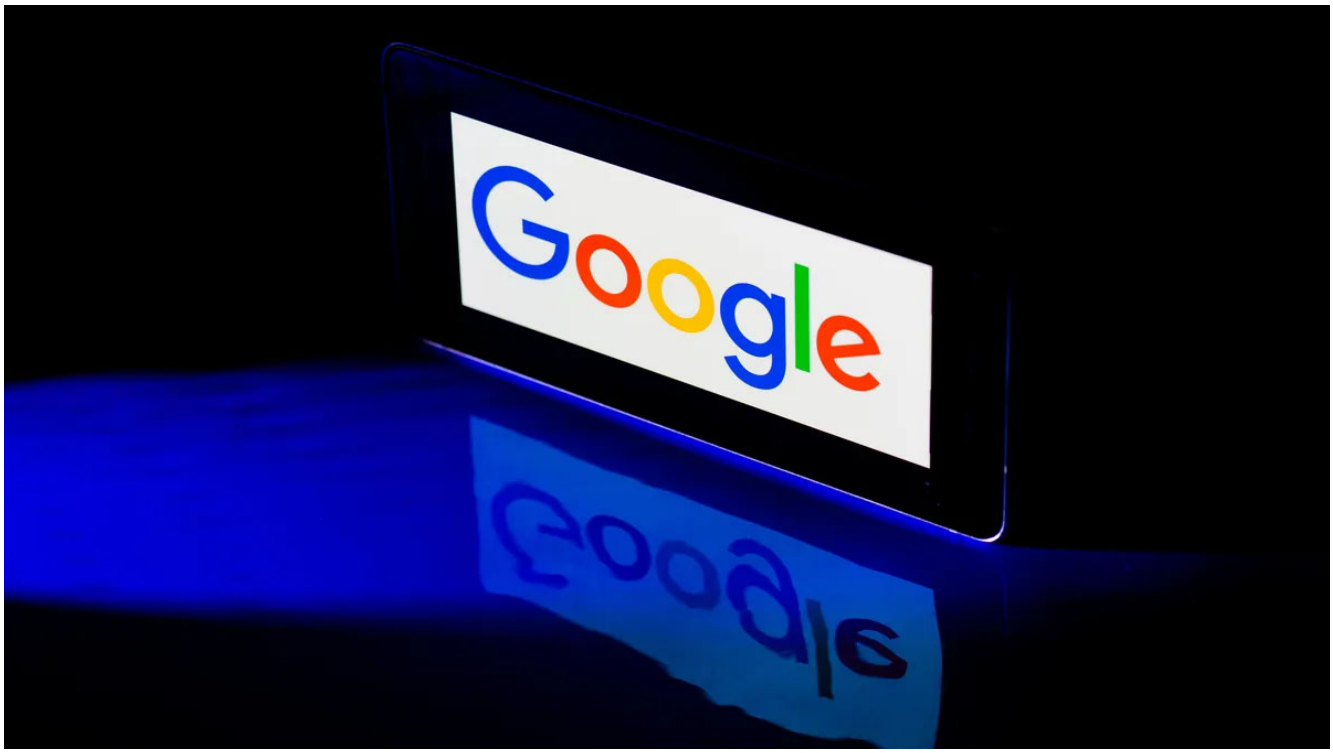
Android is finally getting its version of Apple's AirDrop

The feature, called Nearby Share, spent "years in development."



Google is unveiling an Android feature called Nearby Share.
Angela Lang/CNET

Android is getting a feature that's been beloved among iPhone users for years.

Google, which makes the Android mobile operating system, on Tuesday said it's launching a tool called Nearby Share that lets people quickly send files to the devices of people around them. The feature is similar to Apple's AirDrop, which debuted for Mac computers in 2011, then came to iPhones two years later.

It's faster than sharing a file by text because the sender doesn't have to find the recipient's contact information. It also works either online or offline because the feature uses various sending methods, including Bluetooth or peer-to-peer Wi-Fi connections.

Google said the feature spent "years in development," and will be available on "thousands" of different models of Android phones. It will work with devices that run Android Marshmallow, the version of the operating system released in 2015, or newer. Almost a decade ago, Google released a similar feature called Android Beam, but it failed to gain traction with consumers.

