

Personal video recorder

NEED TO KNOW

Analysts predict that a third of us will own a personal video recorder (PVR) by 2012. These new devices record digital TV programmes to an internal hard disk, rather than to removable tapes or DVDs. You can buy simple hard-disk recorders, but the beauty of a true PVR lies in its simplicity. It works with on-screen electronic programme guides to make recording from TV as easy as pressing a button.

The PVRs on test work with either Sky's digital satellite TV service or the Freeview digital terrestrial service. There are currently no PVRs that work with cable TV, though Telewest is planning to launch one.

PVRs are noisier than VCRs or DVD recorders: in a quiet room, you can hear their fans or the whirring of the hard disk. If you're worried, try the machine before you buy.

RECORDING CAPACITY

Hard-disk capacities vary but all the machines here let you record at least 20 hours of programmes. The table shows typical figures – actual capacity depends on the rate at which the TV channel transmits data. Some Freeview PVRs let you compress recordings to increase capacity, but this reduces picture quality. To free up space when the disk is full, you'll have to delete recordings or download them to a VCR or DVD recorder. PVRs with built-in recordable DVD drives are due to launch later this year.

BEST ON TEST

BEST BUYS

The PVRs tested are all so good that they're Best Buys. All have picture and sound quality as good as live TV.

The **Sky+ 160 (1)** has 80 hours' capacity – four times that of the original **Sky+ (2)**. It costs £399 and existing customers also pay £60 for installation. The older Sky+ is £99 (£199 plus £60 installation for existing customers). For both boxes, you also need to pay £10 a month on top of your existing channel subscription, though this is waived if you subscribe to two premium Sky channels.

The **Humax (3)**, which works with Freeview, is £170 from Comet, Currys, Dixons and Miller Brothers. It has 40

1 Sky+ 160

hours' recording capacity but just one tuner. This means that, unless you have a Freeview box or integrated digital TV, you can't watch one digital channel while you're recording another.

The **Thomson (4)**, £200 from Comet and Miller Brothers, also works with Freeview. It stores 20 hours and has twin tuners.

The **DigiFusion (5)** is also for Freeview. It can store 20 hours of recordings and has two tuners. The electronic programme guide is less useful than that on the other PVRs as the text is small and it doesn't show programme end times. It costs £180 from Currys and John Lewis.

PAUSING LIVE TV

If your TV viewing is interrupted – by a phone call, say – just hit 'pause' on the PVR's remote. It immediately starts recording. When you're ready, just press pause again and it plays the programme from where you left off. It continues to record while you're watching the delayed footage so you don't miss out.



PVRs let you 'pause' live TV

WHICH? EXTRA

Find out more about PVRs – including test results for new models as they appear – at www.which.co.uk/pvrs

Your digital TV options

There are three main ways to access digital TV channels. The simplest and cheapest is via the **Freeview** terrestrial service through your normal aerial. There's no monthly fee or anything else to pay once you've bought a set-top box (from around £40). You can access around 30 TV channels plus a host of digital radio stations. Go to www.freeview.co.uk to find out whether your area is covered and whether your aerial is likely to need upgrading.

Sky's satellite service (www.sky.com) is available nationwide, but you need a satellite dish. This may not be possible in some flats, or if planning rules don't allow. Check with your local council.

With Sky's FreeSat service (www.freesatfromsky.co.uk), you pay a one-off £150 fee for a basic range of channels. For more channels, you pay a monthly fee instead. The most expensive monthly packages include premium channels such as sports or movies.

The third option is **cable**, available if you live in the NTL or Telewest coverage areas (see www.ntl.co.uk and www.telewest.co.uk). You can choose from various monthly subscriptions, depending on the channels you want to watch. Both companies provide telephone and broadband internet, too, and offer 'bundles' of services including digital TV. See *Which?*, November 2004, p49, for a comparison of the various services and prices.

SEARCHING FOR RECORDINGS

Recorded programmes are all listed on screen, with the programme name, date and time. This makes it easy to find what you're looking for, with no more fast-forwarding tapes looking for that elusive recording.

RECORDING WITH THE EPG

All PVRs display an on-screen electronic programme guide (EPG), showing TV listings for the next seven days. This works in the same way as guides used by digital set-top boxes, with details transmitted via your satellite dish or aerial.

To set up a recording, highlight your chosen programme using the remote control. Sky+ boxes have a handy series link feature that lets you instruct the box to record all episodes of a series. If the schedule changes, the TV channel should automatically update the EPG so you won't miss anything.

The Humax (3) EPG is the easiest to use, whereas the DigiFusion (5) guide uses small text and doesn't show programme end times.



An EPG makes recording child's play

TWIN TUNERS

PVRs with twin tuners let you watch one digital programme while you record another. If you have one digital set-top box connected to a VCR, you can't do this as there's just one digital tuner in the box, and the VCR contains only an analogue tuner. The Sky+ 160 box lets you take things even further – you can simultaneously record two programmes from two different channels, while also watching something you've previously recorded.



WIN

We've got 15 Thomson or Sky+ PVRs to give away

See p56 for details

TABLE NOTES

We tested all available PVRs.

Specification

Price Lowest widely available high-street price. **Monthly fee** Sky waives its fees if you subscribe to certain packages of channels. **Works with** PVRs work with Sky (satellite) or Freeview (terrestrial).

Features

Capacity The typical maximum hours the disk can store. **Series link** You can instruct the PVR to automatically record all episodes of a series. **Record/watch** Twin tuners let you watch one digital channel while recording another.

Performance

Picture and Sound In standard play, picture and sound quality are as good as watching live TV.

Ease of use How easy it is to set up, program and play.

KEY

★ ☆ ○ ● ●
Best Worst
■ Best Buy

SCORE

This ignores price and is based on:

Picture quality	30%
Sound quality	30%
Ease of use	20%
Features	20%

Personal video recorders (PVRs)

MODEL

	Specification			Features			Performance			Score (%)
	Price (£)	Monthly fee (£)	Works with	Capacity (hours)	Series link	Record/watch	Picture	Sound	Ease of use	
1 Sky+ 160	399 ^a	10	Sky	80	✓	✓	★	★	★	94
2 Sky+	99 ^b	10	Sky	20	✓	✓	★	★	★	93
3 Humax PVR8000T-80	170		Freeview	40			★	★	☆	87
4 Thomson DHD4000	200		Freeview	20		✓	★	★	○	85
5 DigiFusion FVRT100	180		Freeview	20		✓	★	★	●	81

^a Installation is free for new subscribers, £60 for existing subscribers

^b New subscriber price (includes installation). Existing subscribers pay £199 plus £60 installation