

Summary

The article describes the new satellite communications features of the Apple Watch Ultra 3. The watch allows users to send messages and share their location using satellite connectivity, even in areas without cellular coverage. The article also highlights the watch's larger display, longer battery life, and support for 5G.

This is the first time I've been able to establish a satellite connection on a smartwatch.

[Cherlynn Low](#) Fri, September 19, 2025 at 8:00 AM EDT



Cherlynn Low for Engadget

The latest generation of smartwatches is looking to the skies to expand their connectivity capabilities. The [Apple Watch Ultra 3](#) will be the second mainstream smartwatch (not counting the Garmin Fenix 8 Pro) to support satellite communications, and the new connectivity feature is one of a few changes coming to the device. Other upgrades include the S10 chip, a slightly larger display, bigger battery that lasts up to 42 hours, support for 5G, as well as

the hypertension and sleep score features coming to the Series 11 (and also the Ultra 2 and several older Apple Watch models).

Editor's note (on September 19, 8:00AM ET): The Apple Watch Ultra 3 is now officially available in retail outlets, and those who have pre-ordered their devices will be receiving them starting today. As you make your decisions on whether or which of these you should buy, make sure to check out our reviews of [the iPhone Air](#), [the iPhone 17 Pro and Pro Max](#) and [the iPhone 17](#), as well as the [AirPods Pro 3](#) and the [Apple Watch Series 11](#).

While I continue to review the Series 11 before spending more time with the Ultra 3 (and the SE 3), I wanted to share what it's like to use satellite communications on the wearable and how it differs from the approach on the Pixel Watch 4. To be clear, I have yet to receive a review unit of the Pixel Watch 4, so my impressions are based on a recorded demo at a hands-on event. For the Watch Ultra 3, I have a review unit and am using its built-in demo tool to connect to satellites.

You can launch satellite communications on the Watch Ultra 3 in a few ways. Add it to the Control Center or as a complication on any watch face, and you'll get options to

send messages, share your location or contact emergency services. The first two require paid cellular service for your smartwatch. The device will also automatically suggest satellite connectivity when you're offline, though that's a situation I have yet to encounter. Regardless of where you use it, a lot of the process of connecting to a satellite is similar to that on the iPhone 14 and newer. If you've never tried that before, hang tight, as I will explain the steps a little further down.

Emergency satellite communications on the Apple Watch Ultra 3

There's also another screen where you might encounter a prompt to link to a satellite — in the phone dialer. Whether you're on the watch or iPhone, Apple imagines (and likely hopes) that dialing your local emergency hotline is your first step. Here in the US, that number is 911. Of course, as a socially responsible person, I didn't want to unnecessarily burden emergency services and did not try this out myself on the Watch Ultra 3. Instead, Apple representatives gave us a demo in Cupertino last week, and made a call to 911 that was routed to the company's own call centers.

As a reminder, the process for emergency SOS via satellite is different from using Messages or Find My via satellite because users are likely to be dialing their local services first and foremost. Only when that fails will the emergency satellite communications interface kick in. Once you select the Emergency SOS via Satellite option that appears after a few seconds or when your watch detects you're offline, you'll be shown a list of guidelines, recommending you be outside with a clear view of the sky and explaining that transmission will take longer than when sent over cellular networks.

After that, you'll be presented a series of multiple choice questions to inform rescue services of your condition and environment. Thanks to the Watch Ultra 3's larger screen, the system's large buttons and readable font weren't hard to see, and I could make out the options at arm's length. A few taps later, we had selected some answers indicating we were "lost or trapped," alone, unharmed and near steep terrain. The Apple representative performing our demo also opted to notify the emergency contacts set up on the Watch Ultra 3.



Once that was done, the watch displayed an interface similar to the version on the iPhone, featuring a glowing arc and translucent image of the earth. Words on the screen said "Try to get a clear view of the sky" and guided the wearer in various directions to attempt to connect to satellites passing overhead. After a link was established, the words "Sending report" appeared with a progress bar below.

We had to wait a minute and a half for the message to go through, which is quite long, but it was probably not the usual amount of time. At about 25 seconds in, it seemed like the connection was lost and had to be re-established. That may seem like a long while to hold your wrist up, but Apple did say you only need to lift your arm while establishing a connection to the satellite and not while the information was being sent. I believe the rep only had their arm up so we could more easily see the screen.

