

Popular Mechanics

Actron U-Scan: Get Vehicle Diagnostic Data on Your Phone

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Even if you don't do much auto repair, a [scan tool](#) is a great gadget. On any car made after 1996, the tool will tell you what error code caused the Check Engine light to illuminate. That lets you know if the problem is something you can deal with in a few days, or if it's serious enough to take your car to a shop immediately or park it until you can do the repairs yourself. It's also good insurance against unscrupulous mechanics who might try to upsell you on unnecessary repairs. For the average home mechanic, the scan tool is an essential first step in automotive troubleshooting.

The [Actron U-Scan](#) is a new take on the diagnostic scanner. Where an ordinary scanner is a handheld device with a small LCD screen, the U-Scan connects via Bluetooth to an app on your iPhone or Android device. At \$80 (or cheaper if you search online), it costs only a few dollars more than Actron's most simple code reader, yet the U-Scan can do as much as far more expensive scanner tools.

Using the U-Scan is fairly straightforward. Plug it in to your car's OBDII port and start the car. The U-Scan is powered through the port. Then, connect through your Bluetooth settings and

start the app. The first time you connect to a car, the app will read the VIN and let you save the car in your virtual garage. That brings up the main screen, which shows the overall status of the car which lets you run a quick scan for any errors and reset the check engine light.

Our first time using the U-Scan was with an iPhone 4S, and it took a couple of tries to establish the Bluetooth connection. Once paired to the phone, the U-Scan automatically performed a firmware update (something not possible with a traditional scanner, by the way), and then was ready to work. On a subsequent attempt we used an iPhone 5S and the setup went smoothly on the first try. On all the cars we tested, scanning was anti-climactic—it performed a quick check and reported no problems, so we didn't have a chance to troubleshoot a car that was actually broken.

If there actually is a problem, the basic version of the app will tell you the trouble code. However, if you want to do more, you have to pay extra. For example, many manufacturers use custom codes beyond the basic OBDII requirements. A database containing those, along with the ability to track live data, costs \$7.99 per make or \$15.99 for all makes. It's annoying to have to pay for the additional content, but if you're into the idea of looking at every single piece of data on what your car is doing, this feature is just plain amazing. And each parameter can be brought up as a live graph.

There are two other upgrades as well. For \$5.99 per vehicle, or \$29.99 for unlimited vehicles, you get ABS code reading, which adds the capability to see what's going on with the brakes and wheel speed sensors. Another \$12.99 per vehicle (\$39.99 unlimited) gives you access to the Code Connect, an online database that lists common repairs for each error code.

Going whole hog on all the add-ons and the total can reach nearly \$86—more than the cost of the U-Scan itself. But that \$160 or so is still about the price of a high-end scan tool, and much cheaper than any system that you could use on a computer. And, not people will be fine with just the manufacturer codes and live data. Plus there's the added advantage of saving data for every car you scan; the app has automatic links to save screen shots, send over email, or post to Facebook. We're not sure why anybody would want to share their car's data with their Facebook friends, but hey, it's an option. Even if you keep all that data to yourself, the U-Scan is the best way to do a detailed check of you car's health.

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