

PVRs

NEED TO KNOW

A personal video recorder, or PVR, is an alternative to a set-top box and VCR or DVD recorder. It allows you to access and record digital programmes on to an internal hard drive.

RECORDING

Compared with a VCR, recording is a cinch: you simply select the show you want from an on-screen electronic programme guide (EPG) and press record on your remote. Most models let you record one channel while watching another – something you can't do with a separate set-top box and VCR.

The machines we tested allow you to store between 20 and 80 hours' worth of television on a standard recording setting. Some allow you to compress recordings to increase the overall capacity, but this affects the picture quality.

If you like to keep recordings, you can transfer recorded programmes on to videotape or DVD by connecting the PVR to a VCR or DVD recorder. In January we'll report on a new combined PVR and DVD recorder, the Sony RDR-HX710.

COMPATIBILITY

PVRs work either with Sky's digital satellite TV service or the Freeview digital terrestrial service. Sky incorporates the channels available on Freeview as well as its own channels. Telewest and NTL say they'll launch PVRs compatible with their cable services early next year.



BEST BUYS

All the PVRs on test provide superb picture and sound – as good as live TV. So we've made them all Best Buys. Some models, though, are easier to use than others.

Sky's PVRs – the **Sky+ 160 (1)** and the **Sky+ (2)** are the best. They are essentially the same model but the Sky+160 can store up to 80 hours of recorded programmes while the Sky+ can store up to 40 hours. They are easy to use and do well in all our tests. The Sky+160 is being phased out in favour of the Sky+ so it's not widely available. It costs £199, including installation, for new customers. Existing Sky customers have to pay an additional £60 installation charge. The Sky+ costs just £99 for new customers, including installation. But existing customers are charged £199 plus £60 installation. Sky says this is because it subsidises equipment for new customers and that existing customers will have benefited from subsidies when they originally signed up.

There is also an extra £10 monthly subscription charge, which is waived if you subscribe to two Sky premium channels. The cheapest package offering two premium channels costs £34 a month.

All other models on test work with Freeview's service. The **Humax (3)**, £132 from Miller Brothers, was the only model that didn't have a twin tuner. This means you can't watch one digital programme while recording another unless you have an IDTV (integrated digital television) or a set-top

PAUSING LIVE TV

A PVR lets you pause live TV. So if you're in the middle of watching a football match and the phone rings, you can simply press pause on your remote control and the PVR will start recording. Once you've finished your phone conversation, press pause again, and carry on watching the programme from where you left off. It will record the show you are watching continuously so you'll never miss a crucial TV moment.



EDITING TO SUIT YOUR VIEWING

Some PVRs have editing facilities that allow you to delete parts of a recording, such as the adverts and credits. The Panasonic allows you to split programmes so, for example, you can divide a three-hour film into two parts. This Sagem does the opposite – it allows you to merge programmes so you can turn a three-part mini series into a single epic extravaganza.

box. It's easy to use, though, and can store 40 hours of recorded programmes.

The **Digifusion (4)**, £180 from Currys, Dixons and John Lewis, has a 14-day EPG. We found the TV listings on the EPG frustrating as it displays only the programme that is currently on – you have to scroll forward to find out what's next. It can also store 40 hours of programmes.

The **Sagem (5)**, £130 from Argos, has one of the smallest hard drives on test, so consider it only if you won't need to store more than 20 hours of programmes at a time. Its seven-day EPG allows you to view shows on only one channel at a time.

The **Topfield (6)**, £255 from independents, can store up to 80 hours of recorded programmes. You can display its eight-day EPG either

horizontally or vertically. It's the only Freeview model on test with a viewing card slot which allows you to subscribe to Top-up TV – a package of extra digital channels.

The **Thomson (7)**, £154 from Miller Brothers, stores just 20 hours of programmes but it has a 14-day EPG.

The **Panasonic (8)**, £229 from Miller Brothers, is tricky to get the hang of. Our lab experts found its EPG baffling to operate and its screen layout chaotic at first. But once they'd got to grips with it, they found it OK. It can store up to 40 hours of recorded programmes.

