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How to use amazon echo auto

Tyler Lizenby/CNET I love the idea of a voice assistant in my car: Hands-free calling, music requests, directions -- it seems like everything would become easier and safer. Can you imagine Alexa or Siri or Google Assistant guiding you in the same way a friend holding a smartphone might? "OK, you're not turning at this light, but at the next one." This vision isn't so far off, given many of the hands-free features in newer cars. But Amazon is offering a voice assistant co-pilot that could close the gap between the "almost-there" reality of car integration and the smart cars of the future. The problem is, Amazon's Echo Auto doesn't add enough to its usually homebound digital assistant to bring it confidently onto the road. First impressions Amazon's Echo Auto is invitation-only at the moment, but it's easily polished enough to go to market. For \$50, you get a power cable, an auxiliary cord, a stand and the device itself -- a small black box, near the dimensions of a tin of Altoids, which features the standard Action and Mute buttons, a light bar and eight far-field microphones. (It's not yet available in the UK or Australia, but the price converts to about £40 or AU\$75.)Installation, especially if you already use Alexa, is as seamless as the product is simple. You connect the stand to a vent, use its magnetic pad to hold the device in place, plug it in and connect to the Alexa App on your phone via Bluetooth. The power cable can plug into a USB charging port, or into the lighter port if you use the included adapter. And the Echo Auto can connect to your sound system with the auxiliary cord or Bluetooth. In both a 15-year-old Honda minivan and a brand-new Mustang convertible, I had the rig up and running within a minute. I like the simple aesthetic and ease of setup, though I'm not crazy about the idea of using my mobile data to power Alexa whenever I commute. Of course, for customers with unlimited data plans, that won't be a barrier, and honestly, I'm not sure there's any other solution for Amazon. Tyler Lizenby/CNET Going for a drive For people with newer cars, the Echo Auto will feel largely redundant. Sure, it lets you access music or make a call with a simple voice command rather than tapping your dash display, but those displays are built for easy access. In fact, because the Echo Auto doesn't offer step-by-step directions (when you ask for directions, it sends a push notification to your smartphone linking to a maps app), it still requires some engagement with your screen. This feels like a big missed opportunity, as the Echo Auto ends up relying on precisely what it's supposed to make outmoded. For people with older cars, on the other hand, Alexa in the passenger seat is a serious upgrade. You can easily request songs or playlists with Amazon Music, Spotify or any other Alexa-connected services you use; you can check traffic on the way home; you can make hands-free calls. Fifty bucks to close the features gap between 15- and 5-year-old cars isn't bad at all. One question remains, though: Is the Echo Auto simply a newer shell for the same old voice assistant? Before anything else, I asked Alexa on the Auto about traffic. I was pleasantly surprised when the Auto issued subtle tones to indicate it heard both the wake word and the question. The two indicators are a small-but-smart addition that makes the Echo Auto not only hands-free, but eyes-free. The device can also control smart home gadgets, which is a helpful feature when you're leaving in a hurry, already two blocks away and want to be sure your front door is locked. While home automation isn't unique to the Echo Auto, it's particularly useful when you're on the go. As I checked more features, though, I found Alexa on the Echo Auto to be a gaunt version of its usual self. In the car, Alexa can't adjust volume, let alone change audio settings like bass levels. You can't change its wake word, and it's tethered to one phone -- meaning if I stop at a gas station to grab a snack and bring my phone and my wife and kids stay in the car, they lose whatever music they were listening to. These aren't major issues, but I would've liked to see Amazon work harder to make Alexa as at home on the road as it is in my living room. That said, it's hard to imagine how Amazon could've retained all the digital assistant's smarts without Wi-Fi or a built-in speaker. A little something new? The Echo Auto might be missing a few minor features, but cars are different from houses, and their users' needs are different, too. The more important question is, does the Echo Auto bring anything new to the table -- or the dashboard? Sadly, not really. Step-by-step directions, audio settings controls or even things like reading incoming text messages all could have set the Echo Auto apart, giving it compelling, car-specific features. But none of those is included. The biggest selling point for the Echo Auto, it seems, is that it can hear your voice over road noise. And by and large, with its eight built-in microphones, it can. Over the typical noise in a car -- windows down, music up, kids yelling -- the Echo Auto hears well and responds appropriately. Once you start stress-testing the gadget, though, things get a little hairier. I sped down a highway in a top-down convertible, and the assistant really struggled to hear me. Of course passengers would, too, but it's worth noting the Auto doesn't exceed expectations there. And perhaps that's the overriding problem with the Auto. Despite opportunities to push into new territory, to make Alexa feel truly special and indispensable in the car, Amazon's co-pilot only ever seems to just meet expectations. From the company that exploded the home automation space with its smart speaker, it's a little disappointing to see such an unambitious effort to enter the automobile space. See all photos +12 More Editors' Note: This is still the most recent version of the Echo Auto, but Amazon has since released a number of new Echo products. Read our original review from November 7, 2019 below. The Amazon Echo Auto (\$49.99) lets you take the company's Alexa voice assistant along for the ride. It's a nondescript little device that plugs into your car's 12-volt outlet (or USB port if you have one) and connects to your phone's Alexa app to provide every voice-activated service that your homebound Echo does, including news, sports