

Streaming Media Players and Content: Frequently Asked Questions

This PDF lists the most common questions Tech for Luddites has received regarding how to use streaming media players and content. The final two pages are a comparison chart for the main features of the Big Four of streaming players: Amazon Fire TV, Roku, Apple TV, and Google Chromecast.

You can click the links below to go directly to that question in the document. You can also find the most recent list of questions online at techforluddites.com/streamingfaq and use the Comment box to ask any that are not covered here.

Do I need a computer to use a streaming media player?

Do I need Internet service to use a streaming media player?

How fast does my Internet connection need to be for streaming movies and TV shows?

How many gigs of data do I need to watch streaming media?

Can I stream content using my cellphone's data plan?

I have a limited data plan with my Internet service provider. Does my player stream data even when I'm not using it?

Can I use a VPN service with a streaming media player?

Do I need cable or satellite service to use a streaming media player?

How does a streaming media player work with my cable/satellite service?

Can I watch "regular TV" through a streaming player?

So if I have a streaming media player and an antenna, can I cancel my cable/satellite service?

Do I need a Smart TV to use a streaming media player?

All my HDMI ports are already being used. Is there a way to add a streaming player without unplugging another device?

Can I connect multiple streaming players to the same TV?

I have multiple TVs. Do I need a separate player for each one?

Can I use a streaming media player with an older TV?

How do I switch back to regular TV?

If I buy a Roku/Fire TV/Apple TV/Google Chromecast, is that a one-time cost or do I have to pay annually?

If I buy a streaming media player, why do I need to pay to watch videos?

What are the costs of the various streaming services you can use with your streaming media player?

Can I watch videos saved on my computer, phone, tablet, or external hard drive on TV using a streaming media player?

Can I use a streaming media player outside the United States?

Can I record streaming videos with my DVR?

Streaming Media Player Comparison Chart

Do I need a computer to use a streaming media player?

In most cases, you do not need a computer. You just need a television with the correct ports for the player and Internet service. One exception is Google Chromecast if you don't have a smartphone or tablet, in which case you would need a computer to set it up and to cast videos from.

Do I need Internet service to use a streaming media player?

Yes. The purpose of streaming media players is to get the signal for your movies and TV shows from the Internet instead of from a cable or satellite provider. Some players also let you watch content saved on your computer or mobile device, but you would still need Internet access to set up the device, download software updates and more.

How fast does my Internet connection need to be for streaming movies and TV shows?

This Netflix article explains what speeds are required for various types of content. I'm using Netflix as a reference because a) they have very specific info on their site and b) I expect they're a good proxy for other similar services.

[Internet Connection Speed Recommendations](#)

You can quickly test your connection's speed at fast.com or get a more detailed analysis at speedtest.net.

How many gigs of data do I need to watch streaming media?

The short version is that it depends on the quality of the content you're streaming. Again, from Netflix:

“Watching TV shows or movies on Netflix uses about 1 GB of data per hour for each stream of standard definition video, and up to 3 GB per hour for each stream of HD video. “4K Ultra HD uses up to 7 GB an hour.

Note that these numbers apply whether you're streaming the show to your TV, computer, or mobile device.

Read the full article for [more details of the different settings Netflix offers](#) and how to change them for your account.

Can I stream content using my cellphone's data plan?

If your phone has a hotspot feature, you may be able to use it as the Internet connection for your streaming media player. However, it can use up a lot of data quickly (see earlier question) and even if you have an

unlimited data plan, make sure that includes when you use the phone as a hotspot. A lot of times, it doesn't apply to that situation.

Also note that cell service is often not as strong, fast, or reliable as Wi-Fi, so you may have issues with buffering and picture quality.

[Check out this T4L post for more details on how to stream using a mobile hotspot.](#)

I have a limited data plan with my Internet service provider. Does my player stream data even when I'm not using it?

This is a common question because there's no "Off" button on the players. Unless you unplug them, they're always on. The purpose of that is so that it can download software updates automatically but it doesn't stream content unless you're playing something on it.

However, it's important to know that, depending on your player and the service you're watching, your videos will not stop streaming just because you turn off your TV. Some of them will stop streaming at the end of the current program/movie you're watching but others will automatically move to the next item in your queue. (You may be able to change this in the player's or content provider's settings.)

So it's important that you actively stop the streaming before turning off your TV. You can do this by pressing the Home button on your remote and making sure it does take you to the Home screen (sometimes a single click might not register). You can also do it by pressing the Play/Pause button, but you could accidentally hit that button again when moving the remote and wouldn't know that the show had started playing again. Your safest bet is going to the Home screen.

