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Are Free Public Phone Charging Stations Safe?

'Juice Jacking' Might Load Malware on Your Phone or Tablet as It's Charging

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You're on a layover at a major airport when you realize your iPhone or Android smartphone's battery is draining fast, and the battery power is down to single digits.

The battery icon has just turned from green to red, meaning your phone is nearly drained. Soon it will be as useless as an electric kettle in a cave.

There's a convenient public charging station nearby. You're in a bind. Your jet leaves in half hour. And yet you've read about the dangers of charging your phone or tablet at a public charging station. So what's a person to do?

How can you be sure the public charging station is safe? Reviewed.com reports, "As the latest security alerts prove, USB cables and chargers are like chewing gum—if you find it lying around in public, don't use it. It's not free candy. The Los Angeles District Attorney recently warned that charging your phone via those public USB ports can lead to "juice jacking." That's when hackers use the connection to transmit dangerous malware onto your device and steal your personal information or data."

Reviewed.com's executive editor, T.J. Donegan, recommends an alternative. He recommends you buy a USB portable battery pack, "many of which can even charge laptops on the go–so you don't have to crowd around the one outlet with 15 other people."

Reviewed.com recommends what's called the Jackery Bolt portable battery pack. It says the portable battery pack "has an incredibly high capacity that can charge your phone three times over (!!) before the charger needs to be recharged. Plus, it's slim and compact, so it's easy to tote around and has multiple ports so you can charge more than one device at a time." Amazon currently sells the Jackery Bolt for

$32.99.

The Wirecutter, a website that reviews and tests nearly everything (and purchased by The New York Times), gives high marks to the Zendure SuperMini 20w Power Bank. Amazon currently sells this model for $45 (using the Amazon on-page clipped coupon.) The Wirecutter writes in its Zendure review, "about as small and lightweight as a power bank can be while still offering enough capacity to juice up most smartphones up to three times. Its USB-C Power Delivery (PD) port can charge most handheld devices (and recharge the power bank itself) at top speed with the included USB-C cable and a compatible wall charger (the one that came with your phone will work). The USB-A port can handle any older, non-USB-C devices you might have kicking around, too."

The HyperJuice 18W USB-C+ Lightning Battery Pack also gets a good Wirecutter review. It contains built-in cables, so you don't have to mess with cables that can easily get lost, tangled, or misplaced. It's currently

$60 from the Hyper website.

The Wirecutter also gives thumbs up to the TravelCard Charger, which sells for $30 from TravelCard. "It has the lowest capacity of any power bank we've tested," writes The Wirecutter, but the review claims it's the best portable charger "for someone who wants to have an emergency boost of power always on hand."

Reviewed.com:

Here's Why You Should Never Use A Public Phone Charger

The Wirecutter:

The Best Portable Chargers and Power Banks for Phones and Tablets

**FBI Issues Warning Over Public Charging Stations**

The FBI says don't do it even if you're tempted to use a public charging station so your phone or tablet won't die on you.

It's a risky business, according to the team at the FBI, watching malware spread on mobile devices throughout the

U.S. and abroad:

"Cybersecurity experts have warned that criminals can load malware onto public USB charging stations to maliciously access electronic devices while being charged.

Malware installed through a dirty USB port can lock a device or export personal data and passwords directly to the perpetrator. Criminals can use that information to access online accounts or sell it to other bad actors."

FBI tech experts add, "Don't let a free USB charge wind up draining your bank account." Here are some tips to help you avoid becoming a juice-jacking victim:

* Avoid using a USB charging station. Use an AC power outlet instead.
* Bring AC, car chargers, and USB cables with you when traveling.
* Carry a portable charger or external battery.
* Consider carrying a charging-only cable from a trusted supplier, which prevents data from sending or receiving while charging.