

Review: Apple's AirPods as irritating as they are impressive

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Apple is pitching the AirPods, its new wireless headphones, as "effortless" and "magical."

But I found them to be as much annoying as awesome.

The AirPods represent Apple's vision of the mobile future. The company announced them at the same time that it unveiled the iPhone 7, the first model of its smartphone to lack a headphone jack. In explaining that move, Apple argued that tethering a wireless mobile device to headphones with wires was absurd and outdated. They're right.

Wireless headsets and headphones are nothing new. If you owned the original iPhone, you could make calls via a Bluetooth headset. Wireless headphones, which you can connect to your smartphone and listen to music, have been around for years.

But Bluetooth headphones and headsets can be frustrating to use. Pairing can be a pain. So can be switching among Bluetooth devices or attempting to use a Bluetooth headset with more than one gadget.

Apple's pitch for the AirPods, which just hit stores earlier this month, is that they represent a far better alternative to not only wired headphones, but existing wireless technology, too. With the new headphones, Apple has attempted to improve on the standard crummy Bluetooth experience. Unlike other Bluetooth devices, the AirPods are designed to easily pair with and switch among Apple devices and automatically connect to the iPhone.

The AirPods, which look like a wire-free version of the EarPod headphones Apple for years has shipped with its iPhones, come with a matchbook-sized, flip-top charging case. You can start pairing them to your iPhone by simply opening the case.

When you do, you'll get an alert on your phone showing a picture of your AirPods with a button prompting you to "connect" them. Tap the button, and you're done. You don't have to go into your settings. You don't have to enter some kind of PIN. You don't have to wait for the Bluetooth radios to recognize each other. The process is quick and easy.

Even better, if you are signed into your iCloud account, Apple automatically configures your other Apple devices to use your AirPods. So, instead of having to manually go through a separate pairing process for your iPad or Mac, the AirPods just show up as a connection option. And if you've connected your AirPods to your iPhone, but want to switch the connection to your Mac, you just select them on the Mac. You don't have to disconnect them from your iPhone first.

AirPods are clever devices in other ways too. Apple has designed them to recognize when they are in your ears, using both optical and motion-detecting sensors. Put them in, and they will automatically connect to your phone. Take them out, and they'll disconnect. If you are listening to music, you can pause it by taking an AirPod out of your ear. When you put it back in, the music resumes.

The AirPods don't have any physical buttons. Instead, they respond to a double tap on their side. You double tap to answer or hang up a call and to activate Siri, Apple's intelligent assistant, on your phone. If you want to increase the volume or place a call, you can ask Siri to do it.

Last week, I put the AirPods in my ears before going out running one day. Unlike other Bluetooth devices I've used, they automatically connected to my phone as soon as I put them on. And unlike my wired headphones, I didn't have to constantly fight with wires as I was jogging. It was a great experience.

But there were frustrations, too. While listening to a podcast during a run or a walk, the stream would occasionally hiccup. It was similar to the experience you get when talking on the phone with a weak cellular connection, where you hear every other word. But I was in a fairly strong coverage area and don't remember having a similar experience with wired headphones.

Worse than that, the AirPods disconnected from my phone suddenly and unexpectedly numerous times, often while I was in the middle of a call. I'd be talking away when I'd hear the signal the AirPods give that they're disconnecting, and I could no longer hear anything on them, even though the call was still going. I was left tapping away trying to get them to reconnect. Sometimes that worked; other times I'd have to fish out my phone to try to redirect its audio output back to the AirPods.

I also frequently found myself missing the buttons I have on my plain old EarPods. There's no one-button way to adjust the sound level on the AirPods. You can summon Siri and ask her to adjust the volume up or down. But to do the equivalent of pressing the volume down button three times - something I often do on a dog walk as I go from a heavily trafficked street to a quiet one - you'd have to summon Siri three separate times.

Similarly - and again, unlike my EarPods - there's no pause button on the AirPods. Taking an earphone out to pause audio may work OK in some situations, but when I'm walking or running my dog, I'd much rather not have to worry about holding on to something else. I'd much prefer to just press a button.

One other AirPods frustration: battery life. Apple promises five hours of listening time or two hours of talk time per charge, but I generally got less than that. A couple of days, I neglected to charge overnight. I figured it wasn't a problem, because I hadn't used them much after their last charge. I certainly hadn't accumulated five hours of listening time. But they were completely dead when I plopped them in my ears.

So, I'm not sold on the AirPods. If they're the future, you might not mind much being stuck in the past - at least for now.

Troy's Rating

6 out of 10

What: Apple AirPods [wireless headphones](#)

Likes: Easy to pair with Apple devices; automatically connect to user's iPhone when placed in the ear and disconnect when removed; simple to switch connection to a Mac computer or iPad; pause music when remove one from ear; case makes it easy to recharge; lightweight; easy to activate Siri.

Dislikes: Relatively short battery life for [headphones](#) and case; lack of buttons makes it difficult to pause music or adjust volume; susceptible to wireless interference that can result in choppy audio; can suddenly and unexpectedly disconnect from iPhone.

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