Finally, when the report had been delivered, the Watch Ultra 3 took us to the Message window showing a confirmation that the request had been received. It also tells the wearer to reply with “Stop” if emergency services were not or no longer required.

Using satellites to send Messages and your location

Outside of using satellite communications when you’re in need of emergency services, you can also send messages or share your location when you’re off the grid. This, again, mirrors the iPhone version of this service. You can go to the Find My app on the Watch Ultra 3 to share your location when you’re out of coverage, and your position can be shared up to once every 15 minutes to previously added contacts. In the Messages app on the watch, you can contact people you’ve chatted with in the last 30 days.

In my experience, it was easiest to add Satellite as a complication to a watch face. Tapping the button will bring up the Satellite screen with options to try a demo, go to Messages, share your location or contact emergency services. Like on the iPhone, the demo is there for users to get familiar with the process of connecting to a satellite, so they’re not completely unfamiliar in high pressure situations.

Unfortunately, as I spent most of my time with the Ultra 3 so far in areas that had good coverage and signal, I never really got a chance to try to send a message or my location via satellite. First world problems, I know. I’ll embark on an adventure upstate soon to check it out, though, and will report back after.

Those unfamiliar with Messages or Find My via Satellite on iPhones may wonder why those features exist. It’s not just for the frivolous desire to play with a novel feature. You can send texts, emojis and tapback reactions to let a loved one know you arrived in the desert safely for Burning Man, for example. Texts go through with a delivery message that says “sent via Satellite,” so your recipient will understand you have limited connectivity and can’t engage in a full-blown tea-spilling session right then.

Or, if you’re like my partner and sometimes go camping in the middle of nowhere, sharing your location when you’ve arrived at your campsite can bring some peace of

mind. (Note: I don't go camping.) My partner tends to favor forested areas, though, where satellite connectivity would struggle with the dense foliage, hampering its usefulness.

To be very clear, emergency SOS via Satellite will be supported on all models of the Watch Ultra 3, but satellite communications for Messages and Find My require a paid cellular plan. With all purchases of the Ultra 3, Apple is providing two years of satellite service for emergency, Messages and Find My.

Apple Watch Ultra 3 vs Pixel Watch 4: The satellite comparison

That's somewhat similar to Google's approach for [the Pixel Watch 4](#), where Satellite SOS "is included at no additional charge for 2 years after launch." However, only the LTE models of the Pixel Watch support its satellite feature, and it's only available in the contiguous United States at the moment. Google's version also uses Skylo's Narrowband Non-Terrestrial Network (NB-NTN), and adopts similar haptic and audio cues to the Watch Ultra 3's in the connecting process. One area that appears to be different is that the Pixel Watch 4 will offer a "check replies" button that [Google says](#) "guides you to re-establish connection for updates from emergency services as needed."

Meanwhile, Apple's Find My and emergency satellite features will work in 18 countries at launch, including the US, UK, Japan, Switzerland, Australia and others. Messages via satellite is limited to Mexico, Canada and the US at the moment.

Other testing impressions of the Apple Watch Ultra 3



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As I continue to put the [Watch Ultra 3](#) through its paces, it's worth noting what changes the latest model has over its predecessor. Like I mentioned, it has a larger display while maintaining the same size, thanks to thinner bezels (which Apple said are 24 percent slimmer). It also uses an LTPO 3 panel that enables a faster refresh rate in Always On mode, as well as wide-angle OLEDs for easier reading at off angles.

I've found the Watch Ultra 3 lightweight and comfortable to wear so far, and I enjoy tapping buttons or reading messages on its 49mm screen.

Unfortunately, I am also a person who wears long-sleeved shirts that are snug at the wrist, making the bigger watches a harder sell, especially as the weather gets colder here in New York. I did find it amusing when the Night mode got triggered any time I

tucked the Ultra 3 under my sleeve, turning the watch face's dials, complications and other elements red.

The Watch Ultra 3 gets the same 5G support, hypertension notifications and Sleep Score as the Series 11, along with watchOS 26 upgrades like Workout Buddy and Liquid Glass. I need a few more days with the Ultra 3 before I can vouch for its 42-hour battery estimate, but it's nice to see longer runtimes on an endurance watch.

My evaluation of those new features and whether they add up to a meaningful package will be ready soon in a full review. In the meantime, the Apple Watch Ultra 3 is available for pre-order and will arrive in stores on September 19.