

What should I look for in a digital camera?

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If you're thinking of buying a digital camera then you need to look at its size, the quality of the pictures you'll get, the number of pics it can store and how fast you can copy them to your PC, its battery life and - of course - the cost.

This is a long list, but you need to be sure that you're buying a camera that will do all the things you want.

You wouldn't want to buy the first camera you saw only to find there are cheaper models around that do everything you want.

What sort of photo

Ask yourself what sort of photos you're likely to take - will they mostly be holiday snaps or quick photos of the kids playing in the park?

Or do you want everyone in their best clothes with hair brushed and mouths wiped for the family portrait?

Do you want to carry the camera with you everywhere or does it only come out on special occasions?

If you only take the occasional photo then a cheaper, bigger camera might be all you need, but if you take it everywhere and want lots of pics you'll have to spend more for a pocket camera - one that's smaller and can hold lots of shots.

A professional model will be bigger and even more costly, just because it does so much.

How many dots

A cheap digital camera will take photos that look fine if you look at them on screen, send them via e-mail or put them onto a website, but they won't print out very well. That's because every picture you take is made up of lots of coloured dots, called 'pixels'.

Look really closely at any of the pics on this page and you'll see them. The more dots, the better the picture looks - but each dot takes up some computer **memory**.

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So the more dots you want in your digital photos the more memory you need - and the more your camera will cost.

Number of pixels	Look at on screen	Print in a document	Photo quality print
Around 1 million (1M)	Yes	Not very well	Don't even think about it

1.3-1.5M	Yes	OK	Small pictures only
2M	Yes	Good	Reasonable up to 8" by 10"
3M	Yes	Good	Excellent even for large prints
More than 3M	Yes	Brilliant	Good enough for use by professionals

What Can You See?

Cheaper digital cameras come with a viewfinder that you look through, just like an ordinary camera. But for a little more money you can get one with a screen in the back.

When you take a photo you get to see it on the screen, or you can even use it as a way of lining up your photo before you take it instead of looking through the viewfinder.

But the main reason is to have a look at the photo you've just taken - if it wasn't any good then you can get rid of it and take another.

Perfect for when Auntie Jane blows her nose at just the wrong time!

How many - how fast?

Each time you take a photo it gets stored on your camera, and that uses space in the camera's computer memory.

Most cameras, apart from budget ones, have a special card that stores the pictures - it might be called 'CompactFlash' or a 'Memory Stick' - and you can bung another one in, like putting a new film into an ordinary camera.

But these cards don't come cheap - expect to pay 30 pounds for something to store 36 photos.

Some cameras actually use an ordinary floppy disk to store the pictures, so you can just take it out and put it in your PC.

But a high quality photo can easily fill a whole disk, so this isn't as convenient as it might sound if you're taking dozens of snaps on a Spanish beach.

Power

A digital camera needs electricity to run - and that means batteries. A new set of four AA batteries every week can easily add up, so look for a camera that has rechargeable batteries in it, or invest in some separately.

When you're taking photos you'll probably turn the camera off when you're not using it, and most will turn off automatically after a short time.

But if you're spending a lot of time copying pictures to your PC it's really useful to have a power adaptor so you can plug the camera in - then you won't get annoyed when the batteries die halfway through!

Zooming in and other cool stuff

Most digital cameras let you zoom in on the action - some do this in the traditional way by moving the lens (it's called 'optical zoom') and some just magnify the image in the camera (this is 'digital zoom').

Digital zoom isn't as good as it can make the image more blurred, so look for optical zoom.

Almost all cameras apart from the budget models have a flash too, so you can take photos in poor light.

Apart from the top of the range expensive ones they are all fixed focus, so you don't have to worry about blurry pictures of the kids in the sea, and they do things like controlling the exposure and shutter speed automatically.

In fact, you'll have to pay a lot more if you're a serious photographer who wants to do that sort of thing for themselves.

Price and performance

Once you know how much you can afford then you can look around for a camera that does as much of the stuff you want at or under that price.

Camera	Price Range	Pictures you can print	Number of pictures the camera holds	Zoom lens
Budget	Under 100 pounds	Not really - mostly for looking at on screen	16-32	No
Point and Shoot	Around 150 pounds	Yes, but not great quality	32-64	Yes / No
Mid End Home User	Under 300 pounds	OK for standard photos	64+	Yes
High End Home User	Over 300 pounds	Yes - even large size	64+	Yes
Advanced	1000 pounds plus	Absolutely!	Could be thousands!	Yes