

iPod shuffle: Are these earbuds for you?

15 April 2009, By Etan Horowitz



iPod Shuffle

Apple has a history of making things without features that many people consider essential.

The original iMac lacked a floppy-disk drive, and the MacBook Air did not have an Ethernet port. In both cases, Apple's rationale was the older standard was no longer needed because it was being replaced by newer ones -- CD drives and Wi-Fi.

The latest example is the new [iPod shuffle](#) (\$79), which in addition to being smaller than an AA battery, does not feature essential controls such as volume, play/pause or next/previous song on the device itself.

Instead, the controls are on the cord of the white [Apple](#) earbuds that come with it. This means if you use any other [headphones](#) with it, you can listen, but you can't pause the music, skip to the next song or make other adjustments. Same thing goes for connecting it to speakers or a car stereo. The device does have a switch to turn it off and choose if you want to shuffle your songs or listen in order.

Why did Apple do this? Putting controls on the iPod would have prevented the company from making the device as small as it wanted. Apple says third-party vendors including Sony, Klipsch

and v-moda are planning on making headphones and adapter cables that work with the new shuffle, the first of which should be available in May. But that means having to shell out more money.

Housing the controls on the earbud cords will limit the shuffle's appeal, but then again, the shuffle has never been for everyone. As Apple's entry-level iPod, it lacks a screen to display song titles or video, and it's never been good for listening to podcasts or audio books. It has always been popular with runners and gym rats, and some of its new features make it more versatile.

If you don't mind only using the included Apple earbuds, the new shuffle is a brilliant device that packs a lot into a small package.

First, its [storage capacity](#) has improved dramatically to 4GB, allowing you to store up to 1,000 songs. It's most exciting feature is VoiceOver, which solves the problem of not having a screen to display what song is playing. When you hold in the center button on the cord, a computerized voice speaks the song title and artist. It's not perfect. It pronounced Salt-N-Pepa as "Salt-N-pee-pa," but it's a big help when you can't figure out what you're listening to.

There is a larger learning curve with the shuffle than most iPods. That's because the three buttons on the cord are used almost like Morse code to perform a variety of functions. Press once on the center button to pause or play a song. Press twice to skip to the next song, three times to return to the previous song and hold it down to hear the song information. It seems daunting at first, but you get used to it.

That center button also lets you access your playlists and podcasts. To do this, you hold down the center button, wait for the [song](#) and artist to be announced and then let go after you hear a tone. You will then be read a list of your playlists (including podcasts) and when you hear one you like, press the center button to go to it.

Although some might see the earbud controls as the shuffle's worst feature, they can also be viewed as one of its best, particularly if you plan to use the device while running or working out. Moving the controls off the device allowed Apple to make it so small that you can clip it anywhere (on your T-shirt, hat, belt, etc.) and not feel like you are being weighed down.

It also makes it easier to change songs while you are running on a treadmill because you can just reach your hand up near your face to press the button instead of having to interrupt your stride by fumbling with the device itself.

When Apple introduced a computer without a floppy-disk drive, it sped up the demise of that technology. Although the new shuffle will probably lead to more headphones with ear-bud controls, I'm not sure it will completely remake the market.

Lots of people can't stand Apple earbuds because they don't fit their ears, or they don't provide noise cancellation. There are products you can buy to improve the fit and sound of the Apple earbuds, but that's more money you'd have to spend.

So if you can deal with the earbuds and just plan to use it while you exercise, the shuffle is a great choice.

Otherwise, you would be better off getting the 8GB iPod nano (\$149) or buying a previous generation of the shuffle.

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