

Best Buy television surround-sound kits

We've found home cinema systems that give maximum sound for minimum cost

A home cinema system might sound like the sort of luxury you could live without in these difficult financial times. But if you are staying in rather than going out to save money, an entertainment package that boosts the sound of your TV and gets you closer to a cinema experience could be money well spent.

We've tested 14 systems that all cost less than £500 – and found a £150 option that our testers rated as a Best Buy.

In the systems we tested, speakers placed around the room bombard you with sound giving the impression that you're in the thick of the action. A kit – the simplest and cheapest option – usually includes an amplifier, speakers, cables, a radio tuner and DVD player.

The latest trends in the world of home cinema include the advent of wireless rear speakers (see 'Expert view' opposite). It's a development that is likely to grow – Ofcom has given permission for a small part of the radio spectrum to be used for wireless home cinema. This will allow HD signals to be sent from set-top boxes and other video sources directly to a TV without the need for cables.

Surrounding yourself with sound needn't cost a fortune. Our cheapest Best Buy, the LG HT304SU (£150 on the high street or £121 online) is a bargain. It costs less than many mediocre 2.1 kits, and its online price is less than a quarter of the price of our top-scoring Best Buy, the Pioneer XV-LX03 (£499).



Expert view

Which? home cinema expert Dave Holes explains why a 5.1 system will always be better than a 2.1 system, and why you might consider going wireless



2.1 SYSTEMS

A 2.1 system comprises two front speakers and a subwoofer – a 3.1 system has an extra front speaker that sits in the centre. Because these systems lack speakers placed around the room to bombard you with sound, they try to create this artificially.

Electronic processing is used to try to create a pseudo surround-sound effect. But this is never as good as a 5.1 system, and no 2.1 system has ever been a Which? Best Buy.

Those who want fewer wires or don't have space for additional speakers might find 2.1 systems appealing, and they are a good choice for someone wanting a basic system, as they're easier to set up.

BUYING GUIDE The best-performing 2.1 system this time around is the Philips HTS4600/12 – its 56% score is a long way off our Best Buys (see p36-37), though it's a reasonably priced kit.



5.1 SYSTEMS

A 5.1 system, the best for full surround-sound effect, has three front speakers, two rear speakers and a subwoofer.

A 7.1 system has two more rear speakers, but these don't add much to the surround effect.

All 5.1 systems we tested give good surround impression – with a 5.1 system, the sounds all seem to be coming from the right place. During dialogue, for example, the voices are heard front and centre, while more general background sounds seem clearly as though they are coming from behind you.

This is something that 2.1 systems cannot produce – they tend to blur the sound somewhat and it loses direction. **BUYING GUIDE** More speakers doesn't necessarily mean more money – many good 5.1 systems cost less than an average 2.1 performer – as shown by the £150 Best Buy LG HT304SU (see p36-37).



WIRELESS SYSTEMS

The downside of home cinema is the amount of speaker cable snaking round your living room.

One solution to this problem is to buy a system with wireless rear speakers.

Wireless kits are very similar to wired kits, but they have a transmitter which allows the rear speakers to operate wirelessly. Though you won't need cabling to the amplifier, they still need a mains socket near the speakers.

Since many systems come with tiny satellite or bookshelf-style rear speakers that can be wall mounted, a kit with wireless rear speakers allow you to remove a lot of clutter.

BUYING GUIDE The Samsung HT-Z220 and HT-TZ222 systems (see p37) have this as an option, as do other kits we've tested previously (reviews of which you'll find at www.which.co.uk/homecinema), but they're not Best Buys.

Jargon buster

What surround sound is, what our experts look for in surround effect, and what DivX and USB direct recording mean

■ SURROUND SOUND

Home cinema systems deliver surround sound if they're fed with a surround-sound signal. The effect is most obvious in action scenes, but it's also used for ambient

effects, such as background chatter in a bar scene. Blu-ray discs, modern DVDs and some Sky and Freesat shows have 5.1 surround information, but Freeview doesn't – TV shows broadcast



in 5.1 surround sound are few and far between.

■ **DivX** Means the player is compatible with DivX, a file format that can compress movies to fit on a CD up to 10 times smaller than a typical DVD.

■ **SURROUND EFFECT** Our experts give their view of how effective the surround sound is when watching movies and concerts. They're looking for sound that surrounds you and

makes you feel like you are in the middle of the action.

■ USB DIRECT RECORDING

Lets you connect an MP3 player to the system and record music direct from CDs.



Pioneer XV-LX03 £499

Which? test score 71%

PROS A top-end Best Buy with good sound and picture quality and an award-winning design. It's versatile, with two centre speakers that are operated parallel in a normal 5.1 configuration, while other configurations are possible. Replacement speaker plugs allow you to use different or longer cables. There is a USB slot for playing MP3s, or you can dock your MP3 player to the system

and control it with the system remote. It's the easiest to use of our Best Buys, helped by a detailed instruction manual where different set ups are described with sketches.

CONS Tuning could be simpler, and the centre speaker setup is complicated. It's one of the more expensive kits we've tested.

Full review at www.which.co.uk/pioneerxvix03

We found it cheapest at John Lewis
Also available at Comet



LG HT554PH £280

Which? test score 69%

PROS This LG offers good sound quality in stereo mode, and the surround-sound effect is also good. The rear speakers are ready for wall mounting and are supplied with a generous 10 meters of cable. This system offers top-notch error correction for faulty CDs and DVDs, and can playback and record MP3 tracks direct from a USB drive. It also offers the best picture quality

of all the home cinema kits in our most recent tests.

