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Beats solo review

The Beats Solo 3 arrives at a crucial time in the wireless headphone business. Apple has drawn a line in the sand with its decision to boot out the 3.5mm headphone jack from the iPhone 7 and, regardless of your thoughts on Apple's intentions, this has pushed wireless audio tech very much into the mainstream. The cable-free design of Apple's AirPods might have become an ergonomically disputed icon for the wireless revolution, but the real powerhouse is Apple's W1 chip - the company's new wireless communications processor. Providing a shot in the arm to Bluetooth pairing and battery life, it's the W1 chip that arguably makes wireless headphones a more practical reality - and it's the W1 chip that goes a long way to making the Beats Solo 3 a standout pair of headphones. **Beats Solo 3 review: Design**Visually, there's nothing revolutionary here. In fact, you'd be hard-pressed to find any major aesthetic differences between the Solo 2 and the Solo 3. Beats has stuck with plastic over metal, which doesn't provide the Solo 3 with any obviously upscaled touches, but it looks stylish and keeps the headphones lightweight. The top band is cushioned, as are the ear cups that mould snugly to your head. Fold the headphones up and they fit tightly into the supplied compact case, and they snap back into position with reassuring firmness. Beats has taken a page out of Apple's book when it comes to simplicity of design, with buttons and other flim-flam kept to a minimum. There's a small button on the right earpiece to turn the headphones on and off and to pair the headphones. Below this is a row of five small LEDs that indicate battery life. On the left earpiece, there's a big central button to play/pause audio, and buttons above and below to control volume. These aren't touch-sensitive gesture controls, but rather physical buttons embedded into the outer surface of the ear cup. **Image 2 of 4**To match the iPhone 7, the Solo 3 is available in a range of six colours: gloss black, gloss white, silver, gold, rose gold and black. The matte black pair I received didn't chip or peel during my time with them, but if you go for the gloss coat then you'll have to get used to seeing your own fingerprints. **READ NEXT: Our guide to the best wireless headphones you can buy****Beats Solo 3 review: Battery life**The battery life on the Beat Solo 3 is frankly excellent. The Solo 2 was able to muster 12 hours before charging, and more expensive headsets such as the Bowers & Wilkins P7 can make 17 hours. Thanks to the W1 chip, the Beats Solo 3 blows these out of the water with a hugely impressive 40 hours of battery life. That's enough to cover you for six transatlantic flights worth of music, radio and podcast listening, or your entire working week, Monday to Friday. If you listen to music with headphones only sparingly - say, two hours a day - it could be three weeks before you need to recharge the Beats Solo 3. **Image 3 of 4**Even if, like me, you're slightly obsessive about having the power stores close to 100% each morning, the Solo 3's quick-charging "Fast Fuel" feature translates five minutes of charging to three hours of listening time - seriously useful, if you find yourself running out of juice just before heading home. And if you can't wait five minutes then there's always the Solo 3's headphone jack. Beats includes a 3.5mm cable for wired listening, although you'll need to connect that with Apple's stubby adapter if your phone doesn't have a 3.5mm port. **Beats Solo 3: Pairing**Aside from battery life, the W1 chip makes pairing with the Beats Solo 3 a painless task. While Bluetooth pairing has improved across the board in recent years, the W1 chip gives an added leg up to Apple products. It uses regular Bluetooth along with the AAC codec to transfer audio, but offers instant pairing with your iPhone, Apple Watch and Mac (with macOS Sierra). As long as you've updated to iOS 10, you only need to hold your phone next to the headphones and a screen will slide up asking you to connect. You don't need to root around Bluetooth settings or a list of connectable devices, just accept and you're on your way. **READ NEXT: The best Bluetooth speakers to buy**My experience with the Solo 3's pairing was seamless. Following a week of use, I didn't encounter anything in the way of drop-outs or forgotten connections. Each time I turned on the headphones, they'd connect to my iPhone within a few seconds and maintained connection throughout. The downside to all this is, if you have iOS 9 or earlier or an Android device then you won't benefit from the W1's ease of pairing. Instead, you'll have to use the standard pairing mode. This still seemed to work in practice when tested with a Samsung Galaxy S7. **Image 4 of 4**The Solo 3 also has a built-in microphone for making calls that does the job, but in my experience it doesn't capture voice as clearly as holding a phone to your face. It's a useful addition, though, and stops you having to tear the headphones away from your face before answering calls on the go. **READ NEXT: The best true wireless earbuds to buy****Beats Solo 3 review: Sound quality**The