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Review

Nest Hello review: Google's smart facial-recognition video doorbell

★★★★★

Excellent smart device comes with optional 24/7 video recording with facial recognition - and works as a doorbell too



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Google's new Nest Hello is a video doorbell that aims to be smarter than the rest with constant recording, face and object recognition.

The Hello is a direct replacement for a wired doorbell, working with an existing chime and requiring constant power, making it one of the high-end options for smart doorbells.

That need for power restricts where you can put it, unlike some more flexible options such as the battery-powered [Ring Video Doorbell 2](#), but enables some much more powerful features.

What is it?



📷 The button glows when people approach it, enticing them to push it. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

The Hello is a simple-looking modern doorbell featuring one large button with a glowing blue ring around it and a camera above it. It's about twice the size of a traditional doorbell and is screwed directly into the wall.

When someone approaches the door the light ring pulses around the doorbell button, enticing them to push it. The doorbell fires off the connected chime when pushed, but also sends a notification to your phone and can make any of your Google Home smart speakers sound an alert too.

You can then choose to ignore the caller, hit buttons in the app to read out an automated message (options are: "You can leave it"; "We'll be right there", and, a little abruptly, "No one can come to the door") or talk through the doorbell to the caller using your phone.

Installation

The Hello is either a doddle to set up or a bit of a task, depending on whether you have a wired doorbell already and the voltage of its transformer.

If you have a wired doorbell with the correct voltage transformer, then switching it out for the Nest Hello is as simple as unscrewing the old one, disconnecting two wires, drilling two holes in the wall, screwing the backplate in place, reconnecting the wires to the back of the Hello and clipping it in place. It'll take you about five to 10 minutes to do guided by a setup routine in the Nest app on your Android or iPhone.

That's the easy way. Unfortunately it turns out that the Hello needs a transformer outputting a voltage between 16 and 24V AC that isn't commonly used in British homes, which means you'll probably need a new transformer and an electrician to install it for you.

Then there are the homes with no wired doorbell, like mine, which require not only a transformer to be installed, but a chime and all the wiring too - a process that can take several hours and will need a qualified electrician to do the work.

Google sells the Hello either on its own or with professional installation, but that installation only covers replacing an existing wired doorbell with the Nest Hello and swapping out the transformer, if required. To get an electrician to install all the wiring necessary if you don't have a wired doorbell already requires organising separately.

Using it



📷 You can see a live feed from the camera at any time through the Nest app on Android or iOS. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

