

Review: Apple's new iPhone 7 models offer modest updates

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Credit: Apple

Apple's new iPhone 7 devices are no breakthroughs.

The mid-size iPhone 7 and the jumbo-sized iPhone 7 Plus look much the same as last year's versions. In fact, they look little different from the iPhone 6 and 6 Plus of two years ago.

The [new phones](#) work much the same way too. And while they have some cool new tweaks, they don't have any real must-have new features.

What the iPhone 7 models do offer are a collection of new features and updates that amount to a modest upgrade from last year's devices. They also offer a pair of drawbacks - one big and one small - that you'll want to consider before purchasing them.

The most significant update in either of the new iPhone 7 models is the new dual-lens camera system in the Plus version. In addition to the wide-angle lens that Apple has long used for its iPhone camera systems, that device now has, right to the side of it, a second zoom lens. If you tap on a virtual button in the iPhone's Camera app, you can switch over to that lens and zoom in twice as close as with the regular camera lens.

Now, you may wonder what's so great about that. The iPhone and other smartphones have offered zoom features for years. But they relied on digital zoom, which basically just crops parts off of a full-resolution photograph and in the process lowers its resolution. Optical zoom, which is what the new lens offers, gives you a zoomed in image at full resolution and detail.

The zoom lens on the iPhone 7 Plus is easy to use and works great. I tested it out shooting pictures of flowers in my front yard and my dog sitting on a bed. The pictures looked sharp. It's not going to offer you anything close to the zooming capability that you'd get from a true telephoto lens on a high-end camera, but it's a big improvement.

And it should get even better soon. Apple plans to offer a software

update in coming months that will give the zoom lens the ability to detect the distance of objects in your pictures and, knowing that, to blur out what's in the background. The resulting pictures should look like those you might take with one of those high-end cameras.

The only disappointing thing about the zoom lens is that Apple is only offering it on the Plus model, not the regular-sized iPhone 7. I tend to find the jumbo version too big for my hand and pockets - not to mention that it costs \$120 more - and I'm not sure the zoom lens, as cool as it is, is worth the trade-off.

But Apple didn't exactly neglect the regular iPhone 7 camera. Both new models have a new camera system that does a better job of taking pictures in low light. Apple has brought image stabilization - which helps to prevent blurry photos or jerky video - to the regular-sized iPhone 7; previously it was only available on the large-screened model. And it has upgraded the front camera of both phones to a 7-megapixel sensor from a 5-megapixel one, which should mean sharper selfies.

The other big change with the iPhone 7 models is that they are the first of Apple's smartphones to be water and dust-resistant. According to Apple, they are compliant with a standard called IP67. Apple says the new phones are water-resistant to 1 meter - about 3 feet - for up to 30 minutes. That won't allow you to take them snorkeling - at least not without a case - but should provide some needed reassurance that your phone won't be fried if you get thrown in the pool with it in your pocket or you accidentally drop it in the toilet.

The new phones offer some other long-needed upgrades. For example, Apple says it's bumped up the battery life on both phones - at least for some uses - by an hour or more. I didn't get to test that claim thoroughly, but my observation was that the new phones were lasting significantly longer than my iPhone 6s.

Apple also is offering more storage space at the same price as earlier models. The base iPhone 7 models now come with 32 gigabytes of storage, up from 16 gigabytes. And the top-of-the-line versions include 256 gigabytes, up from 128 gigabytes. With all the photos, music, apps and more that we're storing on our phones these days, more space is always welcome.

What isn't so welcome are a couple of other changes. The one that's generated the most controversy is the removal of the [headphone jack](#). I've already written about why this was a bad move for consumers. But having the iPhone 7 in hand confirmed that opinion.

While Apple is including an adapter with the new phones that will allow users to plug older headphones into them, that adapter is small and easy to lose. And it's just going to be a pain to have to have it plugged in - or on hand - all the time just to use older headsets or to connect your phone to older car audio systems.

While Apple is also providing a pair of headphones that will plug into the phones' Lightning charging port, it isn't providing an adapter so that you can plug them into a headphone jack. So unless you buy an adapter on your own, you won't be able to use them with even a Mac laptop, much less just about any other non-Apple device out there.

The other change I wasn't happy with is Apple's decision to replace the old mechanical home button with a new electronic one. Instead of actually depressing when you press down on it, like the old one did, the new one vibrates to simulate a press.

While you can adjust the sensation so that it's stronger or weaker, it doesn't feel like a real button. Instead, it feels like you're mashing your thumb against a pane of glass.

The change - like the ditching of the headphone jack - provides Apple with more interior space inside for new sensors and other features, including a new touch-feedback system. It's possible over time that those high-tech features will outweigh the loss of the analog ones they're replacing. But right now, I'm not happy with the trade-offs.

On balance, though, the [new features](#) and updates the iPhone 7 models offer are compelling, if modest. If you're in the market for a new iPhone any way - or are part of one of the early-upgrade programs - you won't be disappointed by the new phone. But if you can wait, you won't be missing out on much.

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