

A smiling woman with blonde hair is shown in a kitchen, interacting with a built-in microwave oven. She is wearing a light-colored t-shirt and has her hands on the microwave's control panel and handle. The microwave is integrated into white cabinetry. The background is slightly blurred, showing a modern kitchen environment.

BUYERS GUIDE

Microwaves

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INTRODUCTION

Microwave technology has developed over recent years, with some models featuring an incorporated grill or fan oven, giving you more flexibility than ever before. They can vary in function and size, with solo, combi, and microwave grill models emerging on the market.

Basic models will have a setting for weight and temperature, while more advanced models allow you to select pre-set cooking times – this is all reflected in the price range. They're also energy efficient and economical if you want to heat small amounts of food quickly, while different sizes allow you to fit in larger kitchenware. Microwaves are perfect if you're short on space, and some models can be integrated to fit in with your kitchen units. Just bear in mind you'll need a gap of 15 cm above and behind your appliance for ventilation if it's sitting on your countertop.

This easy-to-read, free buyers guide will provide information on all of these topics, and will walk you through the process of choosing a microwave. We'll answer any of your questions here.



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TYPES OF MICROWAVE



Shopping for a microwave can be overwhelming. While some promise to have enough features for you to cook a roast dinner, others are simpler with only a microwave function. If you're looking to learn more about your options, you're in the right place.



SOLO

Solo microwaves offer the most basic cooking functions. They microwave your food using radio waves, heating it up quickly and evenly. But, a solo model doesn't offer grilling or convection cooking.

If you feel you wouldn't benefit from these added functions, a standard solo microwave is the best option for you. There are plenty of choices available, and they usually have defrost functions too. Lots of solo models are listed by retailers as microwave ovens. Surprisingly, the phrase 'microwave oven' doesn't necessarily mean it has an oven function.



WITH GRILL

A microwave with a grill is the same as a solo model, but with the addition of a grill. This gives you the option to brown and crisp food, either separately or after microwaving (with multi-stage cooking). But they are often less powerful than conventional grills, so your food may dry out. Metal racks are usually included to raise your food up to the grilling elements, which are located in the roof of the microwave.

There are two different types of grills – quartz and radiant. Quartz grills heat up in seconds and are available on high-end microwaves. They are often combined with a turntable for even results. Radiant grills tend to be a little more powerful but take around five minutes to heat up.

“ Surprisingly, the phrase 'microwave oven' doesn't necessarily mean it has an oven function.



COMBI

A combi microwave provides three different functions. It can act as a grill, microwave, or convection oven, for more variety of use. Combis are a great solution if you find yourself running out of oven space regularly, or if you want to save energy when cooking a meal for one or two people.

Convection cooking uses a fan to circulate hot air evenly around the appliance. You may be able to combine this with the microwave function, for faster but still perfectly crisp results. Often, they'll look more like a small oven, with a drop-down door and adjustable horizontal wire racks.

“Built-in microwaves are designed to free up workspace by seamlessly fitting in alongside your kitchen units.

STEAM

Some high-end combi microwaves also feature a steam function, providing 4-in-1 cooking functions. Steam is a healthy and delicious cooking method, which helps to maintain the vitamin levels in your food.

BUILT-IN

A built-in microwave is sometimes referred to as integrated. These models are designed to free up your workspace by seamlessly fitting into your kitchen units. They're available in any of the types above, but are most commonly combi or steam designs.



CAPACITY AND POWER



A microwave's cooking abilities depend hugely on its capacity and power. They're two of the main factors you should consider as they affect how much food you can cook at once, and how long it will take. Here's an explanation of what you should consider.



CAPACITY

The amount of cooking space inside your microwave is really important. A large capacity model has room for bigger dishes, and you'll be able to cook more than one meal at a time. They commonly range from 17 to 46 litres, with a wide choice of models available at both ends of the range. Built-in combi designs can be as large as 67 litres, providing valuable extra cooking space when your main oven is full.