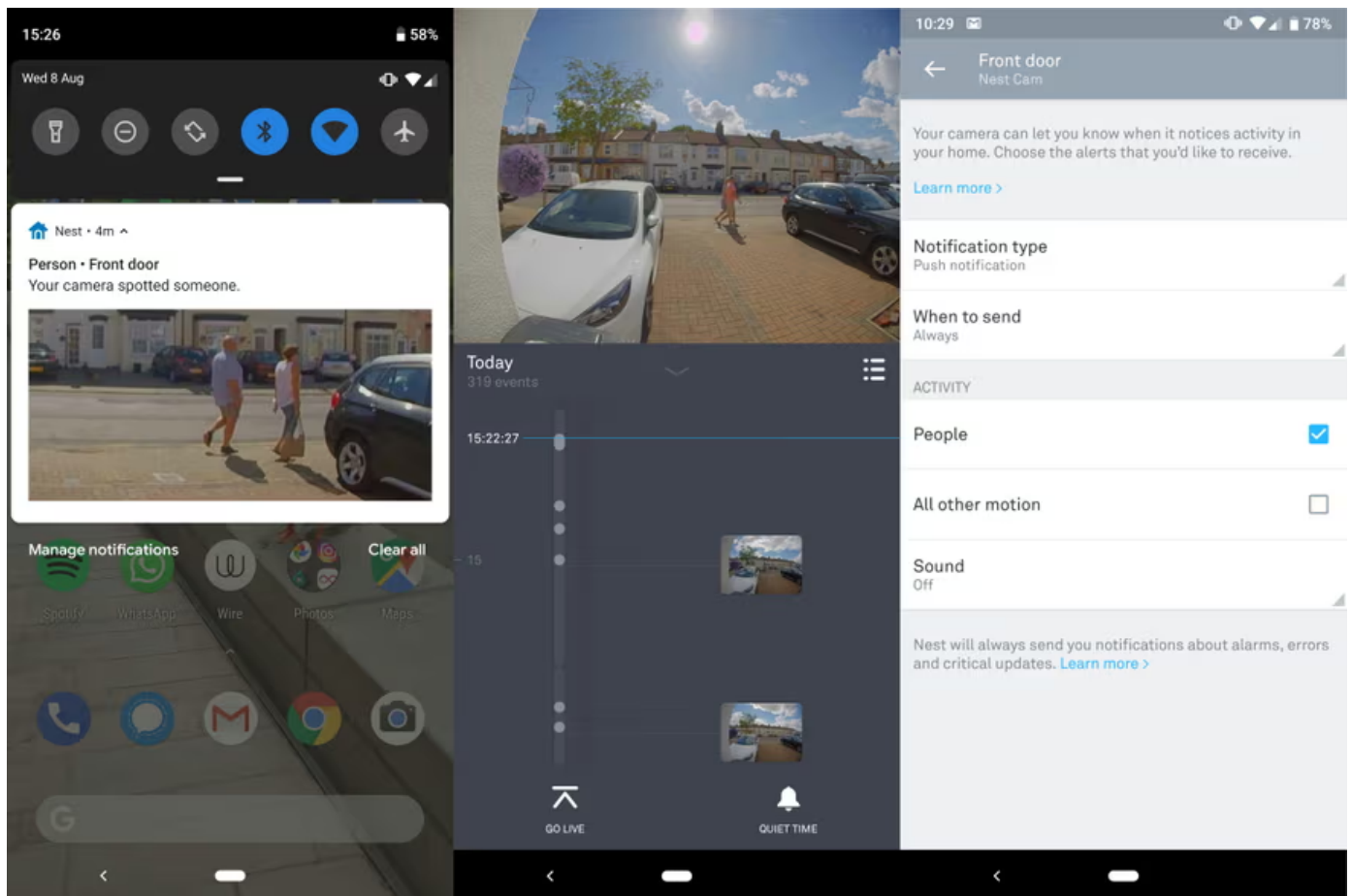
Once the Hello is installed, using it is incredibly simple. Like the [Nest Thermostat](#), if you never really use any of the “smart” functionality, the Hello functions like a really snazzy doorbell. And it isn’t a worse doorbell than the existing wired one it replaces, which isn’t always the case with smart home devices.

When someone hits the button it will fire off the chime and an alert to your phone, plus any Google Assistant smart speakers you might have too. If you’re in the home most of the time you’ll probably just glance at the image of who is there in the notification and simply answer the door in person.

But if you don’t know who it is – someone trying to sell you a new religion or political party – you can talk to them straight through the Nest app on your phone. Tapping the notification takes you to a live feed from the door with a button to answer and talk to the caller, a button to play a selection of pre-recorded messages or the option to ignore the caller.

It works in or outside of the home, as long as you have an internet connection on your phone. You can also access a live stream from the camera at any time through the Nest app or through compatible smart displays such as [Amazon’s Echo Show](#).

Cloud options



📱 The Nest app's alerts and functionality is reduced without a Nest Aware subscription, but it works just fine as a video doorbell you can answer from anywhere. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

The rest of the non-doorbell functionality changes depending on whether you take out a Nest Aware subscription.

Without the monthly cloud storage you have the option to enable various basic alerts, such as when the camera spots a person, any other movement or hears a sound. Each notification comes with a snapshot image taken from the camera, which is saved in the Nest app as a timeline of previous events, although I found that the images for just-happened events didn't always appear immediately in the timeline.

With a Nest Aware subscription, which starts at £4 a month, things get a more advanced. The Hello constantly streams video up to the cloud, which records 24 hours a day allowing you not only to see snapshots of events but everything in between, making it an excellent security camera.

