

IN-EAR HEADPHONES

The earbuds that come with your MP3 player are rarely worth listening with. **Ian Calcutt** finds five upgrades offering a more comfortable fit and better sound

What to look for

Sound quality

Well-fitting earbuds cut ambient noise to improve clarity at lower volumes, reducing sound leakage and hearing damage

Comfort

Soft silicone covers are generally nicer than the rigid in-ear buds, but everyone is different so find what's best for you

Extras

Earbuds don't offer much, but look for things like spare covers, extension cables and built-in volume control

Value for money

You can pay over £100 for some in-ear headphones, but you can get a decent upgrade for as little as £7.89



ON THE PODCAST



Creative EP-830

Although among the cheapest upgrades, the EP-830 are a superb fit, aided by a choice of three sizes of silicone covers and sturdy connections (left and right labelling could be better though). The sound quality is rich in bass while remaining pleasantly clear for upper frequencies, though it misses some of the warmth found with more luxurious models. These come separately or bundled with Creative's snazzy Zen X-Fi player.

Best price: £7.89
through www.amazon.co.uk
Info: uk.europe.creative.com

Goldring GX200



The generous GX200 package includes three silicone cover sizes and 'squishy' foam tips for even greater sound isolation. They aren't the prettiest (other colours are available), but comfort and a not too overpowering bass are main selling points. Sound lacks the smooth, expansive quality of Sony and Sennheiser, but with some retailers selling them at half the original price, they're unbeatable value.

Best price: £24.99
from www.play.com
Info: www.goldring.co.uk

Sony MDR-EX300SL

This affordable Sony model has relatively large earphones, so they stick out more than most, but the fit remains comfortable and provides good isolation. Three sizes of cover tips are included and there's a 90cm extension lead with a right-angled plug too. The sound quality is evocative and spacious, similar to Sennheiser, though with marginally less bass and can be a little on the raspy side with some vocals.

Best price: £29.99
from www.amazon.co.uk
Info: www.sony.co.uk

Sennheiser CX 400-II Precision



Sennheiser has updated its popular CX line with a Mark II edition. Once you've wrestled them from the excessive packaging, you'll be impressed by the attention to detail, including a right-angled jack to reduce wear and an in-line volume control. The outstanding performance is superb for higher frequencies – avoiding the harshness of some rivals – and just bassy enough.

Best price: £37.99
from www.shop-com.co.uk
Info: www.sennheiser.co.uk

Denon AH-C551

The AH-C551's cylindrical earpieces are chunkier than most (excluding Sony), but still easy to handle. At 50cm the lead is short, but you can connect an 80cm extension cable. You get three sizes and two colours of tip covers that fit well, but sound isolation isn't the best. The bass is excellent, though, while high notes are vividly sharp, perhaps too unforgiving for the compressed audio formats most of us listen to.

Best price: £57.99
from www.iheadphones.co.uk
Info: www.denon.co.uk