

CNN underscored The best Apple Watch to buy in 2025, tested by experts

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Choosing the best Apple Watch for your needs used to be simple: you'd just buy the newest one, or maybe score the previous year's model for a discount. But now that Apple offers three distinct models of its mega-popular wearable, it's a bit trickier to decide on the [best smartwatch](#) to live on your wrist for the next few years.

Do you go with the tried-and-true standard Apple Watch that your friends and family are already wearing? Is that cheap Apple Watch SE actually any good? What the heck is an Apple Watch Ultra, and why does it cost \$800? These are all valid questions, and fortunately, we've tested every single Apple Watch extensively to answer them for you.

Whether you're an athlete, an extreme adventurer or just want a decent smartwatch that'll keep you on top of your notifications, here's how to pick the right Apple Watch for your needs.

Best Apple Watch



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Best budget Apple Watch



If you don't mind forgoing a few features — namely an electrocardiogram app, sleep apnea notifications and temperature sensing — the [Apple Watch SE](#) offers nearly everything great about the core Apple Watch experience for a very enticing price.

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Best splurge Apple Watch



If you want a watch that can survive long days of hiking, swimming or diving — or are just willing to pay up for the biggest, most feature-packed Apple Watch possible — the Ultra 2 offers a lot for its high price.

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Best Apple Watch: Apple Watch Series 10



The standard Apple Watch has been our best smartwatch recommendation for years now. It just hits that sweet spot between price, performance and effortless integration with your iPhone. And while the latest Apple Watch Series 10 largely iterates on things we already love, it also makes some notable improvements that make it feel like a true leap forward.

The current Apple Watch marks one of the more significant aesthetic upgrades we've seen in a while, with a design that Apple says is nearly 10% thinner than the Series 7, 8 and 9 while also offering a bigger OLED display than ever.

You have a choice of 42mm and 46mm watch face, which, according to Apple, gets you a whopping 30% more display area than the Series 4 through 6 and a solid 9% boost from the Series 7 through 9. The larger 46mm option is the biggest watch display Apple's made yet; even bigger than the one you'll find on the Apple Watch Ultra 2. It's also nice and bright, promising a 40% brightness upgrade over the Series 9 and outshining the much pricier Ultra 2 in our testing. Long story short, you'll be getting a much bigger and brighter screen that makes it even easier to stay on top of your notifications and apps, even on the sunniest of days.

Improved design aside, you're getting the same complete Apple Watch experience that's kept the company's wearable at the top of our rankings. On top of the reliable notifications, call functionality and in-depth fitness tracking for a huge breadth of workouts, we really dug playing around with some of the new features introduced in the latest watchOS 11 software. That includes Smart Stack widgets, which give you essential information (think weather alerts and workout data) at a quick glance and feel breezy to tap through. We also really like the double-tap feature, which debuted

on the Series 9 and lets you use pinch gestures to easily control the watch with one hand.

But the reason we truly love the Apple Watch is its comprehensive and [genuinely life-improving health features](#), nearly all of which are present and accounted for on the Series 10. We loved using it to track our sleep (the Series 10 was much more comfortable to wear to bed than the Ultra 2) and appreciate its ability to notify you about potential sleep apnea, a condition that an [estimated 30 million people](#) suffer from, though only six million have been diagnosed.

Using its built-in accelerometer, the watch can detect irregular breathing patterns and disturbances, and notify you when it thinks you should go see a doctor. There's also the ever-critical heart rate tracking, which allowed our electronics writer to [get an early jump on — and beat — a prediabetes diagnosis](#). The Apple Watch Series 10, unfortunately, does omit the blood oxygen tracking found in previous models (more on that below), but overall, Apple's latest wearable continues to offer a wealth of critical health tools that have genuinely impacted even our own editors' everyday lives.

The Apple Watch Series 10 carries the same 18-hour battery life as the Series 9, and that's not a bad thing. It got our testers through most days with plenty in the tank, and when they went to bed to test sleep tracking, they often woke up with around 80% battery left to go. If you're using low-power mode, you can stretch that endurance to up to 30 hours. The chunky Ultra 2 remains the battery-life king (36 hours of normal use; 72 hours on low-power), but the Series 10 offers more than enough juice for most folks' needs.