CONS This kit is a pain to set up and tune, thanks to a complicated system of setting the speaker distances. It isn't the easiest system to use either, and both amplifier and tuner displays are hard to read. We also found a delayed reaction with the skip function.

Full review at www.which.co.uk/lght554ph

We found it cheapest at Currys



LG HT304SU £150

Which? test score 68%

PROS The LG HT304SU scores well and, at £150, the price is very reasonable for a 5.1 system. Sound quality is good in both stereo and surround-sound modes. Surround effect and picture quality are also good. Error correction with CDs and DVDs works well, and disc access times are faster than average. Both MP3 playback and recording are possible via the USB slot.

CONS Usability is the Achilles heel of this bargain system. It isn't the easiest to set up and connect, nor is it the easiest to use. Cables for both front and rear speakers are a bit short, the amplifier display is dark and reflective and the remote control doesn't have a great working range.

Full review at www.which.co.uk/lght304su

We found it cheapest at John Lewis
Also available at Currys, Tesco



Which? tests first Blu-ray home cinema system

We've tested one of the first Blu-ray kits on the market for high-definition video and audio – the Samsung HT-BD 1250 (£500). It's a decent-scoring 5.1 system, but it's not good enough to trouble our Best Buys. Sound quality is

just average in both stereo and surround-sound modes. The centre speaker sounds dull, which limits the quality of movie soundtracks. It boasts a hard disk, as well as a LAN connector that lets you stream content from a PC.



PHOTOGRAPHY SHUTTERSTOCK

MODEL	SPECIFICATION							WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE							SCORE (%)
	PRICE (£)	TYPE	RDS	DIGITAL INPUT	USB	FULL AUTOMATIC SET-UP	WIRELESS REAR SPEAKERS	TUNER	SURROUND-SOUND EFFECT	SURROUND-SOUND QUALITY	STEREO SOUND QUALITY	DVD PICTURE QUALITY	SETTING UP AND TUNING	EASE OF USE	
PIONEER XV-LX03	499	5.1	✓	0	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	71
LG HT554PH	280	5.1		0	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★	★★	69
LG HT304SU	150	5.1	✓	N	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★	68
PANASONIC SC-PT470EF-K	250	5.1	✓	0	✓			★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	67
SAMSUNG HT-Z220	167	5.1	✓	0	✓		✓	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	65
SONY DAV-DZ280	230	5.1	✓	N	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★	65
PHILIPS HTS 3270/12	215	5.1	✓	C,0	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★	★★★★	63
PHILIPS HTS 3377/12	202	5.1	✓	C,0	✓			★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★	★★★★	63
SAMSUNG HT-BD 1250	450	5.1	✓	0	✓			★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	63
SAMSUNG HT-TZ222	190	5.1	✓	0	✓		✓	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	59
PHILIPS HTS4600/12	200	2.1	✓	C,0	✓			★★	★	★★	★★	★★★★★	★	★★★★	56
SONY DAV-F200	277	2.1	✓	0	✓	✓		★★★★	★	★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	55
LG HT33S	250	2.1	✓	0	✓			★★★★	★	★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★	★★	53
SAMSUNG HT-X620	240	2.1		0	✓			★★★★	★	★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★	★★	50

USING THE TABLE

The more stars the better.

Specification

Price See p29. **RDS** Radio Data System. This shows details such as station or track names. **Digital input** Lets you connect to a source such as a Sky+ box. O = optical, C = coaxial, N = none. **USB** Lets you connect to a flash drive or memory stick. **Full automatic**

set-up A microphone placed at your sitting position allows the system to set speaker volumes and delay times. **Wireless rear speakers** Whether wireless rear speakers are an option.

Which? test performance

Tuner How well weak stations are picked up and unwanted noise eliminated. **Surround-sound effect/Surround-sound quality/Stereo sound quality/**

DVD picture quality Ratings based on our expert panel's views. **Ease of use** Includes remote control, instructions and using the system.

Score

This ignores price and is based on:
Performance
Ease of use
Features and connections
Power use

65%
20%
10%
5%

Contacts

LG 0870 873 5454 www.lge.co.uk

Panasonic 0844 844 3852
www.panasonic.co.uk

Philips 01293 776675
www.philips.co.uk

Pioneer 0870 600 1539
www.pioneer.co.uk

Samsung 0870 726 7864
www.samsung.co.uk

Sony 0870 240 6354 www.sony.co.uk

BEST BUY COMPETITION

Win a Best Buy home cinema system worth £499

We're giving you the chance to win one of three Best Buy Pioneer XV-LX03 home cinema systems.

To enter, simply answer the following question:
How many centre speakers does the Pioneer XV-LX03 have? a) Four b) One c) Two

To enter the competition, go to www.which.co.uk/bestbuycompetition or send your entry on a postcard to Best Buy Oct 09, Which?, PO Box 44, Hertford X SG14 1LH. Include your name, address, and daytime phone number. Entries received by 15 October 2009 will be eligible. Competition is open only to current Which? members. Only one entry per household. See www.which.co.uk/bestbuycompetition for full conditions of entry.

Which.co.uk Set up your home cinema system

Are you having trouble deciphering that tangled mess of cords, or can't seem to get all the speakers positioned just right for the best surround-sound effect?

At www.which.co.uk/cinemasetup, we have tons of advice that will help you set up your home cinema system, including top tips for different room configurations.

And if you're still confused, watch us set one up in our step-by-step video at www.which.co.uk/homecinemavideo.

