often one of the first infrastructure systems to fail in an emergency. The cell system can become quickly overloaded, can become degraded or stop working all together. In almost every major emergency, like major storms, fires and earthquakes, cell operation has been impacted. Also, Ham radio allows all the listeners monitoring a given frequency to hear the transmission – The equivalent of a giant conference call. This can be difficult to achieve in a cell phone environment but can be very helpful.

Q. My husband, my wife or my HOA won't let me have a large radio antenna.

A. Antennas for some of the commonly used bands are under 4 feet tall. They can be mounted on a vehicle or you can use a small handheld radio that has a short rubber coated antenna less than a foot long. Some hams will install a short antenna in their attic. You definitely don't need an antenna that will be an eyesore or raise any alarm with your neighbors.

Q. Isn't Ham radio usually just for seniors?

A. There are hams who are under 10 years old and some over 100 years old. Ham radio is popular with all age groups. Ham radio is often called the original social networking medium. This is because there are all kinds of affinity groups inside of Ham radio. If you are interested in international relations, technology, hiking, camping, photography, etc., there are groups that get together and discuss these topics and many others. Of course, there are regular Emergency Preparedness groups that also get together on the air and practice their skills so they and their equipment are ready for any emergency.

NOTE: If you have read these frequently asked questions, I have already given you the answers to about 5 commonly asked test questions!

Richard Lewis

KK6YHQ