Sure, there are more affordable *and* more advanced Apple Watch options, but the Apple Watch Series 10 is still the model I'd recommend to the vast majority of people. It does everything you'd want a smartwatch to do, from its snappy performance to its reliable battery life, all while giving you a bigger canvas for staying on top of text messages or monitoring your workout. And now that it's frequently on sale these days, Apple's already-excellent flagship watch is a better value than ever.

Best budget Apple Watch: [Apple Watch SE \(2nd Gen\)](#)



If your main reasons for buying an Apple Watch include tracking your workouts, getting a better look at your sleep and staying on top of your heart rate, there's a good chance that the \$249 Apple Watch SE is more than enough watch for you. Much like the original model, the second-generation Apple Watch SE does a great job offering the core Apple Watch experience for a notably cheaper price.

Looking at the Apple Watch SE and Apple Watch Series 10 side by side, it's not immediately obvious which is the more expensive watch, though the latter's display is noticeably bigger. Still, this is a real-deal Apple Watch, with the familiar curved-rectangle display and the signature Digital Crown that makes navigation a breeze. The latest SE is powered by Apple's S8 chip — meaning it's about two generations behind in terms of speed — but that wasn't very noticeable as I bounced between apps and notifications without issue.

Most of the Apple Watch's key features are here, including a robust fitness app that can track everything from quick runs to dancing and kickboxing, Smart Stack widgets that let you flip through what's important and the same quick setup and seamless integration with your iPhone's photos, messages and more, which lets our electronics writer keep his [iPhone 16 Pro Max](#) pocketed when he wants to check for texts. It's rated for the same 18 hours of battery life as the Series 10 and has a Low Power mode, though Apple doesn't provide a specific Low Power estimate as it does with the Series 10. So, what are you really giving up at this price point?

The Apple Watch SE is the least-bright Apple Watch at 1,000 nits (compare that to 2,000 nits for the Series 10 and 3,000 for the Ultra 2) and isn't optimized to be viewed at an angle like its bigger siblings are. I found the SE's brightness to be perfectly acceptable both indoors and under bright sunlight, but folks who spend most of their time outdoors may want to consider a brighter watch.

While the SE can track your heart rate and alert you to irregularities, it lacks the electrocardiogram (ECG) functionality of the more premium models that allows you to record an ECG of your heart and get a detailed analysis of it via an app on your iPhone. These recordings can alert you to possible irregularities like arrhythmia and can be exported to share with your doctor for next steps. Similarly, while the Apple Watch SE will let you track your sleep to get a basic sense of duration and quality, it can't alert you to possible sleep apnea like the Apple Watch and Apple Watch Ultra can. Other notable omissions include double-tap controls, a temperature sensor and the option of a more-durable titanium case.

Still, if you're more concerned with tracking the essentials than monitoring potentially serious health issues — or if you're getting a younger family member their first watch — the Apple Watch SE is a fantastic value and plenty of smartwatch for most. It's worth noting that the Series 10 has dropped to near-SE pricing during limited-time sales (we've seen it drop to as low as \$300). But unless you manage to score one of those elusive savings, you can go ahead and

save some cash on the SE while knowing that you're getting a pretty great Apple Watch for everyday use.

Best splurge Apple Watch: [Apple Watch Ultra 2](#)



The Apple Watch Ultra marked one of the biggest additions to the Apple Watch lineup when it launched back in 2022, offering a kitchen sink's worth of advanced specs and features for hikers, swimmers and climbers within a bigger, more durable design — and a twice-as-high price tag to match. We found the original version to be worth the splurge for adventurers or folks who are simply willing to pay up for the most feature-rich Apple Watch out there, and fortunately, that remains the case with the latest Apple Watch Ultra 2.

With its extra-large case and prominent orange digital crown, the Ultra 2 screams “I’m made for the outdoors” the moment you look at it. The watch’s 49mm titanium case is the biggest in Apple’s lineup and houses nearly the biggest screen of any Apple Watch (the Series 10 edges it out by a few square millimeters due to its thinner bezels). That extra real estate allows room for the Action button: a customizable, Ultra-exclusive feature that lets you do things like start a workout or mark a waypoint with a single press. Despite all this extra size and heft — the Ultra 2 is roughly 20 grams heavier than the heaviest Series 10 — Apple’s premium watch never felt too heavy on our testers’ wrists.