Can I use a VPN service with a streaming media player?

Yes, although how you use it depends on the player. Learn more in this T4L post:

[Use ExpressVPN to Access TV Shows and Movies Not Available in Your Location](#)

Do I need cable or satellite service to use a streaming media player?

No. A streaming player takes the video signal from the Internet, so you can use it without having cable or satellite service. However, you may need cable/satellite to watch certain TV programming through your streaming player or you may need to buy a separate subscription for networks that offer that.

For example, if you pay for HBO through your cable provider, then you can use the HBO GO app to stream their shows for free by using your cable company login. If you do not have cable or your package doesn't include HBO, you can purchase the standalone HBO NOW service and use that app to watch their shows.

How does a streaming media player work with my cable/satellite service?

If you have a cable/satellite subscription and a streaming media player, you will have two different things going into your TV: the cable from your TV provider's box (or the wall, if you don't use a box) and your player (either by cable or directly for stick-type models). Your TV remote should have a button for Input, which you use to switch between those two sources of content. The player one is probably hooked to something like HDMI 1 (or 2 or 3...). So you need to use your TV remote to select that input. (Some players will automatically switch to the correct input when you press a button on its remote.)

Then you'll use the player's remote or a content provider's mobile app to select something to watch from the Internet.

Can I watch "regular TV" through a streaming player?

It depends on what you mean by "regular TV." If you're from my generation (-ish), "watching TV" means turning it on and going to a broadcast or basic cable channel (CBS, ABC, CNN, Bravo, etc.) or premium pay-TV channel (HBO, Showtime, etc.) and watching whatever is on that station at that time.

Streaming generally works differently, although there are starting to be options that make it more like the old-fashioned way. Until recently, most streaming content was available on demand, i.e. you could watch them at any time as long as a) the network or a third-party content provider made them available over the Internet and b) you had access to the shows available from those providers. These options still exist, and there are various ways to get that access:

- You pay a monthly subscription (Netflix, Hulu, CBS All Access, HBO NOW) or per episode/season of a show (Amazon, iTunes, Google Play, Vudu).
- You have a cable or satellite subscription that includes the networks that have the content, in which case you'll need to log into your cable or satellite service to access it (usually for free). Most cable networks require this, including HBO GO, FX Networks, and so on.
- The network makes the shows available for free. Which episodes are available varies from network to network. It might be the day after it airs for some shows and a week later for others. They also may only be available for a limited time period.
- You use the network's website or app on your computer or mobile device. Some networks allow you to watch their shows on those devices but not through a streaming player, or through some streaming players but not others.

In the last couple of years, a number of streaming services have launched that provide various bundles of live programming for a monthly fee. These include [Sling TV](#), [PlayStation Vue](#), [DIRECTV NOW](#), [Hulu Live TV](#), and

[YouTube TV](#). These services still have a ways to go to offer the same level of reliability and ease of use as cable, but they're improving all the time.

Additionally, some TV stations also have some local programming available on their websites. Usually it's not live although some stations do provide limited live programming (you usually need a cable or satellite subscription to access the live feed). In that case you may be able to watch them on your TV using [PlayOn software](#) that lets you stream almost any web video to your TV with a compatible player or by [mirroring your computer or mobile device screen](#).

Finally, you can still watch shows live from the free broadcast networks [using an antenna](#) without a streaming player at all, as long as you live in a place where you can get a good over-the-air signal.

As I've said before, it is VERY confusing and I can't blame anybody for not being able to make sense of it, but I'm trying to do my best to make it a little clearer!

So if I have a streaming media player and an antenna, can I cancel my cable/satellite service?

It depends entirely on what you like to watch. If you cancel your cable or satellite service, you'll probably lose access to at least some programming, although the new streaming bundle services I mentioned in the previous section are starting to fill in the gaps.

One thing to keep in mind is if you live in an area where you can't get high-bandwidth Internet service at a reasonable cost, you may find streaming is actually more expensive than your cable service.

Do I need a Smart TV to use a streaming media player?

No. A Smart TV is one that can connect to the Internet directly to access content from it. Since that's what streaming media players do, you could say they turn a regular TV into a Smart TV. Learn more in this T4L post:

[Do You Need a Smart TV To Use a Streaming Media Player?](#)

All my HDMI ports are already being used. Is there a way to add a streaming player without unplugging another device?