The video quality is very good, even at night, and captured in high-dynamic range (HDR), which makes a real difference if your camera faces into the sun. The video is recorded in a 4:3 ratio with a relatively wide angle. Like all these cameras, it's still difficult to make out a name badge on a caller when they're standing away from the door, but you can clearly make out faces and logos.

The streaming video is processed in real-time by Google's AI in the cloud enabling a series of smarter tools too. For instance, you get a similar set of notifications, for people, movement and sound as before, but they're slightly enhanced, noticeably removing more false positives and allowing you to narrow down notifications to only certain zones within the camera's field of view.

The notifications sent to your phone also contain gifs, showing a small animated snapshot of the person or object, making it easier to see whether you need to do anything about the notification.

Tapping the notification takes you straight to the full video of the event in question, which you can then save and share if needed. You can also zoom in on a particular area, should you want to keep an eye on a set spot more closely.

Facial recognition



📷 The camera has a little green light above it which glows when recording. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

Facial recognition is the Hello's big differentiator over rivals such as Amazon's Ring. It is powered by Google's cloud, and as such requires a Nest Aware subscription. The idea is that as people come near the front door the system spots faces and then allows you to tag them with names. Next time that person comes to the door and presses the button, the notification you get on your phone will show their name, and Google's smart speakers can announce their name too.

In practice the facial recognition isn't quite as magical or terrifying as you might imagine. It recognised most individuals as multiple people, but allows you to manually merge them into one and delete images that aren't of the right person. Initially that meant the Hello recognised me as three separate people - one "Sam" with sunglasses and two other "Sams" without until I merged them all together as one "Sam" to rule them all.

For less frequent visitors it sometimes failed to recognise them as previously tagged faces.

There are also privacy concerns around constant recording and facial recognition, although all the video and facial data is only accessible to your Nest account. You're also not associating faces with accounts or anything like that, but it's important you explain all this to your neighbours at the very least.

Observations



📷 Alexa, show me the front door. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

The Nest app runs you through full installation instructions that you can't skip, even if you've had an electrician install the doorbell for you. Tedious.

The [hyperlapse](#) effect of scrolling through a full day's video is really beautiful, watching the sun streak across the sky

I received far too many notifications for people passing by without a Nest Aware subscription, meaning I had to turn them off

Shadows of people walking are identified as people, setting off the alert even if the person isn't actually in your motion zone

The Hello is weather-proof, but the backplate doesn't fit all that tightly to the wall, so water can get in behind it if it's exposed to torrential rain or similar

You'll need a strong wifi signal for the doorbell and an uncapped broadband connection for the Nest Aware video recording

You can silence the chime for 30 minutes to three hours, but can't schedule it to be quiet overnight or similar - you can toggle it on or off in the app manually though

Price

The Nest Hello costs £229 on its own, or £329 with professional installation. Nest Aware subscriptions cost £4 a month (£40 a year) for five-day video history, £8 a month (£80 a year) for 10-day video history or £24 a month (£240 a year) for 30-day video history.

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Verdict

The Nest Hello is an excellent smart doorbell that's still good at being a regular doorbell. If you rarely use the smart bits, it'll work OK without an add-on subscription.

When you do want to use the smart functionality, a Nest Aware subscription is almost certainly a necessity, which is at least another £4-a-month add-on. You get value for money out of it though, with seven days or more of constant video from your front door making it an excellent security camera, plus smarter and more useful alerts and other bits.

