

[Home](#) > [Smart Home](#)

Everything you want to know about Google Home

Here's your guide on where to buy, how to get started and how to get the most out of a Google Nest smart speaker.

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Chris Monroe/CNET

Welcome to CNET's guide to the [Google Home](#) smart speaker and Google's [growing lineup of smart home gadgets](#). Perhaps you're wondering if you need a smart speaker like the [Google Nest Mini](#), a [smart display](#) like the [Nest Hub](#),

both or neither. Do you want one with [Google Assistant](#) or with Amazon's competitive voice assistant, [Alexa](#)? Should you buy one now or wait until [Google's next mysterious speaker](#) launches?

Maybe you've already made your decision and bought one of Google's smart speakers or smart displays and now you want to know what you should do with it.

I can help. Below, I'll familiarize you with the basics of Google Home, then dive into everything you can do once you're up and running. I'll also look at the flaws of the system and what's next for the Google Nest smart home.

If you're not sure whether you want a Google Home, an [Amazon Echo](#) or perhaps an [Apple HomePod](#), I can help with that, too. CNET has created a [guide to buying the right smart speaker](#) for you, and here's a [breakdown of the three main digital assistants built in to smart speakers](#) -- [Google Assistant](#), Amazon's [Alexa](#) and Apple's [Siri](#).

What is Google Home?

The smart speaker from the eponymous search giant was designed to compete with the popular Amazon Echo. The Google Home can play music, but it's primarily designed as a vehicle for Google Assistant -- Google's voice-activated virtual helper that's connected to the internet. The Google Assistant you access via the Home is the same as the one on recent Android [phones](#) such as the [Google Pixel 4](#).

The Google Home is always listening to its environment, but it won't record what you're saying or respond to your commands until you speak one of its preprogrammed wake words -- either "OK, Google" or "Hey, Google." Here's a [list of commands you can give your Google Home](#).

Google actually has three current first party smart speakers. Google Assistant debuted in the [original \\$100 Google Home](#). The \$50 [Google Nest Mini](#) squeezes all of the smarts of the original into a smaller, more affordable

package. It replaced the [Google Home Mini](#) last fall. The \$300 [Google Home Max](#) puts Google's smarts into a speaker designed to deliver premium sound.

All three speakers give you access to the same Google Assistant service. They differ in size, sound quality and price. You use the same Google Home app to set up all three, and they all respond to the same wake words and commands.

Read more: [Which Google Home speaker should you buy?](#)

The JBL Link 300 offers a lot of sound quality for the price.

Sarah Tew/CNET

You can also use Google Assistant through a variety of third-party smart speakers such as the portable [TicHome Mini](#), the [JBL Link series](#) and the [Sonos One](#). Unless it's specifically stated otherwise, all of the Google Home features I discuss below work with any Google Assistant-enabled smart

speaker. Pick your speaker, then [check out our tips for getting started](#). Here are a few [tricks specific to the original Google Home](#) and a few [tricks specific to the Google Home Max](#).

In addition to the voice commands, each Google Home speaker has a limited set of physical controls. You can change the volume, mute the microphone and play or pause your music via a physical interface on the speaker. Check out the video below for details on these physical controls.

Here's how to make the most of your Google Home



Where to buy a smart speaker

You can buy the original \$100 Google Home, the \$300 Google Home Max and the \$50 Nest Mini online via [the Google Store](#). You'll also find Google's speakers at a number of electronics stores, including [Best Buy](#) and even hardware stores such as [Lowe's](#). Third-party speakers like the \$250 JBL Link 300 are also widely available at electronics stores. The [prices of the Google Home and Google Home Max dropped last year](#), making the Max in particular more appealing at \$300 instead of \$400.

Read more: [Best Google Assistant and Google Home devices](#)

Making music

Once you get your Google Home set up, you may want to use it to listen to music. You can use a Google Home as an ordinary Bluetooth speaker and pull up the song you want to listen to on your phone. Better yet, use your voice to tell Google what song you want to hear. You can even search by lyrics if you don't remember the name, or tell it to start a playlist of a certain genre.

