

A Guide to Air Fryers: Everything to Know Before You Buy

What is an air fryer?

An air fryer doesn't actually fry at all. Instead, the air fryer works more like a convection oven, circulating hot air with a fan. The main difference between a regular convection oven and an air fryer is that the air fryer fan blows faster and the compartment in which food is cooked is often (but not always) smaller. Most air fryers come with a grated rack or perforated basket so the air can travel through and hit the food on all sides.

This fast, hot roasting or "super convection" will quickly brown chicken, potatoes, frozen snacks, veggies and fish without overcooking the inside. That's very similar to how deep-frying works, which is where both the comparison and name come from.

Are air fryers healthy?

It all depends on what you're making in your air fryer but cooking something in an air fryer is almost universally healthier than deep-frying or pan-frying it in oil. Less oil means less fat and fewer calories too.

What can you cook in an air fryer?

If you think about the best fried foods -- chicken wings, fried chicken, french fries, mozzarella sticks -- those are all great candidates for an air fryer. You'll get similarly crispy and browned outsides with insides that don't overcook. You can cook fish (salmon is a popular air fryer pick), vegetables, pizza and bread. You can also warm food or reheat leftovers and much more.

Do you need to use oil in an air fryer?

You don't need oil, but some foods do well with a light spray or coating of cooking oil. Vegetables including green beans, broccoli, asparagus, and even potatoes will dry out if you blast them in an air fryer so a light spritz of avocado or olive oil can go a long way. Anything with some inherent oil content, like chicken or salmon, will have plenty of natural oil to baste itself while cooking.

How big should an air fryer be?

If you're cooking for one or two people a 2- or 3-quart air fryer should be large enough. Add a quart of capacity for every person that you're regularly cooking for. So, if you plan to air fry for five people on a regular basis, spring for a 5-quart model. A smaller air fryer means food is going to get blasted faster and more often than inside a larger model where the air has further to travel and more time to lose heat. The smaller air fryers mean less overall capacity so you may have to cook in batches.

What are the different types of air fryers?

Solo air fryer: Best for most people (and most budget-friendly)

The most basic of air fryers. These models come with digital controls or manual dials. There are also air fryers with dual compartments so you can make two types of food at different temps simultaneously. Solo air fryers are the least expensive.

Air frying toaster oven: Bake, broil, roast and toast

These models look and function much like a standard countertop toaster oven but they have an air fry function as well. Due to their larger size, these models usually don't cook as quickly or quite as intensely as smaller solo air fryer ovens. These air fryers start at around \$150 and go up from there.

Air fryer and multicooker: An air fryer that does it all

These are the most advanced and versatile air fryers and they do a whole lot more than air fry. Think Instant Pot but with an air fryer function as well. If you want an air fryer and multicooker or pressure cooker but don't have a lot of kitchen space to relinquish, one of these is a great option. These models generally retail for about \$175 to \$250

Air fryer attachment for your Instant Pot is a great option

If you already have an Instant Pot, you can buy an Instant Pot air fryer lid (\$90) to attach or a Mealthy (\$60) which will clamp on top and air fry food down below. These air fryer lids work exceptionally well, although they don't have a large capacity for cooking.

Should you get a digital air fryer over analog?

This depends on your personal preference, but the controls don't have much to do with the performance or end result. Digital air fryers have presets for things like chicken wings, french fries, fish and such, but even if the presets exist, it takes a few runs to learn how long things need and the correct temperatures, so you may end up bypassing them anyways. Digital air fryers tend to cost a bit more and you run the risk of the panel shorting out but having a digital readout of the temp and cook time can be nice.

Which is the best air fryer?

It depends on your needs and budget.

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