Families should look for at least 27 litres of capacity, with a large turntable if you're not choosing a flatbed design. High capacity models are usually more expensive, so choose a smaller one if you don't need the extra space.



POWER

The wattage gives you information about the microwave's power. Models tend to start at 700 watts, with the most powerful designs going up to 1000 watts. The higher the wattage, the more quickly your food will cook. The number listed by the retailer is the highest power the microwave can achieve.

Most microwaves can alternate between high and low power for gentler cooking, but some have inverter technology which uses a lower wattage. Remember the cooking times listed on food packaging are a guide only – different microwaves will take different lengths of time. You should cook for the lowest duration and check the temperature. Stirring half-way through can also help prevent any cold spots.

“Families should look for at least 27 litres of capacity, with a large turntable if you're not choosing a flatbed design.”



HEATING CATEGORY

To make the different wattages clearer, the Government introduced heating categories. Each model is given a rating between A, the least powerful, and E, the most powerful. This system only considers wattage.

As A rated models are so low in power, they are very uncommon. Category B has around 650 watts of power, while Category D has 750 watts, and E has 850 watts. However, modern microwaves are more powerful than ever before and commonly exceed these figures.

“High capacity models are usually more expensive, so choose a smaller one if you don't think you need the extra space.



MICROWAVE FEATURES



With so many microwaves to choose from, one of the main things which sets them apart is their features. Gain an understanding of which ones you want here.

DESIGN

SIDE OPENING VS. DROP-DOWN DOOR

Consider your kitchen layout before choosing a door style – you'll want to avoid clashes with surrounding items. While most microwaves have doors with a side hinge, some feature a drop-down door. This design is practical as it won't be in the way when you're removing a hot dish.

If you're happier with a side opening door, you'll find a wider selection of models. Most have the hinge on the left, although right opening versions are available.



TURNTABLE VS. FLATBED

The majority of microwaves use a turntable to rotate your food while it's cooking, encouraging even heat distribution. This round glass plate is even removable for cleaning.

A flatbed microwave is even easier to clean since the base is completely flat. It's less restrictive with which dishes you can fit inside, whether that's one large dish or lots of small items at once. However, they don't rotate your dishes, so you'll need to stir food more often to ensure it's cooked evenly.

Some turntable models have a programme which switches off the rotating feature. This gives you the flexibility to make the most of the available space.

INTERIOR LIGHT

All modern microwaves have interior lights. These let you see the food while it's cooking – perfect for making sure nothing boils over.



If you're happier with a side opening door, you'll find yourself with a wider selection of models.



CONTROLS

CONTROL PANEL

A combination of buttons, dials, and touch controls give you full control over your cooking, so you should look for a model which you feel comfortable using. Take into consideration the layout and number of controls.

State-of-the-art touchscreen controls are available on the most expensive built-in designs.

CHILD LOCK

If you have little ones in the house, it's worth looking out for a microwave with a child lock. With this feature, you'll need to press a sequence of buttons before you can start cooking anything.

DISPLAY

An LED display screen helps you see your programmed modes and the length of time remaining. Most can act as a handy kitchen clock when the microwave isn't in use.

Some basic microwaves don't have a display. With these models, you can see how long is left by looking at the numbers around the dial itself.



“If you have little ones in the house, it's worth looking out for a child lock feature.”



TIMERS

Microwaves work using a programmable timer. This means, unlike your oven, it can't be left on for too long accidentally (providing you programme it correctly). Extra programmes for pre-set foods are also available – find out more in our guide to programmes.

SENSORS

Microwaves are smarter than ever before, and sensors are a great example. They can detect the food's and automatically adjust the cooking time to suit. You'll never have to eat dried out, overcooked food again.

ACCESSORIES

There are a range of microwave-safe extras you can purchase which help extend your cooking versatility. These accessories include trays, dishes, rice cookers, and egg poachers.