Google pulls songs from a variety of streaming services including [Spotify](#), [Pandora](#) and [YouTube](#). In the Google Home app, you can pick one of those services as your default, and Google will search that service first when you ask for a song or a playlist. You can still access music from any of the other services by asking for it by name.

Here are [nine tips for getting the most out of your Google Home as a music streamer](#). The article also discusses how to group multiple speakers so you can play a single song synced throughout your house. Google also recently [made it easier to add and remove speakers from groups](#). If you don't like the sound quality of your Google Home or Nest Mini (both are serviceable but not outstanding) you can send music to your speaker of choice via either a [Chromecast streamer](#) or a [Bluetooth connection](#).

Google Assistant can even play music on your TV if it's Chromecast-enabled, and you can [ask it to play your favorite TV show](#) through a variety of streaming services such as Netflix and HBO Now. You can [control Roku streamers and TVs with your voice as well](#). [LG announced several TVs with Google Assistant built in](#). You have to push a button on a remote to give a voice command, so the TV isn't always listening. [Sony was the first to offer TVs with similar voice control functionality](#).

Ready to assist

Since it launched in November 2016, the Google Home has gotten a lot better as a personal assistant. You could always ask your Google Home to perform basic tasks like searching the web and checking your calendar. Now, Google Assistant in your smart speaker can do so much more. You can train Google Assistant to recognize up to six distinct voices, which will enable it to customize its responses based on who's talking. Google can then offer personalized answers if you ask about your commute to work or your schedule for the day.

You can add different profiles for each member of your family and if you want Google Assistant to respond to you in a unique voice, you have several options now. Better yet, different family members can pick different voices, and Google will switch which one responds based on who's talking.

Read more: [Best Google Home commands for health, nutrition and fitness](#)

With the Continued Conversation feature, you don't have to say the wake words every time you want to ask a question. The Google Home's microphone stays hot for up to eight seconds so you can ask a follow-up question without saying, "Hey, Google" again. It'll shut off early if you say, "Thank you," and if you don't want Google's mic to stay listening for longer than normal, you don't have to enable the feature.

As of Google I/O 2019, you can also skip the wake words when an alarm or timer is buzzing. Just say "stop" and you'll be able to silence your smart speaker. While your alarm is sounding, "stop" essentially functions as an additional wake word.

You can even make purchases via the Google Home verified only by your voice. Be careful with this functionality, though, as we were able to fool its voice recognition fairly easily.

Thanks to frequent feature updates, you can now do quite a few things with your Google Home. [Here's how to find the full list of its capabilities](#), including third-party skills.

Other highlights of the Google Home's resume include:

- [Broadcasting](#): Make an announcement to one Google Home and it will play on all connected smart speakers throughout your home or you can [broadcast to a specific device](#). You can also [reply to a broadcast](#) with a simple voice command.
- [Recipe assistance](#): Your Google Home can help you cook with step-by-step instructions, skipping forward and back as needed.
- [Calling](#): You can use your Google Home speaker to make a phone call. (Note: You can't use Google Assistant to make calls on third-party speakers for now.)
- [Multiple commands](#): You can issue two commands to your Google Home in sequence.
- [Night mode](#): Your Google Home can automatically lower the volume of its vocal responses and music streaming at certain times of the day.
- [Storytime](#): Your smart speaker can read aloud a number of stories from Disney and Nickelodeon. Better yet, you can read certain stories while your Google Home provides appropriate music and sound effects.
- [Multiple lists](#): You used to just be able to make shopping lists with your voice. Now you can create to-do lists, gift lists and more.
- [Routines](#): Give a command such as "Good morning" or "I'm leaving" and you can customize your Google Home to respond in a variety of ways, including telling you about your commute, playing the news and controlling your [compatible smart home devices](#).

Google Home in the smart home

Routines make it easy to control multiple smart home devices with a single command. Plus, they're getting better. At first, [you had to pick from six prepackaged options](#). Now you can [customize the command that activates the routine](#) and add any element you want to any routine -- including podcasts, smart home controls, music playlists and calendar updates. Routines are getting more advanced, as you can [now train your smart lights](#) to come on gradually leading up to your scheduled wake you time.