Yes, you can use an HDMI switcher to plug multiple HDMI devices into a single port on your TV. This is the one I have, but there are many other models available: [Etekcity 4K x 2K 4 Port High Speed HDMI Switch with IR Wireless Remote Control](#).

Can I connect multiple streaming players to the same TV?

Yes. All you need to do is plug each player into a different port and then use your TV remote to switch to the input for the one you want to watch.

I have multiple TVs. Do I need a separate player for each one?

As is the case with many technology-related questions, the answer is: It depends. The basic concept here is that all the “magic” behind the player comes from the connections that have been set up between the device, your account with the device manufacturer (Roku, Apple, Amazon, Google), and any accounts you have with content providers (Netflix, Amazon, Hulu Plus, HBO GO, etc.). Your TV simply acts like a big computer monitor that takes the signal coming out of the device and plays it through its screen and speakers. This means two things related to the this question.

First, a device must be physically attached to your TV to be able to watch streaming content through it. You can't access the signal from a device connected to a different TV. Second, if you have multiple TVs in your home but you only ever watch one at a time, you can simply move your device from one TV to another. All of your settings will still be intact. However, if you want to use the device with more than one TV at the same time, then you need a separate box or stick for each TV.

Can I use a streaming media player with an older TV?

Whether a TV can work with a streaming media player depends on what kind of connection ports it has. If it has an HDMI port, then it will work with most players. If it doesn't have an HDMI port but it has RCA ports (red/white/yellow), you can get a [Roku Express+](#), which has those ports.

How do I switch back to regular TV?

Your TV remote should have a button on it marked Input. When you click that, you will see all the different input ports on your TV, e.g. HDMI 1, A/V, etc. Use the remote keys to select the port that your cable or satellite box is attached to (or the TV port if you have cable going straight from the wall into your TV).

Note: If you use the remote for your cable/satellite box to turn your TV on and off, it may not have an Input button. In that case you'll need the remote that came with your TV. If you no longer have that, there should be a button somewhere on the TV itself to let you change the input.

If I buy a Roku/Fire TV/Apple TV/Google Chromecast, is that a one-time cost or do I have to pay annually?

The devices themselves are a one-time cost. However, you may need to pay for subscriptions to the content you want to watch through it.

If I buy a streaming media player, why do I need to pay to watch videos?

The purpose of a streaming media player is to let you watch things on your TV that normally you would only be able to watch on your computer or mobile device. But it doesn't give you free access to that content.

For example, you may already have a Netflix subscription so you can watch movies on your tablet. With a streaming player, you can watch their movies and other programs on your TV, with its larger screen and better sound system, but you still need to pay for the Netflix subscription.

It's like you can buy a television but you still need to pay to watch shows on it, either through a cable or satellite subscription or through advertising on broadcast networks if you use an antenna.

There is some free content available to watch with streaming players—for example, Crackle offers advertising-supported programming and if you're an Amazon Prime member, they make a subset of their video library available for free. However, the most popular content providers with the most recent movies and TV shows generally require you to pay for a monthly subscription, like Netflix and Hulu, or on a per-use basis, like Amazon Prime Video.

What are the costs of the various streaming services you can use with your streaming media player?

Each of the services have different costs and pricing structures. For example, with Netflix and Hulu you pay a monthly fee for unlimited content, with different fees for different features (SD vs HD, number of simultaneous screens, etc). Amazon Prime Video charges you for each title you watch, but you pay different prices to rent something vs. buying it and extra for HD versions. They also have thousands of titles you can watch for free if you are an [Amazon Prime](https://www.amazon.com/prime) member. HBO GO is free if you subscribe to HBO through your cable company AND if it permits you to watch HBO GO through your streaming media player. HBO also has a standalone streaming service, HBO NOW, that costs \$15/month for people who don't have cable service.

So you really need to determine which services interest you and visit their website to see what the price is.

Can I watch videos saved on my computer, phone, tablet, or external hard drive on TV using a streaming media player?

Yes, there are several different methods for watching your personal media collection on your TV. Learn about these options in this T4L post:

[How to Watch Your Personal Media Collection Through a Streaming Media Player](#)

Can I use a streaming media player outside the United States?

I can't provide specifics on what works or doesn't work in other countries because I have no way to test them and there are so many variables involved. But here's a post that talks about the general concepts of [using streaming players and accessing content in other countries](#).

Can I record streaming videos with my DVR?

No, you can't use a DVR to record streaming videos. However, there is software you can purchase called PlayOn that lets you record them. Learn more about it in this T4L post.