Accessories for your microwave include trays, dishes, rice cookers, and egg poachers.



FINISHES

INTERIOR

When shopping around for your new microwave, you'll see a variety of painted, stainless steel, and ceramic microwave cavities.

Ceramic benefits from being smooth and easy to clean, while stainless steel is more effective at heating your food. A painted interior is available on budget models. It's easy to clean but less durable. Some models also feature antibacterial interiors, which prevent bacteria from building up.



EXTERIOR

You may want your microwave to match your kitchen. You'll be able to choose from a range of coloured coatings and exposed stainless steel finishes, or even a mirror finish. Top-of-the-range models are nearly always stainless steel. Some models feature anti-fingerprint designs so you can always enjoy a spotless microwave.



Microwaves come in a range of coloured coatings and exposed stainless steel finishes.



MAINTENANCE

CATALYTIC AND PYROLYTIC LINERS

Some of the best microwave ovens have self-cleaning liners. This means you won't ever have to scrub away a layer of built-up grease again.

STEAM CLEANING

A steam cleaning function helps to break down any food spillages inside the microwave. Some models have an auto dry function, so the microwave is ready to use straight afterwards.

SMART FEATURES

Some higher-end models will be able to connect to an app. This allows you to control your appliance wherever you are in the house and even choose recipes to follow.



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PROGRAMMES AND COOKING MODES



To get the most out of your microwave, you'll need to know about the different ways you can use it. This guide to programmes and cooking modes explains some of the phrases you might come across.

COOKING MODES

POWER LEVELS

You'll already know how powerful your microwave is from the wattage. An adjustable power level won't affect your machine's wattage, but it'll pulse on and off intermittently. This lets you cook at a less powerful setting if required, which is ideal for delicate foods or liquids which are prone to boiling over. The controls may come in the form of a couple of options (low and high), or you may be able to choose a percentage up to 100%.

INVERTER TECHNOLOGY

Rather than turning the power off intermittently to achieve a slower cooking time, inverter technology provides continuous reduced power. This is gentler on your food and produces improved textures and flavours.

“One touch cooking means you'll have buttons for specific foods.

ONE TOUCH COOK

One touch cooking makes microwave programming easier and quicker. It means you'll have buttons for specific foods, so you don't need to figure out the timing and power levels for those common dishes. For example, a pizza function will crisp up the base and gently brown the top.



AUTO COOK

Like one touch cook, auto cook models have different pre-set modes for various food items. You may need to type in a couple of digits to tell the microwave what you're cooking, along with the weight of your ingredients. This allows the appliance to accurately calculate the cooking time. Some state-of-the-art microwaves don't need this information, as they use intelligent sensors instead.

AUTO REHEAT

This feature is the same as auto cook but designed to warm your food, rather than cook it. Some microwaves let you select whether you're heating from room or fridge temperature. You'll then have to enter the weight of the food or an amount of time, unless your microwave has a built-in humidity or steam sensor. An extra fast or turbo option can then boost the power, for faster reheating.

SENSOR COOKING, REHEATING, AND DEFROSTING

Sensors detect the air moisture inside the microwave. The power will stop if your food is at risk of drying out, which helps you to achieve fantastic results every time.

“Power controls may come in the form of a couple of options, or you may be able to choose a percentage up to 100%.”



DEFROST

Defrost is one of the most commonly used programmes. Forget about taking meals out of your freezer the night before – you can now defrost it safely within a matter of minutes.

You'll usually need to select either a weight and food type (auto defrost) or manually choose a time. On some high-end microwaves, you'll find a sensor defrost function which will automatically detect how long the food needs to defrost.

“Chaos defrost uses strong, random pulses.



CHAOS DEFROST

Chaos defrost is a faster and more effective way to thaw food. While traditional defrost programmes simply use a low power level, chaos defrost uses strong, random pulses. It means that meat, bread and other foods are defrosted evenly, for safer cooking afterwards.

