VPN stands for Virtual Private Network, and its definition hides in those words. It's virtual because it's created using software. It's private because your data is encrypted, and your device's IP address is hidden. It's a network because it's used to create a connection between computers and devices.

VPNs act like a tunnel for data between your device and the internet. When you use a VPN connection, every bit of data you transfer first goes to a VPN server — which could be local or located thousands of miles away. This helps users appear as if they're connected from another country.

The VPN server encrypts the data you send and forwards it to the website or internet service you're connected to. When the service responds and sends data back, it's sent to the VPN server, encrypted, and forwarded to your device.

Any service or website you connect to will see the VPN as the device that's connected. They can't detect your original IP address and can only access the IP address of the VPN. This also prevents your ISP from tracking your online activity because all traffic is encrypted.