WHICH? EXTRA

If you're not ready to buy a PVR yet but will do so in a few months' time, check our latest results at www.which.co.uk/pvrs

**BEST
ON
TEST**



TWIN TUNERS

Most PVRs have twin digital tuners which allow you to watch one digital channel while you record another. Five models have gone even further – both the Sky+ models (1 and 2), the Digifusion (4), Topfield (6) and Panasonic (8) allow you to record two digital channels while watching something you've previously recorded into the bargain.



sky guide 6.43pm Wed 26 Oct ALL CHANNELS

Today	6.30pm	7.00pm	7.30pm
101 BBC 1 South	South Today	Casualty..	Real Sto..
102 BBC 2 England	Strictly C..	This World	How to Re..
103 ITV1 London	ITVEven..	Emmerdale	Coronati..
104 Channel 4	Hollyoaks	Channel 4 News	
105 five	Family Affa..	Arctic Glants: B..	
106 Sky One	Malcolm..	Simpsons	Simpsons
107 Sky Mix	Little Mon..	Star Trek: Voyager	
109 UKTV Gold	The A - T..	Doctor Who	
110 UKTV Gold +1	Casualty	The A - Team	
111 UKTV G2	UKTV Sport		

Page Up Page Down +24 Hours -24 Hours

RECORDING WITH THE EPG

Like set-top boxes, all PVRs use an electronic programme guide (EPG), which shows on-screen TV listings for between seven and 14 days ahead (depending on the model) for all the channels. You simply highlight the shows you want to record on the EPG and press record.

Both Sky+ boxes also have a feature called 'series link', which allows you to set the PVR to record all episodes of a programme automatically. It can also be programmed to avoid repeat showings, such as the Sunday afternoon *Eastenders* omnibus. If for some reason the programme schedule changes, the TV channel will automatically update the EPG and the PVR will adjust the recordings accordingly.

USING THE TABLE

We tested all available PVRs.

Specification

Price For Best Buys we give the cheapest widely available high-street price as we went to press.

Works with PVRs work with Sky (satellite) or Freeview (terrestrial).

Features

Capacity Our estimation of the number of hours of programming that can be stored on the hard drive. It assumes that two gigabytes equals one hour of recording. **EPG** The number of days ahead the EPG displays programme listings for.

Record/watch Models with a ✓ allow you to watch one digital channel while recording another.

Editing PVRs with a ✓ allow you to edit recorded programmes.

Performance

Picture In standard record, a ★ means it is as good as the original live TV broadcast.

Sound In standard record, a ★ means it is as good as the original live TV broadcast. **Ease** How easy it is to set up, program and play the PVR.

KEY

★ ☆ ○ ●
Best —————> Worst
■ Best Buy

SCORE

Ignores price and is based on:
Picture quality 30%
Sound quality 30%
Ease of use 20%
Features 20%

PVRs

MODEL

	Specification			Features				Performance			Score (%)
	Price (£)	Monthly fee (£)	Works with	Capacity (hours)	EPG (days)	Record/watch	Editing	Picture	Sound	Ease	
1 Sky+160	199 ^a	10 ^b	Sky	80	7	✓		★	★	★	94
2 Sky+	99 ^a	10 ^b	Sky	40	7	✓		★	★	★	93
3 Humax PVR8000T-80	132		Freeview	40	7			★	★	☆	87
4 Digifusion FVRT200	180		Freeview	40	14	✓	✓	★	★	○	86
5 Sagem PVR6200T	130		Freeview	20	7	✓	✓	★	★	○	86
6 Topfield TF5800PVR	255		Freeview	80	8	✓	✓	★	★	○	86
7 Thomson DHD4000	154		Freeview	20	14	✓		★	★	○	85
8 Panasonic TU-CTH100	229		Freeview	40	7	✓	✓	★	★	●	82

^a This price includes installation for new subscribers. Existing Sky subscribers have to pay £60 for installation ^b Waived if you subscribe to two Sky premium channels