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THEY PUT YOU IN CONTROL OF TV

Personal video recorders enable you to pause live TV, record series with just one touch and store hundreds of shows on hard disk. John Archer tests five of the best

BEST FOR EXTRAS ON A BUDGET
VIRGIN MEDIA V+ £99 (plus subscription)



The hardware is similar to the Sky+ HD box but Virgin's high-def content (delivered over cable) is limited to BBC HD and a few pay-to-view films and shows. The V+ box displays HD as adeptly as Sky's but only when it comes to the extras does it stand out: a basic £16-a-month subscription includes a phone line, the Virgin Central TV-on-demand channel and hundreds of films (at up to £5 a time).

Verdict: Despite the high-speed promise of cable, the V+ is a little sluggish to respond. An upgraded box is promised for the spring.
 ★★☆☆☆
www.virginmedia.com/v+

BEST FOR RECORDING OPTIONS
PANASONIC DMR-EX88 £350

BEST BUY



The DMR-EX88 contains just a single Freeview digital tuner, but that's the only blot on its copybook. It has a 400GB hard disk and a recordable DVD drive so you can copy CDs onto the hard disk, or transfer recorded video onto DVD. The most economical recording option translates to 712 hours of viewing. The box can upscale standard-definition video and DVDs to 1080p.

Verdict: A vast array of features and exceptional picture quality, although it cannot display one channel while recording another.
 ★★★★★
www.panasonic.co.uk

BEST FOR MASSIVE DISK SPACE
TOPFIELD TF5810PVR £260



This Topfield's 500GB drive is large enough to store at least 250 hours of immaculate, uncompressed Freeview recordings from its twin tuners. You can even free up space by downloading software that allows you to edit out commercial breaks. There is also a picture-in-picture system, so you can watch two shows at once, plus 1080i upscaling of Freeview's standard definition signal.

Verdict: Delivers bags of features and loads of space — although that quality doesn't come cheap.
 ★★★★★☆
www.topfield.co.uk



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**BEST FOR SUBSCRIPTION-FREE HD
 HUMAX FOXSAT-HDR £300**



This PVR lets you watch and record standard-def channels — and some HD — from the Freesat digital satellite platform for free. HD and SD recordings from its two tuners are impeccable, and its 320GB hard disk is big enough for 80 hours of HD and 200 hours of SD. It's compatible with the sophisticated Freesat electronic programme guide, which is arguably superior to Sky's class-leading system.

Verdict: You're paying relatively heavily for an HD-capable machine that receives only 1½ HD channels: the BBC and some ITV shows.

★★★★☆

www.humaxdigital.com

**BEST FOR CHOICE OF HD CHANNELS
 SKY+ HD £49 (plus subscription)**



The satellite broadcaster's 31-channel high-definition service can be viewed only via its own twin-tuner Sky+ HD box. Lucky, then, that it's an excellent PVR. It handles an HD picture superbly when set to maximum resolution of 1080i. The box's price is low, but even the most basic mix of HD and SD channels costs £26.25 a month. And nearly half the 300GB disk is eaten up by Sky's download service.

Verdict: Both high and standard-def TV look great, but there's no upscaling option and you can store only about 40 hours of HD.

★★★★☆

www.sky.com/hd

SERVICES COMPARED

These five PVRs cover four digital broadcasting platforms.

Freeview This popular subscription-free service doesn't require a satellite dish or cable connection. It offers 48 digital television channels (all at standard definition) and 24 radio stations.

Freesat A subscription-free satellite broadcasting service offering about 140 digital TV channels and radio stations. You'll need to pay for a dish (although you can hook it up to an unused Sky dish). High-definition programming is limited to BBC HD, which screens shows from the corporation's various channels, and HD simulcasts (broadcasts going out at the same time as the standard version) of selected ITV1 shows.

Sky The satellite broadcaster — in which News Corporation, the parent company of The Sunday Times, has a 39.1% stake — will deliver more than 200 channels if you pop for a top-level, £65.75 monthly subscription. Thirty-one of those are in HD, including dedicated film and sports offerings.

Virgin Available mainly in urban areas served by a cable TV system, the Virgin Media service offers a three-tier package of 45, 100 and 165 channels. The top package costs £29.50 a month and includes a Virgin phone line.



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