[Learn more about PlayOn in this T4L post. >>](#)

Streaming Media Player Comparison Chart

Note: This chart was last updated on December 2 2019. Information may change at any time. For complete and up-to-date details about any of these devices, please visit the company's website. If you find any errors, please let me know at elizabeth@techforluddites.com. Find more information about streaming media players and content at techforluddites.com/streaming.

	Amazon Fire TV	Roku	Apple TV	Google Chromecast
				
T4L Post	techforluddites.com/firetv	techforluddites.com/roku	techforluddites.com/appletv	techforluddites.com/chromecast
List Price	Fire TV stick: \$39.99 Fire TV Stick 4K: \$49.99 Fire TV Cube: \$119.99 Compare Models	Roku Ultra: \$99.99 Roku Ultra LT: \$79.99 Roku Streaming Stick+ Headphone Edition (HE): \$59.99 Roku Streaming Stick+: \$49.99 Roku Premiere: \$39.99 Roku Express+: \$39.99 Roku Express: \$29.99 Compare Models	Apple TV 4K, 64GB: \$199.00 Apple TV 4K, 32GB: \$179.00 Apple TV HD, 32GB: \$149.00	Chromecast Ultra: \$69.00 Chromecast: \$35.00
Content Providers Available on All	Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, YouTube, Crackle, FilmStruck, Sling TV, PlayStation Vue, DIRECTV NOW, Hulu Live TV, YouTube TV, HBO, SHOWTIME, PBS, PBS Kids, Disney Plus, WatchESPN, FOX NOW, Telemundo Deportes EN VIVO, Plex, Pandora, Sirius XM NOTE: May be limited to certain models and geographies. Check with device manufacturer to confirm availability.			
Additional Popular Providers	Available: Apple TV+, Spotify, Amazon Music, PlayOn Find More Missing: FandangoNOW, Google Play, VUDU, iTunes, Apple Music	Available: Apple TV+, FandangoNOW, VUDU, Google Play, Spotify, Amazon Music, PlayOn Find More (official channel store) Private channels also available Missing: iTunes, Apple Music	Available: Apple TV+, iTunes, Apple Music, VUDU, Find More (full list not available online) Missing: Google Play, FandangoNOW, Spotify, Amazon Music, PlayOn	Available: Google Play, FandangoNOW, VUDU, Amazon Music, Spotify, PlayOn Find More Missing: Apple TV+, iTunes, Apple Music

	Amazon Fire TV	Roku	Apple TV	Google Chromecast
Ethernet Connector (all have Wi-Fi)	Cube has built-in Ethernet port. A separate Ethernet adapter is available for both stick models.	Ultra, Ultra LT	Apple TV 4K: Gigabit Ethernet Apple TV: 10/100BASE-T Ethernet	N/A
A/V TV Connector (all have HDMI)	N/A	Express+	N/A	N/A
4K/HDR Support (all have 1080p)	Fire TV Stick 4K, Cube	Ultra, Ultra LT, Streaming Stick+ HE, Streaming Stick+, Premiere	Apple TV 4K	Ultra
Voice Search on Remote	All	Ultra, Streaming Stick+ HE, Streaming Stick+	All	N/A
Display Mirroring	N/A	All	Cast and control streaming content and mirror screens from compatible Macs and iOS devices using AirPlay	Screen mirroring available for compatible Android devices Use Chrome browser to cast any tab/ full computer screen to TV
Hotel Login	Yes	Yes	No	No
Single Sign-On for TV Everywhere Apps	Yes	Yes	Yes	No
Additional Features	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pair stick versions with select Amazon Echo voice-activated devices for hands-free control • Remote and mobile apps also work with Alexa • Fire TV Recast adds live TV watching/recording capabilities with HD antenna • Amazon Fire, Android, iOS apps available for use as remote • Amazon FreeTime for children • Free Amazon Cloud storage for all Amazon content • Supports Bluetooth accessories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • iOS, Android, and Amazon Fire apps available • Remote with voice search and TV controls: Ultra, Ultra LT, Streaming Stick+HE, Streaming Stick+ (no mute button) • Remote with headphone jack: Ultra, Ultra LT, Streaming Stick+ HE • Storage expansion: Ultra (microSD, USB), Ultra LT (microSD) • Ultra also includes premium JBL headphones, personal shortcut buttons, and remote finder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can watch content saved on Mac computers, iOS devices, and iCloud • TV app helps organize content in one interface • Use Siri voice commands • iOS app available for use as remote • Supports Bluetooth accessories 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pair with Google Home voice-activated devices for hands-free control • Google Home app helps you discover popular content and supported apps