But this watch truly earns its “Ultra” moniker with the sheer amount of cool things you can do with it. Right out of the box, you’ll notice its unique Wayfinder watch face, which has a dizzying array of complications — including compass directions, sunrise and sunset info, elevation, longitude and latitude — on top of the usual activity rings and weather widgets. It’s a lot more than what you get on the standard Apple Watch face, and while it may be overwhelming to some, it’s also tailor-made for a day out on the trail or at sea.



One of the Ultra 2’s standout features is its hyper-accurate GPS, which our tester was able to use to create various waypoints during an overseas trip and get hyper-accurate compass directions for navigating back to them (this is especially ideal if you’re out in the woods and want to mark

locations you typically wouldn’t find on, say, your Maps app). This is complimented by a handy Backtrack feature that shows your recent steps so you can easily retrace them. And should you ever find yourself lost or in need of assistance, there’s a built-in 86-decibel emergency siren that we found to be satisfactorily loud in our testing.

If you prefer to do your adventuring under the sea, know that the Ultra 2 is swimproof and water-resistant up to 100 meters, and is designed to support recreational scuba diving activities up to 40 meters (by contrast, the Series 10 is rated for 50 meters of water resistance and isn't designed for scuba or water sports). With the latter, you can use apps like Oceanic+ to get a detailed breakdown of your free dives.

The Ultra 2 maintains the original's reputation as Apple's longest-lasting Watch, promising up to 36 hours of normal use and a whopping 72 hours with Low Power mode activated; that doubles the Series 10's rating on every count. We found ourselves regularly exceeding Apple's 36-hour rating in day-to-day use and rarely went below 20% battery even after long hours of hiking followed by a full night of sleep tracking.

The Ultra 2 doesn't change much from the original, but there are some noteworthy improvements. The wearable's operating altitude has been expanded from 1,640 feet below sea level to 29,500 feet above it. That's up from sea level to 9,842 feet on the Ultra and, as [our review](#) notes, is lower than the Dead Sea and higher than Everest.

The upgraded Maps app now lets you download maps for offline use for when you're adventuring out of cellular range, and it offers topographic views for hikers in select national and regional parks in the US. Apple boosted the Ultra 2's brightness from 2,000 to 3,000 nits too, making it the brightest Apple Watch in the lineup by a good margin, a perk that we found especially useful in bright sunlight.

Factor in all the same features we love on the Series 10 — including Apple's robust set of fitness features and seamless integration with your iPhone apps — and you truly have the ultimate Apple Watch. Existing Apple Watch Ultra owners don't have much of a reason to upgrade, and price-conscious adventurers may want to consider tracking down a refurbished first-generation model at a significant discount. But if you're willing to pay up for an Apple Watch that truly does it all, the Ultra 2 justifies its price tag.

How we tested

Design and display

- **Comfort:** A watch is useless if it doesn't feel good to wear, so we heavily factored in how comfortable each Apple Watch felt on our wrists after roughly a week of heavy use. The quality of the included bands also played a role in our rankings.
- **Aesthetics and options:** While most Apple Watches more or less look the same, we factored in any major design improvements (such as the significantly slimmed-down Series 10). More importantly, we noted how many size options each Apple Watch offers and how well they cover most folks' wrist sizes.

- **Display:** Apple Watch displays have evolved quite a bit in size and functionality over the years, so we paid close attention to how well the screen works in daily use. Was it easy to read notifications? Did the screen stay visible in bright outdoor lighting? These are the things we look for.

Performance and features

- **Battery life:** We recorded how long each Apple Watch lasts against our standard daily use, paying particular attention to how much battery we had left at the end of the day as well as how much juice was remaining after a night of sleep tracking.
- **Overall reliability:** We factored in how well an Apple Watch works when doing basic tasks like switching between apps and tracking workouts, taking note of any significant moments of slowdown.
- **Feature set:** Each Apple Watch's unique feature set played a major role in our evaluations. We compared each model side by side to find the best mix of health, fitness and overall convenience features, and we also tried them all out to confirm they actually worked as advertised.

