

Review: Apple takes innovation to new levels with AirPods

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Apple has a knack for examining a product market and introducing its own version that leapfrogs the established competition.

The iMac, iPhone, iPod and iPad fall into this category.

Apple has also taken a lot of heat for falling behind the innovation curve since co-founder and CEO Steve Jobs died.

The Apple Watch certainly was well received, but it didn't exactly light the world on fire.

I'm happy to say Apple's latest product, the AirPods, have once again placed Apple at the top of a product category - wireless earbuds.

What's that? You didn't realize wireless earbuds were a category?

I didn't either until late last year when I started getting offers to review smaller and smaller Bluetooth headphones.

I guess Apple had to do something in response to killing the headphone jack in the iPhone 7.

Apple introduced AirPods alongside the iPhone 7 in September. The release date slid to late in the year, but Apple finally started shipping a limited number of AirPods a few weeks ago.

I can say they're the best wireless earbuds I've tried - by a lot.

FAMILIAR LOOK

Apple has set the bar very high for both sound quality and ease of use.

The AirPods sound great, and they have the easiest setup of any Bluetooth device I've seen.

AirPods look exactly like Apple's EarPods without the cord.

I was surprised at how comfortable and stable they were in my ears.

They don't go inside your ear canal to make a seal. In fact, they don't include the usual assortment of rubber tips to customize the fit.

They hang off your ear almost like an earring.

AirPods come nestled inside a small plastic case that looks like it should hold dental floss.

The case not only stores and protects the AirPods, it also charges them with an internal battery. The AirPods can play for five hours on a charge, and a fully charged case can charge those AirPods five times.

The AirPods case's battery is charged with an included lightning cable that can also charge your iPhone or iPad.

SETUP

The AirPods come charged and ready to play.

If you're an iPhone user, simply turn on Bluetooth, place the AirPods case within a few inches of the phone and pop open the top.

Magically, an AirPods dialog box slides up from the bottom of the iPhone screen with a button to complete pairing.

Press a button on the screen, and you're paired to the iPhone.

But wait - there's more.

Because of a special chip inside the AirPods called the W1, the pairing will also extend to any iPad or Mac that's signed into the same Apple ID as your phone.

Indeed, as soon as the AirPods were paired with my iPhone 6S, they also appeared (after a few seconds) as a sound output on my Macbook Pro and my iPad Air 2.

Android and Windows phone users can also use the AirPods with their phones. There's a small button on the back of the case to put them into pairing mode for non-Apple devices. They will pair to any Bluetooth device that can talk to headphones.

IN USE

Take them out of the case and hang them in your ears.

As the first AirPods is put in your ear, you'll hear a faint chime sound indicating they are ready to play.

You can listen through one or both AirPods.

If you choose to just use one AirPods, Apple will combine both stereo channels into one side so the music sounds decent.

When you insert the second AirPods, the sound magically spreads out to both sides.

I like to listen to sports talk radio during the day, and I found using one AirPods was perfect. I could listen to the radio and still hear the outside world around me.

AirPods have sensors so they know when they are in your ears and removing one or both will pause the music. A quick double-tap on either AirPods will resume the playback.

The double-tap can also be assigned to invoke Siri.

Since there are no playback controls on the AirPods, Siri is the only option to change the volume or skip to the next song without using the phone.

I found Siri a bit of a pain to use for the playback controls, especially when I was in a place where I didn't want to blurt out a voice command, so I just used the phone to control things.

AirPods each have a beam-forming microphone on their stem, closest to your mouth, so you can use them for talking on the phone and talking to Siri.

When the phone rings, you double tap either AirPods to answer or hang up.

I was impressed with how clear my voice came through on phone calls.

CONCLUSIONS

Apple's AirPods feel solid - both in build quality and it use.

They worked well and never failed to connect quickly. They worked every time, and the sound was outstanding.

The case is well built and there are magnets that grab the AirPods when you insert them in their spaces in the case. A small magnet also snaps the case shut. You can just tell they are expertly designed.

AirPods are tiny. I can see why people are worried about losing one (or both).

The case is small enough to carry easily in your pocket or purse, so the lesson is to keep them in the case when you're not using them.

PRICING AND AVAILABILITY

Apple's AirPods are not the most expensive wireless earbuds I've tried. They cost \$159, and I think they're priced right. I've tried wireless earbuds that cost twice as much that they don't sound as good as the AirPods and they don't set up nearly as easily.

APPLE AIRPODS

Pros: Easiest pairing ever. Fantastic sound. Comfortable to wear.

Cons: Control via Siri is a tad awkward.

Bottom Line: Apple has introduced the best wireless earbuds, and it's not even close.

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If you want cheaper options, consider these

If you're on the fence about spending \$159 for AirPods, there are plenty of cheaper options for wireless earbuds. Of course, [sound quality](#) and comfort are a personal choice. Here are two other options:

JBL Reflect Contour (\$99.95)

These are sport headphones that are overdesigned to stay in your ears.

They have what JBL calls Dual Lock Technology, which consists of an over-the-ear loop and an inner ear stabilizer.

Once you lock these babies in your ears, they are not coming loose.

They include three sizes of ear pieces for comfort. Once you get them adjusted, the sound is good, but they need to make a seal in your ear or you'll hear no bass.

They are sweatproof, but don't take them swimming.

Playback controls are on the cord that connects the earpieces.

Battery life is eight hours.

JVC Gumy Wireless (\$29.99, Best Buy)

These are cheap enough to almost be disposable.

They are also sweatproof, and the playback controls are on the right earpiece. The Gumy's are a bit heavy, as there is a small box on each side sticking out of your ear.

They fit more like the AirPods, but without making a seal in your ears.

Sound was decent but a step below more expensive models.

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