

# Who makes the best home-security camera? We test 6 new models to find out

BY MICHAEL ANSALDO



**RENT OR OWN**, we all want to know our homes are secure while we're gone. That used to mean signing on with a professional—and pricey—security service like ADT. But the boom in wireless security cameras is putting home surveillance into our own hands.

These close cousins of webcams require minimal installation and offer flexible setups and a range of security features. Indeed, the offers vary widely by camera, and navigating them all gets more daunting as this category grows ever more crowded. To help you find the best security camera for your needs, we've outlined the key features to consider and tested six of the newest, most high-profile models.

Whether you're looking for an easy way to check on your kids and pets, or a full-service sentinel to monitor for intruders, we'll help find the right product for your needs.

## What to look for when shopping

Most home security cameras perform the same basic functions—they detect an event, record the event, and send you an alert—but they don't all perform them the same way. And some cameras have special features that go beyond those basics. Here are some common features you'll encounter while shopping and why they're important (we've listed them in alphabetical order).

**Alerts:** Home security cameras push notifications to your smartphone when they detect events. Without watching the live feed all day, this is the only way to keep tabs on your home in relative real time. Depending on the camera, it may send text alerts when it detects motion, sound, a face (known or unrecognized), or all three. Some can send alerts to multiple people, usually anyone else in the household using that product's app; others will send emails in addition to text messages as a failsafe in the event you can't access your mobile device.

**Battery backup:** Power outages happen, and clever burglars cut electricity before breaking into your home. When that happens, your camera goes dark and, if there's a crime taking place, you lose all forensic evidence. For this reason, some cameras can also run for



**The Flir FX's** battery backup ensures the camera will continue to operate during a power outage.

a short time on battery power. It's a feature worth looking for.

**Cloud recording:** Many manufacturers offer cloud storage plans with their camera. With one of these, your recorded video is sent to a remote server and stored for a predetermined time— usually anywhere from 24 hours to a week—and then deleted to make space for new videos. Though sometimes free, these cloud plans usually require a monthly subscription, but are worth it both for their convenience and if you want a surveillance record during a vacation or other extended time away from home.

**Facial recognition:** A few newer cameras are experimenting with facial recognition. This feature could more accurately be called “facial identification,” as in practice it's much better at distinguishing a face from, say, a lamp, than it is at actually distinguishing one person's face from another's. If you opt for a camera with this feature, know that it typically learns faces through increasing exposure to them, so be prepared to spend a lot of time in front of the lens.



**The Netatmo Welcome**

supports facial recognition and can alert you when people it doesn't recognize come within its field of view.

**Local storage:** Some cameras include memory-card slots in lieu of, or in addition to, cloud storage, so you can store video right on the device. It's an attractive feature, as it can eliminate the cost of monthly storage fees. The downside (if there isn't a cloud backup) is that if a crook steals your camera, he takes your forensic evidence with it.

**Mobile app:** Most of today's home security cameras are accessed primarily through a smartphone/tablet app. In addition to offering you a reliable way to view the camera's live feed, it should offer plenty of options for customizing the way the camera performs. The ability to customize notifications, adjust motion and sound-detection sensitivity, and set detection areas are some of the key features to look for. The app should also be intuitive and easy to master.

**Motion detection:** Assuming you're monitoring your home when it's empty, motion detection is one of the most desirable features in a security camera. Built-in sensors pick up movement within the camera's field of view and trigger video recording. Because these sensors are sensitive to any movement—even a shift in lighting or leaves blowing outside a window—it's important the camera system also offer the ability to narrow the range of detection, adjust the sensor's sensitivity, or otherwise customize this feature to cut down on false alerts.

**Night vision:** Most break-ins occur after dark, so this feature is nearly as important as motion detection. Technically, most home security cameras support infrared LED illumination, versus true night vision based on image intensification or thermal vision. Be that as it may, some cameras will switch to night vision automatically in low-



**Any home security camera worth its salt will support motion detection.**

light conditions, while others allow you to customize when and how it should be activated.

**Pan/Tilt/Swivel:** Most security cameras—including all the ones in this guide—can be manually tilted and swiveled to focus on a certain viewing area, but this is a purely set-it-and-forget-it feature. A true pan/tilt camera is equipped with a motor so that you can move its lens—or even follow a moving object if you’re watching a live feed—using its app or browser-based app.

**Resolution:** No amount of security video will help you if it’s blurry, jittery, or otherwise distorted. Look for a camera that offers the highest possible resolution. Most currently offer 720p (often referred to as “high definition” or HD), but some newer cameras are coming out with 1080p (often referred to as “full HD”). Keep in mind that higher-res cameras use more Internet and Wi-Fi bandwidth and battery life. Many cameras also offer a software zoom feature (which is not the same thing as having a physical zoom lens).

**Scheduling:** Scheduling features allows you to tell the camera to turn on and off, detect motion, and/or send alerts at specified times. This is useful when you, say, only want to be notified when your kids get home from school or just want to monitor your home when you’re away. It also reduces the amount of false alerts.

**Security:** There have been plenty of headlines about hackers compromising home cameras, baby monitors, and other Wi-Fi devices to spy on people, so be sure to check what steps each manufacturer has taken to eliminate this problem. Look for a camera that supports up-to-date wireless security protocols, such as WPA2, and make sure it encrypts Internet transmission of your



**The Nest Labs Nest Cam** delivers higher-than-typical 1080p video resolution.

username, your password, and the live feeds. Never install a security camera (or a router or any other device on your home network) without changing its default user ID and password.

**Two-way audio:** While the idea of a security camera implies eyes-on monitoring, the ability to also hear what's going on gives you a more complete picture of what's happening on the home front when you're away. It can also alert you to something occurring out of the camera's field of vision. This feature can also allow you to speak through the camera, a great tool for remotely commanding an unruly pet or startling an intruder in the act, but be aware that you might need to plug in a powered speaker for this feature to work.


**Viewing angle:** The camera's field of view determines how much it can see. As you're probably monitoring a single room, you want a wide viewing angle. Most current cameras fall in the 130-degree range. These wide angles can sometimes cause image distortion at the edges in the form of a fish-eye effect, particularly when used in smaller rooms, but it's not like you're going to use a security camera to capture snapshots for your photo album.

**Web client:** Many cameras can be accessed through a web portal as well. This is useful for times when you don't have access to your mobile device or a wireless connection. The web app should closely mirror its mobile counterpart, so you don't need to learn a whole new set of controls.

**Wireless range:** One of the benefits wireless cameras offer is the ability to move them around your home. Ideally, your home



**Logitech's Circle**  
home-security camera features two-way audio.

security camera should be able to maintain a Wi-Fi connection no matter how far you move it from your router, even in a large home. Some cameras come with an Ethernet port as well, so you have the option of hardwiring it to your local network. A camera that supports Power-over-Ethernet (PoE) eliminates the need for an AC adapter and relies on just one cable (but your router or switch will also need to support PoE. Another alternative would be to use a PoE injector.) 

Copyright of PC World is the property of IDG Consumer & SMB Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.