How to choose the right Apple Watch

Picking between the three current Apple Watch models may seem straightforward to some — you've got the budget model, the all-around model and the extra-rugged premium option — but there are some other considerations to keep in mind as you're shopping.

Case sizes



You're likely going to be wearing your Apple Watch all day on most occasions, so you'll want to pick a size that you're comfortable having on your wrist all the time — and one that'll allow you to comfortably see your screen. The current Apple Watch case options are as follows:

- Apple Watch SE (2nd Gen): 40mm, 44mm
- Apple Watch Series 10: 42mm, 46mm
- Apple Watch Ultra: 49mm

People with smaller wrists may want to opt for the 40mm SE or 42mm Series 10, while the 44mm SE or 46mm Series 10 will likely be a good middle ground for many. The

Ultra's 49mm case is quite big, but we didn't find it particularly bulky. Note that while the Ultra offers the biggest case, the Series 10 actually offers the largest screen in the lineup, thanks to its smaller display borders. Either way, we highly recommend trying on as many different options as possible at your local Apple store or electronics shop if you can.

Accessories, bands and special editions

One of the best things about smartwatches is that you can often customize them to your heart's content with all manners of bands and cases — and the Apple Watch is no exception. There are a ton of options for making your Apple Watch your own, whether you want to customize your watch at the point of purchase or pick up one of the many first- and third-party Apple Watch bands that let you add some extra flair or functionality to your wearable.

When you're shopping on Apple's website, you'll have a choice of bands before you hit "buy." The Apple Watch SE and Apple Watch Series 10 offer a choice of rubber, textile and stainless steel bands, while the Ultra 2 offers Alpine Loop (for outdoor activities), Trail Loop (all-around), Ocean Band (for water sports) and Titanium Milanese Loop, which costs \$100 extra and is meant to be suitable for both the ocean and a fancy night out.

If you want something extra fancy, both the Series 10 and Ultra 2 come in special Hermès editions that feature premium watch bands from the luxury fashion company. As the brand name might suggest, these models don't come cheap, with the [Hermès Series 10](#) starting at \$1,249 with various knit, rubber and stainless steel bands and the [Hermès Ultra 2](#) starting at a whopping \$1,399 with a choice of water-resistant knit bands.

Of course, those are far from your only options for customizing your Apple Watch. There are tons of great choices out there for just about any need, whether you want an [Apple Watch band for working out](#) or a stylish [leather Apple Watch band](#) to compliment a nice outfit. While there is some crossover in terms of compatibility — [Apple Watch Ultra 2 bands](#) also fit the 45mm Series 9, for example — you'll definitely want to make sure your model and size is listed in the band's description before you commit to one.

Health and safety features

Perhaps the most important thing to keep in mind is what kinds of health and safety features you want on your watch. The latest Apple Watch SE, Apple Watch and Apple Watch Ultra all offer essentials like heart rate tracking, heart rate notifications, sleep tracking and Cycle tracking for those who ovulate, but only the Apple Watch Series 9 and 10 and Apple Watch Ultra 2 feature sleep apnea notifications, while temperature

sensors are limited to the Apple Watch Series 8 and Ultra and later. The electrocardiogram app is only on the Apple Watch Series 4 and later, as well as the Ultra models.

On the safety front, all current models offer Emergency SOS for quickly getting help, fall detection and car crash detection, but only the Ultra offers an emergency siren to help folks locate you in an emergency. Every Apple Watch has a GPS, but the Ultra has an exclusive precision dual-frequency GPS for extra-accurate navigation, something that could come in handy when you're exploring in the woods or on the trail.

The Apple Watch Series 6 introduced blood oxygen tracking, though finding this functionality on a modern Apple Watch gets complicated. Due to [patent dispute issues with health tech company Masimo](#), Apple was forced to stop selling Apple Watch Series 9 and Apple Watch Ultra models with blood oxygen tracking and introduced new versions of the watches with the feature omitted. The Series 10 and Ultra 2 also launched without blood oxygen capabilities.

