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In the years I've been writing for HowStuffWorks, I've had quite range of assignments. Some are highly technical and send me to a nearby university library for research. Others allow me to draw on life experiences as well as popular literature and websites. None, however, has seemed as strange as this one – Are there really condoms with QR codes? I thought my assignment editor was playing a joke. But a little time online showed me that yes, QR codes have even invaded the bedroom. And that savvy public relations professionals are figuring out all sorts of ways to tap into the latest technology and modes of communication in their efforts to reach young people. My online research led me to a phone conversation with a person who probably knows more than anyone else about condoms with QR codes, and he told me about the good intentions behind what at first seems a bit weird. Related Articles How Condoms WorkHow Planned Parenthood WorksHow 2-D Barcodes Work Bangstyle. 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"Sweden Promotes Innovative Safe Sex Through QR Codes & Love Making App." Dec. 9, 2011. (June 27, 2012) Media Platforms Design TeamSee that thing at the right there? You've probably noticed these around, mainly on advertisements. It's called a QR code, and marketers want you to use your smartphone's camera to "read" it. Here's what you should know about them... and how to make your own!QR (Quick Response) codes are a type of barcode — not unlike the vertically-lined ones on every product you buy — that provide information when read by a scanner equipped to interpret it. They were first used in the mid-90s by a Japanese car manufacturer as a way to keep track of parts, but marketers have begun using them as a fun way to encode and share additional information with consumers, beyond what they can squeeze into an advertisement. (The one shown here is Good Housekeeping's.)After downloading an app (I like QuickMark, but there are a ton of options out there), you use your smartphone's camera to capture the code. You'll then immediately be asked if you'd like to see whatever info the code indicates — it could be a prompt to go to a website URL or to send an e-mail (say, to enter a contest). Marketers are also using them to offer discounts and coupons — a reason it really pays to look for these on ads. Further, tech savvy companies are putting them on employees' business cards, so the contact info can be quickly read and imported into a recipient's cell phone's address book.To create your own, you can use a phone app (QuickMark does this), or go to a QR generator website, such as QRStuff.com or Qurify.com. Some ideas for what you might encode: your contact info, your Facebook profile page URL, or even a Google Map of your house (for a party invitation, for example). Once created, you can save the square code as an image file that you can share or paste wherever you see fit, or you can email or text it to your friends and family (phone apps can also interpret codes sent this way).Have you ever scanned a QR code? What do you think of them? And how might you use a self-created one? Please tell us in the comments below. QR codes may not be as prolific as they once were, but they're still highly useful for quickly sharing information. The thing is, it's not always clear how to scan one. If you're an Android user, here's the skinny. The Easiest Way: Use Google Lens in the Assistant You may not realize this, but if your phone has Google Assistant, you have a fast, easy, and native way to scan QR codes baked right into your handset. First, long-press the home button to bring up Assistant. Depending on which version of Assistant you have, you might have the Lens button right there as soon as Assistant pops up. Most likely, however, you need to tap on it to stop it from listening for a voice command. Just tap on the colored dots. Once it stops listening, new options become available: Lens to the left of the mic, keyboard to the right. Tap on the "Lens" button. If this is the first time you've used Lens, you'll need to activate it. Just follow the prompts and then grant it camera access. On the first run, it'll give you a quick rundown of things you can do with Lens. Just swipe that away and move the QR into the camera's view. Within seconds, it will show you what the QR is—just tap on it to execute. So, in our test case, tapping the QR navigates to howtogeek.com. Easy peasy. Option Two: Use the Google Lens App Some may argue that this is actually easier than option one, and to that, I say...maybe. The only reason I consider the first option to be easier is that your phone already has it—pretty much all modern Android handsets come with Assistant, so there's no need to install another app. But if you're all about installing other apps, then here you go. First, fire up the Google Play Store and hit up the Google Lens page. Install that bad boy. Once installed, you'll need to give it permissions and whatnot (assuming you haven't already done so withn Assistant). From there, just scan your QR code. Done and done. Now, whenever you need to scan a QR, fire up Lens and get it done. So fast. Ever since I installed a barcode-scanning app on my phone, I see QR codes everywhere—so naturally I wanted one of my own. If you're a barcode-scanning fool, the QR code to the left links to my personal web site. Fun!A QR ("quick response") code is a square barcode that makes getting URLs, location coordinates, any text or contact information onto a phone fast. With a barcode scanner app installed, you just point your phone's camera at the code to read its contents. Here's what reading this QR code looks like on my Android phone, using an app simply called "Barcode Scanner."To find a scanner application, Google "QR Reader" and the model of your phone. (If you've got a favorite scanner app that you're using, let us know in the comments.)Encoding a regular URL is a fine use of QR codes—especially lengthy and complicated URLs on movie and event flyers—but one of my favorite uses of QR codes is swapping mobile app recommendations with your friends. Since you can't search the Android Market on the web or in desktop software, you're always stuck tapping in search terms by hand. The App Referer app generates QR codes for every one of your applications. So if you want to "give" that app to a friend, you call up the QR code, and your pal can scan your phone's screen.G/O Media may get a commissionYou'll also see QR codes on web pages, in store windows, on business cards, and on conference badges. You can generate your own QR code with the information you want others to be able to read onto their phones quickly too. This QR code generator can embed a URL, text, a phone number, or an addressed and ready-to-send SMS message into a QR code.If you Google "QR code generator" you'll find others, but beware of generators that force a redirect through their site when someone scans the resulting code and gets a URL. (For example, this generator has options to encode Google Maps coordinates, social network information, and Vcards and can print t-shirts and stickers from the codes it generates, but if you enter a simple web site URL it creates a redirect through the qrstuff.com site.)Speaking of stickers, now I just need to print a few with my code to stick on my laptop, phone, and conference badges.Smarterware is Lifehacker editor emeritus Gina Trapani's new home away from hacker. To get all of the latest from Smarterware, be sure to subscribe to the Smarterware RSS feed. For more, check out Gina's weekly Smarterware feature here on Lifehacker. Several months ago, I went to a local TEDx event. It was an opportunity to absorb wisdom, to learn from the experiences of others and... to participate in one of the sponsors' games. The latter could win me a trip for two to an exotic destination, but for a chance to grab the prize, I had to take a quiz at the sponsor's website. There was a poster with a huge QR code on it linking to the page. Then it occurred to me that I didn't have an app to scan the code with. "Why can't smartphone cameras scan these automatically?," I asked myself. Well, it turns out that some already can. With iOS 11, Apple is bringing the ability to scan a QR code by simply pointing your iPhone's camera at one. The link it leads to does not open automatically. Instead, you get a notification saying that a QR code has been detected. Then you tap to open it or slide down to preview the content without leaving the camera app. If the code links to a web page, it will be opened in Safari, but links to apps and games will open in the App Store instead.Curiously, the iPhone is not the first phone that can automatically detect QR codes with its stock camera app. The feature has been present for some time on phones by the Chinese brand Xiaomi and it works in a similar fashion. And Meizu - another Chinese smartphone maker - has a non-automatic QR code scanning mode in its own camera app. While QR codes never became a hit in western markets, they're quite popular in China, which is why it comes as no surprise to see scanning software built into these two brands' phones out of the box.The ability to scan QR codes will come to iPhone and iPad users later this year with the release of iOS 11. Those who are feeling adventurous can try that, along with many other cool new features, by downloading the public iOS 11 beta on their compatible device.

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