name Beats carries a number of associations, very much dependent on who you're asking. Placements with high-profile music and sports stars have helped catapult the brand to a level of popularity few other headphone brands have achieved. Among audiophiles, however, the name is synonymous with sound levels that emphasize bass over all else. The Solo 3 doesn't quite scoop out the mid-level range to the extent of older Beats headphones, but it's still very much tuned to heavy lows and highs. This means the Solo 3 packs a punch when you first use it, but lacks a degree of subtlety on closer listening. Compared to the high-end wired Audio-Technica ATH-MSR7NC, for example, the constituent parts of music can come across less like a surgically precise map, and more like a clouded glass of sound. Whether this is something to care about largely depends on the type of music to which you listen. Contemporary pop and hip-hop sound great, but detail-rich electronica and classical music can sound muddled. Of course, Beats is aiming straight down the barrel at millennials with mainstream tastes and a bit of disposable income, so while the sound quality in the Beats Solo 3 can't compete with a handful of expensive, wired audiophile headsets, it's pitched very well for modern popular music. Unlike the Bose QuietComfort 35 and AKG N60 NC, the Beats Solo 3 lacks active noise cancellation, but its close-fitting on-ear cups do a good job of cutting down environmental sounds without detaching you completely from what's happening around you. **Beats Solo 3 review: Verdict**Looking at sound quality on its own may leave you questioning the £250 price tag, but Beats has never been about sound alone. The argument used to be that you're paying for fashion, but with the Solo 3 you're paying for a lot more than that. You're also getting great battery life and the exclusivity and ease-of-use of Apple's new wireless audio technology. It may look a lot like its Solo 2 predecessor, and it remains pricey, but the W1 chip adds a great deal to the Beats Solo 3 package. If you're an audiophile or need noise cancellation then you'll want to look elsewhere - maybe towards the more expensive Bowers & Wilkins P9 or the superb Bose QuietComfort 35 - but if you want a mainstream-leaning pair of wireless headphones with a dash of style, the Beats Solo 3 is a contender. Apple-owned Beats is moving into the on-ear noise-cancelling world with the Solo Pro, using the same chips that make the PowerBeats Pro and AirPods so good. The £269.95 Beats Solo Pro blends the design of the firm's existing Solo with the wired EP headphones for an attractive, modern and fairly sleek design. On-ear headphones sit with the cushions pressing against the ear, as opposed to the larger over-ear headphones that enclose your ear and sit against the side of your head. The Solo Pro are fairly large for on-ear headphones, with the cushions covering my ears. The headphones fold up for travel. **Photograph: Samuel Gibbs**The leatherette ear cups are well-padded and the soft-touch silicone headband stays in place on your dome. The ear cups articulate to fit as flat and as firmly on your ears as possible, while the metal arms slide into the headband for size adjustment. Despite a firm grip, the Solo Pro are among the most comfortable on-ear headphones I have tried. Over-ear headphones are definitely best for extended listening sessions but the Solo Pro stayed comfortable for up to a couple of hours before my ears needed a break. At 267g, the Solo Pro are about mid-weight for headphones. The arms fold into thirds to collapse down but the thick ear cups means they do not get quite as small as I would like for travelling. They ship with a soft recycled-felt case for protection but they feel robust enough to just toss in a bag. **Specifications**Weight: 267g Drivers: 40mm Connectivity: Apple H1 chip, Bluetooth 5.0 Lightning charging Bluetooth codecs: SBC, AAC Battery life: 22 hours ANC on, 40 hours ANC off Connectivity and controlsThe big Beats disc handles playback and volume controls. **Photograph: Samuel Gibbs**The GuardianApple's H1 wireless chip handles Bluetooth connectivity, the same system built into PowerBeats Pro, AirPods 2 and AirPods Pro. It enables instant-pairing and multi-device switching with all Apple-made smartphones, tablets and computers, plus hands-free "Hey Siri" support for the firm's voice assistant and audio sharing on iPhones and iPads. The Beats app on Android also provides some of the same functionality. You can pair your headphones using the app - it will show battery level when you turn them on in a little on-screen pop-up and manage various settings. The Bluetooth connection to a variety of devices including an iPhone 11 Pro, Samsung Galaxy Z Flip and Microsoft Surface Pro 6 was rock solid. You can use them wired with a special Lightning to 3.5mm cable (£35) but it is not included in the box. The outside of the right ear cup hides volume and playback controls under the large Beats-logo disc. Press it up or down to adjust volume. Press the logo in once for pause/play, twice to skip forward and thrice to skip back. Press and hold it to activate Siri on an iPhone, iPad or Mac, or Google