

Should I get a smart lock? The pros and cons of going digital on your door

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Charlotte Pfahl, 68, prefers using an old-school mechanical key to access her New York City apartment.

So when her landlord modernized the building and installed a smart [lock](#) in 2018, she and several other residents over 65 were not thrilled about

it.

A few didn't own smartphones, so they were locked out of the entrance to elevators. Those who did have a smartphone had to keep it charged, otherwise they couldn't gain access to the lobby where mail and packages were stored, said Pfahl, a retired lawyer.

So five of them sued and won.

"We were concerned that if you lose power, the smart lock wouldn't work. It would either lock closed or lock open," Pfahl said. "We don't have on-site management, so if the power goes out, as it did once, you can't get access to your unit."

With all of today's technological advancements making life "easier," it's sometimes easy to forget that there are pros and cons to switching to any new system.

For those looking for a convenient way to monitor whether they remembered to lock up their [home](#), smarter latches are an easy sell. They work with smartphones that most of us have, and you can program them to identify your best friend and let them in without you having to leave your seat.

Some have keypads with long security codes for when you don't have your smartphone or short-range Bluetooth signals that can pick up when you're nearby.

But will you really think it's all worth it if—and when—the tech malfunctions?

When smart locks don't work

In 2019, there was a massive power outage in New York City in some of the neighborhoods surrounding Times Square. Pfahl was among the 72,000 customers who lost power.

"Frankly, most of the young tenants who only use their smartphones were standing on the streets because the (smart key) system was down and (they) didn't carry mechanical keys to access the back stairwell," Pfahl said.

Some challenges aren't as dramatic as a citywide blackout but equally inconvenient or even potentially dangerous. Think about the possible scenarios born of forgetting to teach a house guest or the babysitter how to open your door, which has a daunting mechanism that looks more like a safe handle or smart speaker and nothing like an actual doorknob.

Regular door locks don't require software updates or battery replacement. Many smart locks do. And though a particular style of door lock and handle might eventually look dated, it doesn't face technological obsolescence.

For those who have adopted the digital pass to access most of the doors to their lives, they are at the mercy of their device. So if the phone battery dies, as they are far too well known to do, you get locked out, perhaps from everything—the door, the car, their wallet, oh and the actual phone to call for help.

Technical glitches aside, smart locks, like most other categories of tech products, come with the potential for hackers and concerns over battery life. While some go the do-it-yourself path, for others, the cost of installation can be a barrier for consumers looking to level up their [home security](#).

Smart locks: Cool tech, not so cool look

One of the most pressing concerns for homeowners is appearance. In other words, many smart locks lack that curb appeal.

Traditional locks, which aren't automated, tend to fade into the background since people are used to seeing them. They've been around for thousands of years, either placed within the doorknob itself or below it.

While there are [different styles](#) from different makers, smart locks are often chromed-out bulbs or boxes that jut out from the door. Some have modern-looking numeric dials. Others look like standard function calculators attached to the outside of the door, which some homeowners may consider an eyesore.

In fact, that's often the determining factor for people considering launching their home locks into the digital age, according to the home tech startup Level Home.

People have been wary of "taking their lock off and putting this giant albatross on your door," said John Martin, CEO of Level Home. "On the inside, you have this big box with four AA batteries, and on the outside, you have a (bulky) keypad. They don't look that smart to consumers."

Level Home introduced a \$250 kit in 2019 that turns a traditional key into a smarter lock that can be controlled by a smartphone or Apple Watch for people who don't have to sacrifice the design of their home for a new lock.

Your door still looks the same, and you can still use your mechanical key to unlock it. The hardware is installed inside the door, and the battery lasts up to a year, Martin said. Many other smart locks allow users to use their traditional key as a backup.

Like some other smart keys on the market, the seemingly invisible computerized deadbolt supports geofencing, voice activation and other smart features. The American lockset maker Kwikset also sells a discreet, smarter lock alternative that allows you to use a fob sold separately.

The idea is to "create products that don't force people to sacrifice the expression of their home in the process of making it smart," Martin said.

Smart locks also may have a hard time winning over older adults like Pfsal who either don't use smartphones, struggle to memorize PIN codes or who don't have an issue using the regular keys they grew up on.

"Some of these things are harder to get used to and have a little bit of a learning curve," said Charlie Kindel, chief product officer at SnapAV, which builds smart home products. Kindel noted that smart locks could have beneficial functions for [older adults](#) who are "aging in place."

"If it's very difficult for them to get across the room and unlock the door, they can say to Alexa "Unlock the door." That can be a very freeing thing," Kindel said.

For younger adults, outsourcing door opening may have an adverse effect, since relying on tech to auto-lock can lead to lazier habits. For example, if you're not used to subconsciously locking your door, you may not just leave it unlocked but open unintentionally.

You also have to remember to update the firmware on some connected locks. And traditional locks aren't open to hackers, since they don't connect to the internet. Though old-fashioned home break-ins are still possible.

Replacing dumb deadbolt with smart lock

While connected home gadgets like Echo Dots and smart plugs are easy to install, putting in a complex security system on all your home entryways is often pretty complex. Hiring an expert locksmith to upgrade something that was working perfectly fine is questionable, especially if the installation costs as much as the lock.

Level Lock claims to be installable using just a screwdriver.

Despite the drawbacks, traditional locks are projected to continue to displace systems that don't reflect a modern lifestyle at a time when people are increasingly letting strangers into their homes—either to drop off packages or sublet a spare room.

Smart locks and other home security products are among the most popular smart home gadgets for consumers, according to IDC data. The sector of consumer electronics is projected to nearly double from about \$74 million in 2019 to \$1.39 billion by 2023.

"What we're seeing is double-digit growth rates because people are becoming more adaptive to the idea. It's just easier when you approach a [door](#), and it automatically unlocks," said Martin Heckmann, director of emerging business at LiftMaster, which provides software for smart garage doors and locks.

With smart a smart lock, you can give a friend temporary (and revokable) access to your home if you want. But if you give someone a key, you may never get it back. And keys are smaller and easier to lose than smartphones you can track down using other devices.

Heckmann said that while [smart locks](#) come with limitations, and many have "fail-safe" concerns, "everything is safer than having a spare key under your doormat."



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