

# The Perfect Earbuds, Except They Don't Last

Apple's wireless AirPods are an engineering marvel, but they are difficult and expensive to maintain.

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TECH FIX

Apple's new AirPods, those tiny wireless earbuds that look like Q-Tips dangling from your ears, are some of the coolest audio accessories you can buy today.

Just insert the buds into your ears and they work instantly and seamlessly with your iPhone. When you are done using them, pop them into a white case that replenishes their power. They are sleek, innovative and convenient.

I could go on, but this is where the gushing stops. That's because AirPods have a finite life. That means you will probably have to buy new ones every few years, as if they were a good pair of shoes.

Here's how I know: After I bought Apple's first-generation AirPods in late 2016, they became my favorite headset for taking phone calls and listening to podcasts. Their lack of wires made moving around easier, avoiding a mess of tangled cords. I haven't once considered reverting to wired headphones.

But about a month ago, my AirPods started dying. Their batteries, which are not replaceable by users, no longer last more than 30 minutes when I am on a phone call; they used to have enough juice for two hours of talk time. Other AirPods owners have recently shared similar complaints.

The second-generation AirPods, which were released last week, may face a similar fate. That's because their minimalist design involves embedding the batteries, circuit boards, microphones and antennas directly into the tiny earpieces. Then they are sealed up, making it impossible for us to open them to replace the batteries.

There are some improvements. The new AirPods have slightly longer battery life and give you the ability to pick songs from an iPhone hands-free by speaking the command "Hey, Siri."

Yet this is a tough product to recommend for people who are slow to adopt new technology or who are environmentally conscious. While you can spend about \$160 (or \$200 for a version that includes a special case that can be charged wirelessly) for the new AirPods, you have to be prepared to shell out that amount again when their batteries inevitably wear out. Good wired earphones — which can cost less than \$50 — last indefinitely, so long as you don't rip the cords.

So what's right for you? Take a look below to decide.

## What's New About the AirPods

The new AirPods look virtually identical to the previous generation. The charging case resembles a white dental floss container. There are three batteries: one inside each earbud and one inside the case. When the charging case eventually runs out of juice, you can plug in Apple's Lightning cable, the same wire used to charge iPhones.

The \$200 version of the AirPods includes a new case that can be charged wirelessly. That means you can place the case on a wireless charging



Apple's AirPods cost about \$160, or \$200 for a version with a special case, like this one, that can be charged wirelessly.

pad, which uses an electrical current to generate a magnetic field, creating voltage that powers up the case. This method relieves the Lightning port of eventual wear and tear.

The new case worked well with several wireless charging pads I tested. But because you will have to spend about \$20 on a charging pad, I recommend buying the AirPods with the special case only if you already own other devices that support wireless charging, like newer iPhones.

Like the first-generation AirPods, the new ones last about five hours when you listen to music. But for phone calls, they can now go about three hours, up from two hours previously. When you return the earbuds to the case, it has enough juice to recharge them multiple times; as a result, you will get about 24 hours of listening time before having to

replenish the case. Over a week of testing, I recharged the case only once.

The audio quality of the new earbuds is about the same as the first generation's. Music sounds O.K. through them, good enough for playing podcasts and songs on your commute. But if you want wireless earphones that sound louder and richer with deeper bass, consider earbuds from Jabra or some of the other recommendations from Wirecutter, a product review site owned by The New York Times.

The AirPods also include a new chip that lets people use them to interact with Siri, Apple's virtual assistant. To summon the assistant, you say, "Hey, Siri," followed by a command like "Play some music" or "Schedule meeting for 3 p.m. on Thursday."

While that's a neat feature for tasks like adding items to your calendar, I

couldn't get in the habit of talking to Siri via AirPods — especially in public, where I still occasionally get dirty looks from people just for wearing the earbuds.

## Apple's Battery Program

When the day the AirPods' batteries are depleted eventually comes, you can take them to an Apple store and pay for battery servicing. The cost for battery servicing is \$49 per earbud and \$49 for the case, for a grand total of \$147. At that point, you might as well buy a new pair.

Kyle Wiens, the chief executive of iFixit, a company that sells parts and offers guides for repairing electronics, has tried to pry open the new AirPods to see whether he could replace the batteries. He concluded that removing the batteries was impossible without

destroying the gadget, which is a contraction of tiny circuit boards and ribbon cables soldered together.

He added that Apple probably wasn't capable of replacing AirPods batteries, either, when consumers take them in for servicing. That means people are most likely getting new AirPods in exchange for their old ones.

"There's no way Apple's replacing batteries in these things," Mr. Wiens said. "It can't be done."

An Apple spokeswoman didn't comment on whether the company was replacing batteries for AirPods or just giving people new ones. But one thing is certain: Maintaining AirPods isn't easy compared with maintaining an iPhone, which you can take to Apple or a third-party repair shop to get a fresh battery or a new screen for relatively little cost.

## Do Things Have to Be This Way?

Apple's AirPods create a moral conundrum. Should you buy these earphones knowing that you will probably have to buy new ones every few years? In the process, you would essentially be using up energy, metals, plastics and human labor invested in creating the product.

The AirPods reminded me of Tile, the company that offers Bluetooth trackers to help find items like house keys, luggage and wallets. In the past, the trackers were tightly sealed, making the batteries impractical to replace. When a Tile device was nearly a year old, the company would send an email warning that it would soon be time to "reTile," or buy a new Tile.

Using Tile thus felt more like a subscription service than ownership. After two years of this routine, I stopped buying Tiles.

But the company recently made a big change: It started selling trackers with replaceable batteries. Simon Fleming-Wood, Tile's chief experience officer, said that over time, the company had realized that the reTile process was angering people.

"People didn't realize that these Tiles died until they started hearing from us after 11 months that it was time to start replacing their Tiles," he said. "When people realized that was part of the deal, some people had very negative reactions to that."

He added that the company was betting that by making the batteries easier to replace, customers would remain loyal to the brand.

I hope Apple makes a similar change with AirPods. I asked the company whether the AirPods had to have irreplaceable batteries to achieve its design. Apple didn't have an answer.

The upshot: As someone who enjoys maintaining electronics for as long as possible before upgrading, I'm on the fence about springing for the latest AirPods. The fact that my first-generation ones have such shortened battery life after two years gives me pause about buying a new pair.

But there are people who enthusiastically buy a new smartphone, tablet or computer as soon as they come out, year after year. The AirPods are perfect for them.

BY GUY CLIFFORD FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

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