

THE SMART HOME

BY SONNY ALI

As a T5 paraplegic with two young boys, a wife, a full-time job and a nonprofit to run, I can use all the help I can get around the house to stay on top of things. With that in mind, I decided to go all-in on the emerging smart tech revolution when I remodeled our house to make it more accessible following my injury two years ago. When going the smart home route, there are a number of good options — Amazon's Echo, Google's Home, Apple's HomeKit — all voice-operated, cloud-based, artificial intelligence smart home solutions, each with slightly different options. The Echo retails for \$179.99; Google Home for \$129; and Apple's HomeKit can run off any iOS-using device. All three require the purchase of compatible home appliances.

I decided to go with Amazon Echo, a simple black cylinder that sits on my dresser and serves as the central brain connecting an array of applications and appliances to help my family with day-to-day tasks and also help me live more independently. In addition to my main Echo, I have numerous Echo Dots placed throughout the house (Echo Dot is the smaller, speakerless version of the Echo, which

retails for \$49.99).

Right out of the box, after the initial set-up, all you have to do to use the Echo is utter its wake-up word, "Alexa." Once someone says the magic word, the Echo will listen and try to answer whatever question, or do whatever task is commanded next. I can ask Alexa how long my commute will be, what the weather forecast is, or what's on my calendar. Alexa's responses

are almost instantaneous — giving me the quickest route to the office, or advising me to dress warm because the weather forecast suggests a drop in temperature. My wife uses Alexa to order pizza delivered or to call Uber. We use it to set timers, reminders, and to keep track of our grocery list. My kids use it to help with checking their math homework by asking, "Alexa, what is 12 times 12?" The list of things Alexa can do is simply amazing and grows with each update. Or if you're looking for a Bluetooth speaker to play your music library from your tablet or smart phone, Alexa can do that, too. The sound quality is better than you'd expect.



Connect Phillips Hue bulbs with your Echo and you can control your lighting with voice commands.

What makes the Amazon Echo a truly marvelous tool for people with spinal cord injuries is its ability to integrate with third-party smart-home solutions. The list of third-party solutions continues to grow daily, but here are a few solutions I've integrated with the Echo to simplify my daily life.

- Integrating my Echo with Phillips Hue smart lights gives me the ability to control my kitchen, living room, and master bedroom lights with simple voice commands. "Alexa, turn off the kitchen lights. Alexa, turn on the bedroom lights." I replaced the vast majority of my home's standard lights with Philips Hue lights that are controlled by Alexa. My kids tend to leave lights on wherever they go, but now I can turn everything off with a simple voice command.

HOME HACK

YOU'VE GOT THE POWER: THE BUDGET SMART HOME

Nowadays more and more people are using voice-controlled smart home devices to control every aspect of their home (see above), but what if you don't have one or can't use one? All you need is some duct tape and a power strip. Tape the power strip down where you can reach it easily, even if you can't move your arms, you should be able to set it up somewhere you can use a mouthstick. Then plug in whatever devices you want to control, and all you have to do is flip the power strip switch. I've used it to control floor lamps, fans, chargers — you name it.

— ALEX GHENIS



The Amazon Echo (left) and Dot (right) can be used to turn lights off and on as well as tap into your favorite playlists or answer trivia questions.