Assistant on an Android phone. A small button on the bottom of the left ear cup swaps between noise cancelling on, off and a transparency setting, which pipes the sounds from the outside world into the headphones. Press and hold the button to pair another device. The headphones turn off and on by folding and unfolding them but taking them off does not pause the music, as has become common with high-end headphones. Sound and noise cancellingThe ear cups do a good job of passively blocking out sound, even if you don't want to use noise cancelling. **Photograph: Samuel Gibbs**The GuardianThe Solo Pro have some of the more effective noise cancelling I have tried with on-ear headphones, which typically struggle to compete with a large set of over-ear noise cancellers. Road noise, engine drone and background office noise was reduced, while noisy commuters were slightly quietened. The headphones do a fairly good job of passively blocking out noise without noise cancelling active, too. They can't quite match B&W, Bose or Sony but the Beats aren't that far behind. The Solo Pro are also some of the best-sounding Beats headphones I have listened to. They produce clear, precise sound that is almost clinical at times, with well-controlled and punchy bass, pleasing mids and crisp highs. You can hear every note in complex tracks such as the Who's Baba O'Riley. Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong sounded particularly good in Summertime, while they handled classical music well, too. Dr Dre sounds good, so does high-energy electronica such as Edge by Cicada. But they sound best with punchy rock and pop. Play Highly Suspicions by My Morning Jacket and they really come alive. The Solo Pro sound best with active noise cancelling turned off, producing deeper, richer bass including the pulsating low tones in Crystallize by Lindsey Stirling. **Battery life**The Lightning port takes care of charging and can be used for wired listening with an optional cable. **Photograph: Samuel Gibbs**The GuardianThe Solo Pro last just over 22 hours between charges using noise cancelling. They are rated to last up to 40 hours with noise cancelling switched off. Charging is via Apple's proprietary Lightning cable, including those supplied with iPhones. A USB-A to Lightning cable is included in the box. A 10-minute charge provides enough battery for up to three hours of playback, while a full charge takes one hour and 45 minutes. **Sustainability**The padded felt case is made from recycled plastic. **Photograph: Samuel Gibbs**The GuardianApple doesn't provide a rating for the number of charge cycles expected from the battery in the Solo Pro but it is replaceable and the headphones are generally repairable. It costs £82.44 to replace the battery and £166.44 for other repairs out of warranty. The Solo Pro are made of up to 36% recycled plastic, while the felt case is made of recycled plastic. Apple also offers trade-in and free recycling schemes, including for non-Apple products. **Observations**It feels as if the control disc on the right ear cup should turn for volume control but it doesn't. The headphones were more comfortable on the ears with the headband pushed further back on my head than normal. Call quality was good with both ends of the conversation clear, although the other end could hear some background noise at times. **Price**The Beats Solo Pro cost £269.95 and are available in a range of single and two-tone colours. For comparison, Marshall's Monitor II ANC cost £300, Bose Noise-Cancelling Headphones 700 cost £350, Bowers & Wilkins PX7 cost £350 and Beats Studio 3 Wireless cost £300. **Verdict**The Beats Solo Pro are a great set of on-ear noise-cancelling headphones. They sound good, have solid noise cancelling and are comfortable and stable on your head. Bluetooth connectivity is rock-solid and the battery lasts long enough for the weekly commute or flights. Apple's H1 chip enables a whole host of convenient features with the firm's devices, while the Beats app brings some of them to Android, too. It is disappointing that a 3.5mm to Lightning cable is not included in the box, and they are certainly expensive. But at least you are not just paying for a big flashy brand any more. If you like on-ear headphones and want a good-sounding, noise-cancelling set, then you can't go far wrong with the Beats Solo Pro - particularly if you use Apple gear. **Pros:** good battery life, good sound, good controls, good noise cancelling, instant pairing with Apple with H1 chip, robust, comfortable for on-ear headphones, strong Bluetooth **Cons:** expensive, no headphones cable in the box, need to turn off ANC for best sound, no pause on remove, no support for aptX or better The Solo Pro look good in black but look best in two-tone white. **Photograph: Samuel Gibbs**The GuardianOther reviews This article contains affiliate links, which means we may earn a small commission if a reader clicks through and makes a purchase. All our journalism is independent and is in no way influenced by any advertiser or commercial initiative. By clicking on an affiliate link, you accept that third-party cookies will be set. 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