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Fun with (more) car lighters

They rarely light smokes now, but they charge PDAs, chill beer, and even power unmentionable acts.

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By [Peter Valdes-Dapena](#), CNN/Money Staff Writer

NEW YORK (CNN/Money) - The hardest thing to figure out about car cigarette lighters these days is what to do with the actual lighter.

What, for instance, do you do with it while you're charging your cell phone -- which is, after all, what most people are using the sockets for anyway.

In fact, even as more people quit smoking, the number of lighter sockets in cars is increasing.

In model-year 2004, there are 47 vehicles that come, standard, with five or six lighter sockets, according to [Carsdirect.com](#). In 1998, no vehicles came with that many.

Technically speaking, "lighter socket" is not even an accurate term since in many cases those extra sockets won't work with a cigarette lighter, according to Ali Elhaj, president of Casco, an auto parts company that claims to have invented the automobile cigarette lighter.

The background

Lighters started appearing as standard equipment in 1925 or '26, said Elhaj. The modern "automatic" lighter -- the little cylinder that pops out when it gets hot -- was developed by Casco in the 1960s. (If you really want to know more, see the [history of car cigarette lighters](#) on Casco's Web site. It starts with a lovely Art Nouveau number.)

All those extra sockets mean more places to plug in cell phone chargers, personal digital assistants and GPS devices. Cigarette lighter sockets near the back seats of many minivans make long trips more manageable. Kids can plug in portable DVD players and video games.

The Mini Cooper has one in the dash as well as one in the cargo area. (The extra lighter-style socket went away for the 2003 model year, but returned due to customer demand, said a Mini spokesperson.)

Karl Braeur, editor-in-chief of autos Web site [Edmunds.com](#) drives a Mini and says he appreciates that extra lighter, although he didn't even know it was there when he bought the car.

"Within weeks, I found ways to use it," he says.

The cost of adding those extra sockets is certainly worth it, said Roger Kwapich, host of [The C.A.R. Show](#), a syndicated radio program, even if only a few car owners use them or even know they're there.

Ways to use it

Cigarette lighter sockets can even provide power to help you do things you probably should not do while driving. Brewing coffee, and other things.

The Pink Pussycat Boutique, an "adult novelty" store in Manhattan, sells a variety of devices that can be plugged into car cigarette lighter sockets. We'll go no farther.

If you get a flat tire, [Safetycentral.com](#) sells a 12-volt impact wrench for removing lug nuts. Among other car lighter-friendly devices the site sells are a 20 oz. coffee pot, a frying pan, an oven, a curling iron, an electric cooler and a special adapter so you can plug multiple devices into one lighter. That way you can make breakfast, curl your hair, run your impact wrench and maybe light a cigarette while you wait for your beer to get cold.

There are even special cables that allow you to jump start a car through cigarette lighter sockets. "Jump" may be overstating things a bit. "Crawl start" might be a better term.

"It works, but it takes a lot of time," said Kwapich of the C.A.R. show.



A better option might be one of several portable battery systems that are available from places like [SafetyCentral.com](#) and Sears. They can be charged from your car's lighter socket or an indoor A/C socket and



Car curling iron

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use jumper cable connections to transfer power to your car's battery if needed. And since you might want to brew coffee when you're not in your car, they come equipped with a lighter style socket.

Light smokes with your PC.

If you don't want to lug that to your office, [FrozenCPU.com](#) sells a car cigarette lighter that can be installed on your desktop PC. Yes, you can light a cigarette with it.

CNN/Money has not tried and does not endorse any retailers or products mentioned in this article. (At least not that we'll discuss.)

Watch the draw

Experts like Elhaj and Kwapich recommend against straining your car's electrical system by pulling too much power through those lightweight sockets. Anything major should only be plugged into the one of the extra not-really-a-lighter sockets, said Elhaj.

As technology advances, though, you may be able to do without those cigarette lighter adapters. The Pontiac Vibe and its sister-crossover, the Toyota Matrix, have a regular plug in the center console. That's right: A regular two-pronged alternating current outlet just like you have at home. Just don't plug in anything that pulls more than one amp. Cocktail blender, OK. Toaster oven, not.



From: [SafetyCentral.com](#)

Of course it also has, in the dash, a regular "12-volt power source." That's a cigarette lighter socket to you and me. Oh, and there's another one, the "not-really-a-lighter" type, hidden inside a compartment in the center console.

You can't have enough of those things, and don't expect them to go away any time soon. There are too many devices now that require them.

"The whole aftermarket is wired around this cigarette lighter," said Casco's Elhaj.

In many cars, the you don't get the actual cigarette lighter device in them unless you ask for the "smokers package." Brauer, of [Edmunds.com](#), said he has apocalyptic nightmares of a world without real cigarette lighters in in those cigarette lighter holes.

Car coffee pot

He imagines one day being stuck in a broken-down car as the sun sets and the air gets chilly. "And I'm staring down at this little plastic cover where there used to be a device that I could make some heat out of," he says.

He should buy one of those heaters you can plug into the cigarette lighter hole. ■

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