

WINDOWS VISTA MEDIA CENTER



In this lesson you'll learn what you can do with Windows Vista Media Center: watch, pause, and record live TV; play your DVD and music collection; listen to FM radio; and much more.

If your PC has Windows Vista Premium or Windows Vista Ultimate, it can double as a full-featured media center. That's because those versions of the operating system come equipped with Media Center, an entertainment-minded interface designed to be operated by remote (but also keyboard-friendly). Thus, your PC can serve as the heart of your living room or as an extra entertainment center in the den or bedroom.

To get the most from Media Center, you'll want a TV tuner for your PC. The ATI TV Wonder 650, for example, installs in a desktop PCI slot, while the Hauppauge WinTV-HVR 950 plugs into a USB port, making it suitable for desktops and notebooks alike. Both models let you tune in standard cable/satellite stations or, with an optional antenna, over-the-air HD stations. (And believe it or not, even a typical LCD monitor offers enough pixels to fully resolve HD signals. It's like you got a free HDTV and didn't even know it.)



The Windows Vista Media Center

Even better, Media Center can pause, rewind, and record live shows, just like a TiVo or cable-company DVR. It features a free electronic program guide (EPG), and it supports multiple tuners (meaning you could watch, say, *American Idol* live while *Lost* is being recorded).

Media Center also lets you tap into your PC's photo, video, and music libraries; listen to FM radio (you'll need an antenna, of course); play DVDs; and access online media like NPR News, XM Radio, and the Movielink movie-download service. All this happens from within Media Center's user-friendly "twist" interface.

Although many of these features are currently available in the Windows XP versions of Media Center, Vista sports a new and aesthetically improved interface as well as more intuitive navigation. Vista Media Center utilizes the wide-screen aspect ratio, displaying everything in a left/right layout as opposed to the traditional up/down, reducing the amount of screen scrolling required.

Still, if your sole reason for upgrading to Vista is the new-and-improved Media Center, early reviews suggest that those already plugged in with an up-to-date Windows XP Media Center may want to wait. Thus far, Vista offers too few functional improvements aside from a fresh coat of paint.

One final note: If you own an Xbox 360, you can stream all your media (live/recorded TV, music, photos, etc.) from your PC to your game console—effectively turning it into a second media center.

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