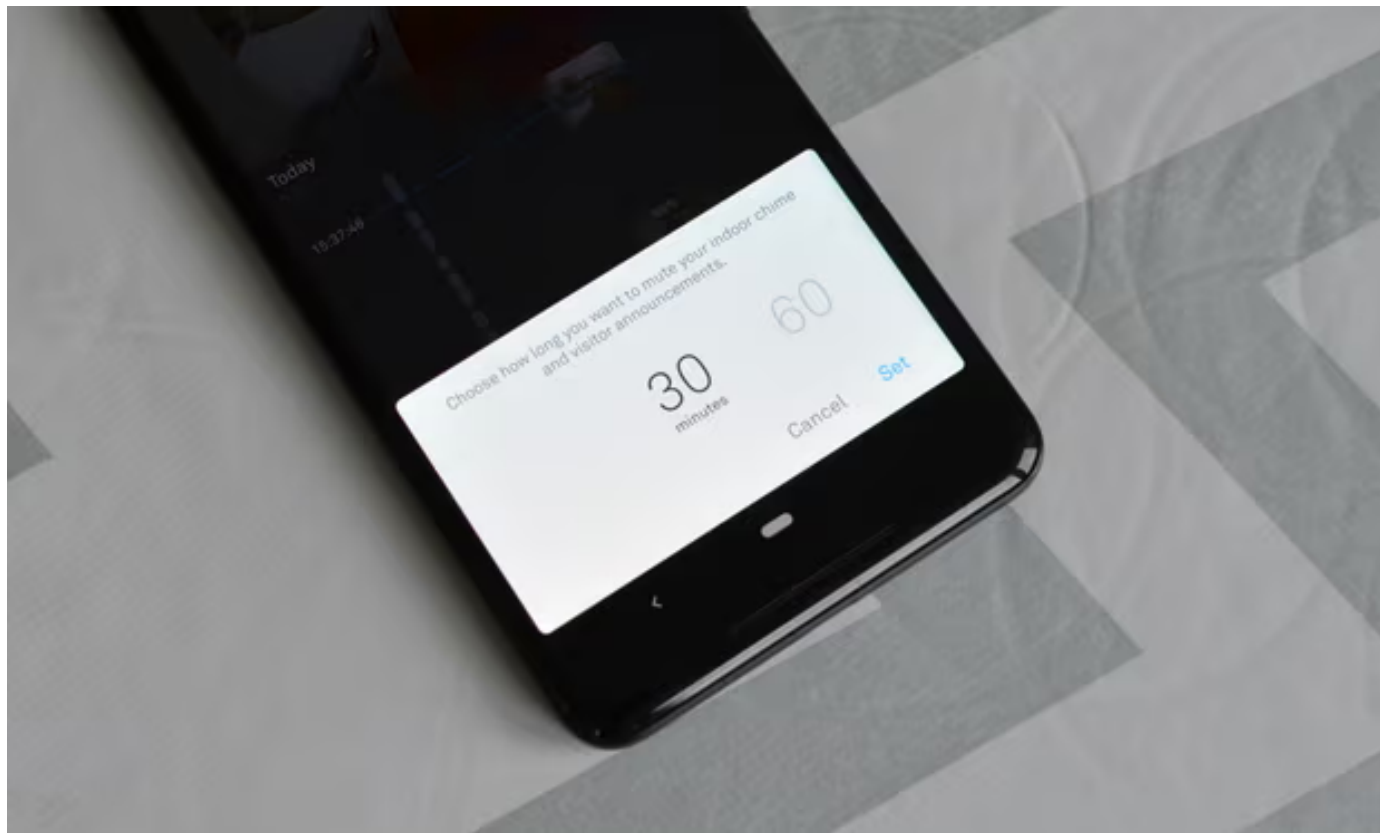
With a little bit of work on your end, the facial recognition should prove useful for regular guests and far less invasive than you might anticipate.

The biggest issue with the Hello is its stringent requirements for wiring and power. It might be a hurdle you only have to clear once, but it certainly adds to the cost and difficulty of fitting it in the first place.

The Hello is a great, high-end, feature-rich option for a smart video doorbell that looks the part on the front of your house. It's just not quite leagues ahead of the competition.

Pros: HDR video, good night vision, good and fast app, great as basic doorbell, attractive, smart add-on features, with Nest Aware it is excellent as home-security camera, recognises guests via facial recognition

Cons: stringent wiring/power requirements, additional subscription almost a necessity, mount sits proud of the wall, privacy concerns of having a camera on your door particularly with facial recognition



📱 Silence the chime for a little while with the Nest app's Quiet Time function. Photograph: Samuel Gibbs/The Guardian

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