With customizable routines and now more than 30,000 compatible devices, the Google Home's gotten quite comfortable in the smart home. You can now sync [a variety of devices with your Google-equipped smart speaker](#). Here's a [guide to getting started with a Google-centric smart home](#).

Here's everything that works with Google Home and Home Mini

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Here's [Google's list of compatible devices](#). It includes thermostats, smart lights, smart switches, smart locks, sprinklers, security systems, large appliances and even some cars. Here's [CNET's guide to Google's compatible smart home](#)

devices.

For most gadgets, you'll need to use the Google Home app to sync your Google account with the account for any smart device you control -- such as your [Philips Hue](#) account for your smart light bulbs. Certain [C by GE devices](#) let you set them up directly from the Google Home app. Once it's set up, either way, you can control your smart devices with a voice command to your Google Home. You can add them to rooms and control multiple devices at once by giving a command such as, "Turn off all lights in the living room." You can also add them to routines.

Last year, Google rolled out a developer kit similar to what C by GE uses so more companies can enable setup in the Google Home app. This [Local Home kit](#) could also make your smart home faster. Instead of communicating with the cloud of every third-party device, the kit allows your smart speaker to store cached versions of certain commands. They can then process the command locally and communicate with the device directly over Bluetooth and Wi-Fi.

Touch controls and smart displays

The new Google Home app.

Google

The Google Home app was previously only useful during setup, but it's now a handy way to see and control all of your gadgets. Shortcut buttons at the top let you perform common tasks such as turning off all of your lights with one tap. Scroll down and you'll see all of your gadgets organized by room. The app allows you to quickly access any connected gadget and control it in detail -- you can set the exact brightness or color of your smart bulb or change the temp or settings of your smart thermostat.

You can also use the app to reorganize and rename your gadgets and even add multiple accounts to your home so people you live with can also see the gadgets via the app on their phones. Or you can group your gadgets into different locations if you've set up smart gear in your office and your home.

Google uses similar touch controls in its smart displays -- the Nest Hub and the Nest Hub Max. Both have Google Assistant and respond to all of the same voice commands. They add a touchscreen to the smart speaker formula, so if you swipe down on the Nest Hub or Hub Max, you'll see a similar smart home control panel to what you find in the new Google Home app.

Google Home Hub's smart home panel.

James Martin/CNET

While the app makes organizing your smart home easier, the smart displays offer a centralized place for your family to control your devices either with their voices or by touch.

The touchscreen also comes in handy when you're cooking and want to see the steps and ingredients spelled out on the screen. If you ask about the weather, you'll see a visual overview of the forecast for the week. Search for restaurants, and the screen will show pictures and hours of nearby places. It can even pull up a map and send directions to your phone. You can also use the screen to look at pictures or watch videos on YouTube.

Unlike with the Google Home, third-party smart displays equipped with Google Assistant hit the market before Google's own models. The [Lenovo Smart Display](#) and the [JBL Link View](#) were both built in partnership with Google. They feature the same Google Assistant and have all of the same functionality as the Nest Hub. They didn't launch with a smart home control panel, but that rolled out to both devices through an update.

You can make video calls on all current smart displays. But unlike the models from Lenovo, JBL and [LG](#), the Nest Hub doesn't have a camera, so the video call's recipient won't be able to see you. [Google says it removed the camera so you'd feel more comfortable](#) putting the Hub in any room of your house. The smart displays from Lenovo, JBL and LG all have physical shutters that slide over their cams.

The Nest Hub Max has a built-in Nest Cam, so it can detect motion when you're away and send you an alert. If you sign up for Nest's premium Nest Aware service, you can get alerts based on who the camera sees. You can also use the cam for video calls, and it can pan, tilt and zoom to keep you in frame. The cam can recognize gestures, so you can play or pause music by looking at the Hub Max and holding up your hand. Face Match for the Hub Max is an optional feature that allows the cam to recognize you and show you personalized notifications when you walk into the room.