scores, recipes, shopping lists, and music streaming. It doesn't offer car-specific features like Alexa-based voice-guided directions, and it lost connection to my phone every so often in testing, but it's an inexpensive little accessory for bringing some smarts to your vehicle.Design and FeaturesThe Echo Auto is a small black rectangular box that measures 3.3 by 1.9 by 0.5 inches (HWD) and weighs 1.6 ounces. It has an Action button, a Mute button, and eight microphone holes on top; a micro USB port and a 3.5mm auxiliary port on one end; and a light strip on the front that glows blue when you ask Alexa a question and alternates between dark and light blue when responding. The eight-microphone array helps the Echo Auto hear what you're saying over the sound of your car's engine and other background noise. The bottom surface of the device has a square indent for attaching it to the included magnetic air vent mount. Also included are a 3.5mm audio cable, a 12-volt car adapter, a micro USB cable, and a quick start guide. The Echo Auto is powered by a Mediatek MT7697 processor and has a Bluetooth radio for connecting to your car's audio system and to your phone and the mobile Alexa app. The device itself doesn't contain any cellular circuitry; instead it taps into your phone's data plan to access the Amazon cloud servers. This won't be an issue for users that have an unlimited mobile data plan, but if you have a fixed plan you'll want to keep an eye on your data usage. You can connect the Echo Auto directly to your car's USB port or use the 12-volt adapter. If your car's audio system doesn't support Bluetooth, use the 3.5mm audio cable.Whereas devices such as the Garmin Speak and Garmin Speak Plus pair Alexa with navigation technology, the Echo Auto is strictly an Alexa device that offers all of the same functionality as Echo speakers. You can ask Alexa to stream tunes using Spotify, Pandora, Apple Music, and of course Amazon Music, listen to audiobooks on Audible, and play games, all through your car's audio system. You can also ask for the latest news, weather, and sports scores, place calls from your phone's contact list, Drop In on other Echo devices, and control smart home products that are linked to your homebound Echo device. What the Echo Auto doesn't do is offer native driving directions. Granted, you can ask Alexa things like where the closest gas station is, and she'll respond with several choices, but in order to get turn-by-turn driving directions, you'll have to open a mapping app on your phone, and press Go. At that point the app takes over and gives the directions. If you have an iPhone, it's actually easier to just ask Siri and get the same results without ever having to touch (or look at) the screen. On the plus side, the Echo Auto integrates with popular mobile mapping apps including Apple Maps, Google Maps, and Waze.The Echo Auto uses the same Alexa mobile app as other Echo products. There aren't a lot of settings for the device, but to access them, tap the Devices button at the bottom of the Home screen, then tap the Echo and Alexa tab to display a list of all of your installed devices. The Echo Auto can be found in the Accessories section. Here you can do things like adjust LED brightness, run a sound test, troubleshoot audio issues, see which phone the device is connected to, and see how the device is connected to the car (Bluetooth, cable).Installation and PerformanceInstalling the Echo auto is a cinch. Once I connected it to my car's USB port, I heard a chime and Alexa told me to go to my Alexa app (when it is safe to do so) to add a new device. I opened the app, tapped Add Device, selected Amazon Echo, then selected the Echo Auto from the list. I followed the on-screen instructions to attach the device to the air vent then tapped Continue. I gave the device permission to access my phone's microphone and location, turned on Bluetooth, and tapped Continue. I waited several seconds for the Echo Auto to appear in the Accessory list, played a quick audio test clip, and the installation was complete. It should be noted that the air vent mount doesn't work on all types on vents. For example, my Ford F-150 uses circular vents with two baffles, and the instructions state that these (and a few other) types of vents are a no-go. I was unable to use the air vent mount in my truck, but it fit nicely into a slot designed to hold things like phones and wallets. However, when I installed the vent mount in my wife's Honda CRV, it became dislodged and ended up on the floor whenever I rolled over a speed bump or a pothole.The Echo Auto worked as advertised in testing, most of the time. It had no trouble understanding my news, weather, and football scores requests, but every now and then I would ask Alexa to do something and she would respond with a message saying that the device had lost its connection to the mobile app. It didn't happen often, but it was annoying nonetheless.The device did a fine job of locating gas stations and restaurants while driving around, but having to pull over to tap a notification to get driving directions is a bit inconvenient. It worked well when controlling smart home devices from the car; I was able to turn Philips Hue lights on and off, change the temperature setting on a Honeywell T9 thermostat, and turn on the fan and light on a Big Ass Fan Haiku I Series fan.ConclusionsThe Amazon Echo Auto makes it easy to bring Alexa and all of her skills with you when you hit the road. Just plug it in to your 12-volt power jack or USB port, pair it with the mobile app on your phone, and use it just as you'd use your Echo speaker at home to play music, get the latest weather and news, check your calendar, or Drop In on another Echo. You can even use it to control smart devices in your home while you're out on the road. Although the Echo Auto occasionally dropped its connection to my phone in testing and lacks a hands-free navigation solution, it still provides a relatively affordable way to smarten up your car. See It \$19.99 at Amazon Pros Offers all Alexa functionality View More Cons Uses your phone's data plan Lacks native driving directions Air vent mount not very secure Occasionally dropped connection to phone in testing View More Amazon's Echo Auto brings Alexa smarts to your car for under \$50, but it doesn't offer native voice-guided driving directions, and occasionally lost connection in our tests.

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