

# Gadgets for Geezers?

By Bob Rankin

## Assistive Tech for Savvy Seniors

In 2011, 40 million Americans were age 65 or older; today, that figure is 76.4 million, according to the U. S. Census Bureau. The ranks of the "oldest old" – aged 85 or older – will swell to 19 million by 2050.

But age has nothing to do with curiosity -- most of today's senior citizens have had access to computers, the Internet and mobile gadgets for 20 years, and they've made technology a part of their daily lives. (My 86-year-old father has a desktop PC, an iPad, and an Android smartphone.)

### VISION AIDS

Visual acuity naturally declines with age. Diseases such as cataracts, glaucoma, and macular degeneration are common among seniors. Bigger computer monitors are one adaptation that can help. (Recently I've seen 23-inch monitors on sale at Best Buy for as low as \$129.)

But there are a variety of other gadgets and computer peripherals that can be used to make things bigger or easier to see.

The [AbleNet Large Print USB Computer Keyboard](#) (\$39.95 at Amazon) fills each key with its character(s), making the characters about twice as large as those on a [standard keyboard](#). Yet overall, the keyboard is the same size as a standard 104-key keyboard.

Similarly, the [EZ Eyes Large Print Keyboard](#) (\$9.75 at Amazon) adds a high-contrast black-on-yellow color scheme to larger characters.

The [Big Bright Keyboard](#) (\$24.24 at Amazon) has extra-large, 1-inch keys that glow in the dark, and big black characters.

Perhaps the most flexible option is the [Ivation Seven Color Adjustable Letter Illuminated Large Print Keyboard](#) (\$29.95). Its keys are backlit by gently glowing LED bulbs, and you can adjust them to any of seven colors.

On Windows, hold down the Ctrl button and spin the scroll wheel on your mouse to enlarge or reduce the font size on your screen. If you don't have a scroll wheel, try Ctrl with the Plus (+) or Minus (-) sign.

Windows Vista and later editions include an "Ease of Access Center" that offers both Magnifier and Narrator tools, which will magnify portions of the [screen](#), and/or read the text aloud. Click the Start button, type "Ease of Access" and press Enter to find it.



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On a Mac, click [the Apple](#) key, then System Preferences, then Universal Access to find similar features.

If you love your current keyboard and can't bear to part with it, you might try [Glowing Fluorescent Large Lettering Keyboard Stickers](#) (\$7.80 at Amazon) made of self-adhesive vinyl here in the U. S. A.

Reading newspapers, prescription drug patient information inserts, or just about anything printed on paper these days can be challenging even for 20/20 vision. The [MagniPros® Book Light LED Magnifier](#) (\$10.99 at Amazon) enlarges tiny text 300%, and its ultra-thin frame harbors three LED bulbs for dim lighting conditions (batteries included). It doubles as a bookmark.

The [Fulcrum 20072-401 Magnifier 12 LED Floor Lamp](#) (\$79.99 at Amazon) has a 5-inch diameter lens with 2x magnification for reading and a 6x inset for detailed work such as cross-stitch or jewelry making.

I was struck by the review from "Betts" who bought this lamp for her 86 year-old mother in 2009. Never before have I seen a consumer update her product review three times over the course of five years! Betts last update, in September, 2014: "This light is like the ever-ready bunny. It keeps ticking along. Mom, now 91, continues to use the light every day."



## MOTOR CONTROL

Some seniors suffer diminished fine motor control due to arthritis, Parkinson's disease, and other causes. Using a laptop's touchpad can be extremely frustrating or impossible. Even conventional mice may be too finicky for trembling or stiff fingers. Many seniors find trackballs more to their liking.

The [BIGtrack Trackball](#) by Infogrip, Inc. (\$83.52 at Amazon) looks like it belongs in a toddler's playpen. But its 3-inch trackball requires less fine motor control than much-smaller conventional trackballs. The blue buttons are located on the far side of the trackball to avoid unwanted clicks. A Drag Lock feature means you don't have to hold a button down while dragging an item on-screen; instead, click the Lock and roll the ball, then unlock to release the item.

## HEARING IMPAIRMENT

Hearing loss, particularly in the higher frequencies range, can also be frustrating. A number of products make listening to music and [video](#) easier for seniors.

The [Wireless TV Speaker System](#) from FirstStreet (\$179.95) puts TV sound right next to your chair. Speaker volume controls are independent of the TV system's [volume controls](#). This system also enhances the audio channel that carries dialogue/voices.



The [Conversation Enhancer](#), also from FirstStreet (\$179.95) filters background noise while amplifying the voices of men and women alike. Plug in the earbuds and converse clearly with a driver from the back seat, even if the radio is on; or enjoy a dinner conversation even if your table is near the kitchen. It can also be helpful for individual [TV watching](#) without disturbing others in the room.

Your thoughts on this topic (and these gadgets) are welcome. Post your comment or question below...