The Nest Hub Max responds to gesture controls.

Angela Lang/CNET

The Nest Hub costs \$90 with a 7-inch screen, and you can buy it from the same retailers as the Google Home. The Hub Max costs \$230 and has a 10-inch screen. The Lenovo Smart Display comes with a 10-inch screen for \$250 or an 8-inch screen for \$200. The JBL Link View costs \$250 and has an 8-inch screen. The smart displays from Lenovo and JBL are also widely available at major electronics retailers.

Google Nest

All of Google's smart speakers, smart displays, Chromecast streamers and Wi-Fi products are now grouped under a new brand called Google Nest. The Nest team and Google smart home team have worked together since 2018, and last year they united under a single brand.

The Google Nest Hub Max was the first product under this new brand. The Google Home Hub was renamed the Google Nest Hub. Other products could eventually get a name change too. All of Nest's products, like the [Nest Learning Thermostat](#) and the [Nest Cam](#), will be produced under the new brand as well.

The merger threatened to cause problems for Nest customers in particular as Google shut down the [popular Works with Nest program](#) that allowed third-party devices to control Nest smart home gadgets like the [Nest Learning Thermostat](#). Google is working on merging all of those integrations into a relatively new Works with Google Assistant program, but the latter isn't quite as flexible.

If you're a Nest customer and using Works with Nest integrations, you should keep your Nest account and not merge it into a Google account or you'll lose those integrations. That said, [Nest accounts won't be receiving future updates beyond security patches](#).

Flies in the ointment

Though Google's done an admirable job of adding features to its smart home lineup, the company has had its share of issues with Google Assistant gadgets as well. Perhaps most importantly, Google's struggled to catch up to its main competitor -- the Amazon Echo and the smaller [Amazon Echo Dot](#) -- [in sales](#).

At CES a couple of years ago, [Google announced it was built into a billion devices](#). That's an impressive number, but it includes the many Android phones on the market and Amazon still accounts for roughly 73% of smart speaker sales.

The Echo Dot (right) headlines Amazon's formidable lineup of smart speakers.

Ian Knighton/CNET

In many smart home respects, Google is still chasing Amazon. The Google Home was meant to emulate the Amazon Echo. The Google Home Mini took notes from the [Echo Dot](#). The Google Home Hub combined a smart speaker with a screen like the [Amazon Echo Show](#) before it. Google and Lenovo partnered on a trimmed down smart display meant for your bedside called the [Lenovo Smart Clock](#). Even that has an Amazon precedent called the [Amazon Echo Spot](#).

The growing competition between Google and Amazon in the smart home space has mostly been good for customers as the companies try to outdo each other with newer, better features. However, it resulted in a [feud over](#)

YouTube. Amazon stopped selling some Google products on its website. Google retaliated by pulling YouTube rights from Amazon's smart display, the Amazon Echo Show. Here are the rest of the details on the dispute.

Google's launch of the original Google Home Mini also ran into some trouble, as a user discovered a bug that caused the Mini to record constantly, instead of just after you said the wake words. Google patched the issue quickly, but it still raised the issues of privacy and trust around Google's always-listening assistant.

After launch, a hacker found potential vulnerabilities in the Google Home Hub's code that he was able to use to reset the device and change some notification settings. Google responded quickly to this issue as well, but called the claims of a vulnerability inaccurate. The company noted that you'd need to be on the same Wi-Fi network to access the code in question.

More to come

As you might expect, 2020 has thrown a wrench into Google's normal cycle of smart home updates. The I/O Developer conference scheduled for this past summer was canceled. Google is still rolling out new features for its assistant and a new Google smart speaker has been confirmed by the company and should launch soon.

For years, the smart speaker landscape has been changing quickly. We'll keep this piece updated as it continues to shift. Fortunately, it's a safe time to invest in a smart speaker. Google, Amazon and Apple are all battling for supremacy of the market and rapidly rolling out new features, but the features get sent out as updates to existing devices, so you don't have to worry about your new assistant getting left behind -- at least, for now.

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