Why does this feature matter? Blood oxygen levels of 95% to 100% are considered healthy, while anything below that may put you at risk of heart and respiratory issues. As such, having quick access to your blood oxygen saturation (or SpO2) can help you get a jump on these potential issues.

As it stands now, the only way to get an Apple Watch with this functionality is to seek out a very specific Series 9 or Ultra model from third-party retailers or track down a Series 6, 7 or 8, which are typically only available refurbished these days. On the plus side, [these models are pretty cheap](#), though you'll be losing out on some of the key features and longer-term software support found on the latest Apple Watches.

Other Apple Watches we tested



The Apple Watch Series 9 introduced Double Tap for convenient one-hand controls while bumping up the storage to 64GB and offering fast speeds via the S9 chip.

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The previous-generation Apple Watch enjoyed a long reign as our best smartwatch pick and is still a darn fine wearable today. It does nearly everything the Series 10 does, just with a slightly thicker design and a smaller, non-OLED screen. If you can find one in stock and on sale — and don't mind those caveats — it's an excellent pickup.



The original Apple Watch Ultra still holds up today, packing tons of features built for the extreme outdoors with up to 72 hours of battery life.

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Much like the Series 9, the original Apple Watch Ultra is largely identical to the sequel that replaced it in 2023. You're still getting most of the same extensive rugged features like diving-friendly water-resistance and an emergency siren as well as the same 36 to 72-hour battery life on the new model. The original Ultra even has an advantage over the Ultra 2, as it packs the blood oxygen tracking that Apple now omits from newer models due to ongoing patent issues. The Ultra 2 does get you a brighter screen, a new black case option, handy double-tap controls and Precision Finding for your iPhone, but these are pretty incremental perks — and ones you may be able to live without considering that some [refurbished Ultra 1 models](#) (new ones are hard to find) are nearly half the price as the new watch.



Apple's first entry-level wearable is powered by a capable Apple S5 processor and offers most of the key features you'd want in an Apple Watch for a much lower price.

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The original Apple Watch SE impressed us when we first got one around our wrists. Its performance and screen were on par with the then-current Apple Watch Series 6, and it offers most of the key integrations and features you'd want one of these things for. It lacks the ECG sensor, blood oxygen tracking and always-on display that come with many modern Apple Watches, but we found that to be a fair compromise for its \$279 price point for new models. The original Watch SE isn't all that different from the upgraded model launched in 2023 and [can be found for less than \\$100 refurbished these days](#). But we'd still recommend going with the second-generation version, especially since Apple's already stopped delivering software updates for the first-generation 2022 edition.



The Apple Watch Series 8 brought a temperature sensor and car crash detection to what is otherwise a fairly incremental update to Apple's flagship wearable.

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The Apple Watch Series 8 proved to be a pretty minor upgrade over the Series 7 in our initial testing, though then-new features like a temperature sensor and car crash detection helped it stand out. It's worth considering today if you really want blood oxygen tracking, or are willing to go the refurbished route to get a great (if slightly outdated) watch for less than \$200.



The Apple Watch Series 7 marked a notable bump in screen size over previous models, while also introducing a more durable design and improved charging.

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The Series 7 proved to be a great Apple Watch for the time when it launched in 2021, bumping up the screen size by 20% while packing a great suite of health features including blood oxygen tracking and an ECG app. Like most other Apple Watches, this one's available refurbished for some pretty cheap prices, though you can get the superior Apple Watch Series 8 at some third-party stores.



One of the more significant updates in the Apple Watch's history, the Series 6 brought blood oxygen monitoring and an elevation-tracking altimeter to the mix.

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The Series 6 was a minor breakthrough at the time of its release and is the absolute oldest Apple Watch we'd recommend even thinking about if you happen to find a used model for dirt cheap (we're talking less than \$100). It's the oldest watch that can run the latest watchOS 11 software and packs that ever-elusive blood oxygen tracking, though given Apple's usual release patterns, we don't expect this one to get software updates for much longer.

[Related article 11 tips and tricks all Apple Watch owners need to know](#)

FAQs

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