DELAY START

Delay start lets you choose when you'd like your microwave to start cooking. If you're busy preparing dinner, and you'd like your frozen peas ready for when the oven's done, you can arrange it beforehand. Get every element of a meal ready at the same time without the stress.

MULTIPLE SEQUENCE COOKING

This handy feature combines two or three of your microwave's functions in sequence. You could defrost, then microwave, then bake, and only need to set it up once at the start.

STAND TIMER

This feature allows your food time to rest between multi-cooking programmes or to continue to cook in the residual heat.



TWO LEVEL COOKING

Save time by cooking multiple dishes at once with a two level cooking microwave. The best convection models have two level cooking features and multiple rack positions, so you can use it like your main oven.

STEAM COOKING

A steam function will maintain textures, flavours, and nutrients within your food. Enjoy delicious, moist vegetables without using any oil. These microwaves will have a little trivet to fill with water to become steam.

KEEP WARM

If your partner's late home from work, a keep warm function will come in useful. This final stage will ensure your food stays piping hot without drying out.

PLATE WARMING

Heat your plates quickly and easily in the microwave. Your machine might give you a choice of temperatures, or keep them warm until the food is ready.

GENTLE BAKE

This feature uses gentle fan heat to circulate hot air around the inside of the microwave as well as the heat from the grill. This produces succulent and flavoursome food.





MICROWAVE PRICES



Whatever your budget, you'll want to get the best microwave for your money. Prices can vary by hundreds of pounds, so you'll need to know the difference between an entry level microwave and a top-of-the-range model. This guide will explain what to expect when it comes to types and features by price.

BUDGET: £50 TO £100

There are plenty of microwaves at the lower end of the market. From between £50 and £100, you'll be able to choose from freestanding designs, with premium brands offering entry-level models at around the £70 mark. Any models under £50 are likely to have very basic functions.

If you only use your microwave for basic cooking tasks, a budget model would be fine. You'll probably be restricted to solo cooking, although a couple of models do have grill functions. Expect a choice of power levels, some pre-set auto cook options and a defrost setting.

You may need to sacrifice capacity since most are between 17 and 25 litres. Power will probably be on the low side, at 700 W to 800 W. Painted finishes are common, although a silver colour can give the impression of stainless steel.

“ Any models under £50 are likely to have very basic functions.

MID-RANGE: £100 TO £200

If you're willing to spend more, you'll find some great microwaves between £100 and £200. This is a reasonable amount to spend if you want a combi, although solo and grill options are available in this price bracket too. These models may be a little larger inside, up to 30 litres, and you can expect more power, at 900 W to 1000 W. Mid-range microwaves commonly have a more stylish appearance thanks to their stainless-steel finishes.

In terms of features, you can expect more auto options than on a budget model. Plus, sometimes you'll get intelligent sensors and turbo modes to speed up the cooking processes. You'll also have a small range of built-in models to choose from.



HIGH-END: £200 TO £1000

With technology developments, microwaves now offer much more than a quick meal-for-one. They've become an extension of your oven, a steamer, and a powerful all-in-one appliance. So it's no surprise that many people invest over £200 in such a versatile appliance. At this price range, you'll find sleek, built-in combi microwave ovens with drop down doors, often with sensors for improved auto cooking. Inverter technology is common too, which is gentler on your food at lower power settings.



TOP-OF-THE-RANGE: £1,000+

The very best microwaves will set you back between £1,000 and £3,000. These have capacities as high as 65 litres, with ovens reaching temperatures of 300°C. Investing in one of these built-in combination designs will provide you with pretty much all of the features and programmes available, plus some extra state-of-the-art technology.

Expect 4D hot air for even heat across the different shelves, a self-cleaning mode and telescopic shelving to make it easier to remove dishes. If you're looking for a sleek integrated microwave which you'll regularly use in a diverse range of ways, a high-spec model could be well worth the investment.

“Microwaves have become an extension of your oven, a steamer, and a powerful all-in-one appliance.”



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