

Digital cameras

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SPECIAL SECTION



[Digital Cameras & Photography Decision Guide](#)



Buying advice *Digital cameras*

Digital photography allows you to be more involved in the creation of the print than film photography.

Digital cameras, which employ reusable memory cards instead of film, give you far more creative control than film cameras can. With a digital camera, you can transfer shots to your computer, then crop, adjust color and contrast, and add textures and other special effects. Final results can be made into cards or T-shirts, or sent via e-mail, all using the software that usually comes with the camera. You can make prints on a color inkjet printer, or by dropping off the memory card at one of a growing number of photofinishers. You can upload the file to a photo-sharing Web site for storage, viewing, and sharing with others.

Like camcorders, digital cameras have LCD viewers. Some camcorders can be used to take still pictures, but a typical camcorder's resolution is no match for a good still camera's.

WHAT'S AVAILABLE

The leading brands are Canon, Fujifilm, HP, Kodak, Olympus, and Sony; other brands come from consumer-electronics, computer, and traditional camera and film companies.

Digital cameras are categorized by how many pixels, or picture elements, the image sensor contains. One megapixel equals 1 million picture elements. A 3-megapixel camera can make excellent 8x10s and pleasing 11x14s. There are also 4- to 8-megapixel models, including point-and-shoot ones; these are well suited for making larger prints or for maintaining sharpness if you want to use only a portion of the original image. Professional digital cameras use as many as 14 megapixels.

Price range: \$200 to \$400 for 3 megapixels; \$250 to \$400 for 4 and 5 megapixels; \$300 to \$1,000 for 6 to 8 megapixels.

HOW TO CHOOSE

The first step is to determine how you will use the camera most of the time. Consider these two questions:

How much flexibility to enlarge images do you need? If you mainly want to make 4x6 snapshots, a camera with a 3- or 4-megapixel resolution will be fine. Such a camera will also make an 8x10 print of an entire image without alteration that looks as sharp as one from a 6- or 8-megapixel model. But to enlarge the image more or enlarge only part of it, you'll want a 6- to 8-megapixel camera.



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How much control do you want over exposure and composition? Cameras meant for automatic point-and-shoot photos, with a 3x-zoom lens, will serve snapshooters as well as dedicate hobbyists much of the time. The full-featured cameras in the 6- to 8-megapixel range offer capabilities that more-dedicated photographers will want to have. Two of the more important capabilities are a zoom range of 5x to 10x or more, which lets you bring distant outdoor subjects close and also lets you shoot candid portraits without getting right in your subject's face, and a full complement of manual controls that you determine the shutter speed and lens opening. '

Once you've established the performance priorities that you need from a camera, you can narrow your choices further by considering these convenience factors:

Size and weight. The smallest, lightest models aren't necessarily inexpensive 3-megapixel cameras. And the biggest and heaviest aren't necessarily found at the high end. If possible, try cameras at the store before you buy. That way, you'll know which one fits you hand best and which can be securely gripped. In our tests, we have found that some of the smallest don't leave much room even for small fingers.

Battery type and life. All digital cameras can run on rechargeable batteries of one of two types: an expensive battery pack or a set of AA batteries. In our tests of the cameras, neither battery type had a clear performance advantage. The best-performing cameras offer upward of 300 shots on a charge, while the worst manage only about 50. We think it's more convenient to own a camera that accepts AA batteries. You can buy economical, rechargeable cells (plus a charger) and drop in a set of disposable lithium or alkaline batteries if the rechargeable run down in the middle of the day's shooting.

Camera speed. With point-and-shoot cameras like the ones we tested, you must wait after each shot as the camera processes the image. Most models let you shoot an image every few seconds, but a few make you wait 5 seconds or more. They may frustrate you when you're taking photos in sequence.

Your other cameras. If you're adding a camera to your lineup or trading up to a more versatile model, look first for one that's compatible with the other cameras. If it is, you can share memory cards and batteries. Designs within a camera brand line are often similar. So staying wit the brand you have lowers the learning curve on the new camera for family members who switch between cameras.

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