The feature lets people transfer files between devices.
Google

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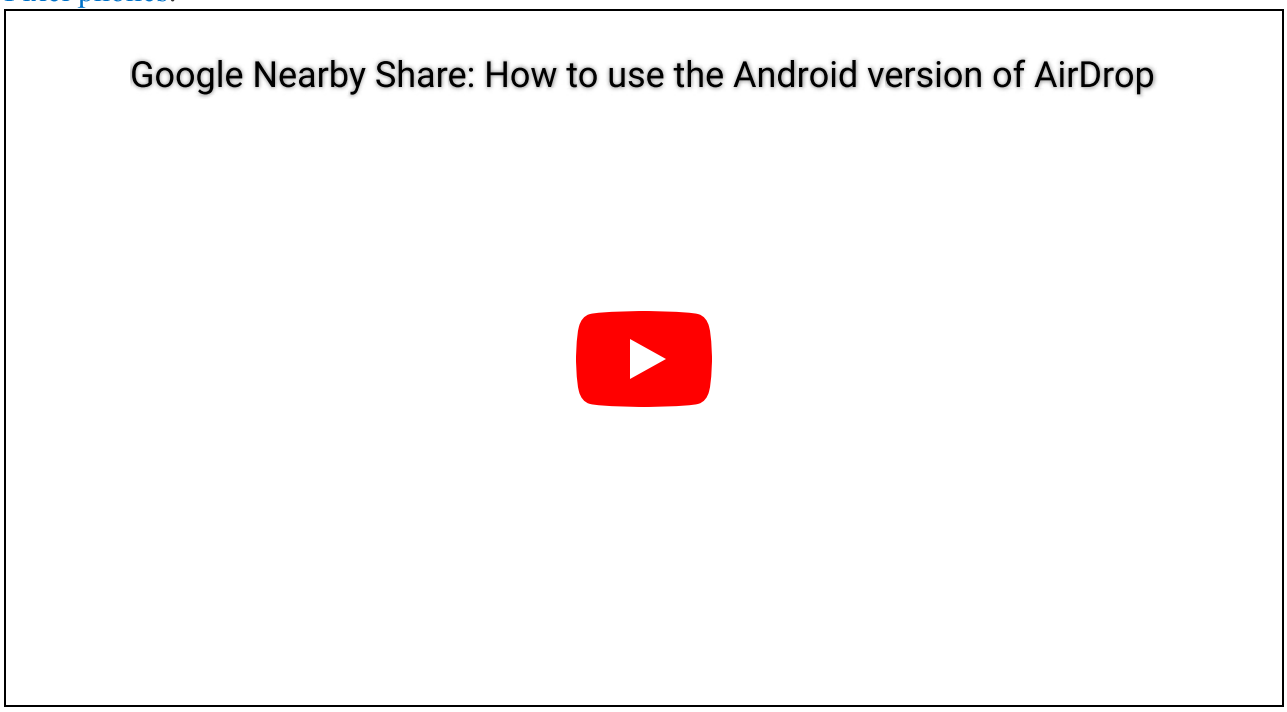
The feature is coming first to select phones from Samsung and Google's flagship mobile device line, Pixel. Samsung is unveiling new devices on Wednesday and Google this week announced three new Pixel phones.



The release comes as both Google and Apple battle to bring new features to users that were previously only on its rival's platform. In June, Apple unveiled several features for its iPhones that Android phones have had for years, including widgets for customizing the home screen and "app clips" for previewing apps without downloading them.

Android is the most dominant mobile operating system in the world, powering almost 9 out of every 10 smartphones shipped globally. The software is a crucial piece of Google's business. The search giant makes the vast majority of its $160 billion in annual sales through personalized ads. Getting more people on its Android software means the company can get more data on users to refine its targeted advertising.

Google, which has been criticized for its privacy and data collection policies, said it built in settings for Nearby Share that let people control how visible they are. Users can send and receive files anonymously. They can choose to be hidden, or seen by some or all contacts. Google said the feature will be compatible with its Chromebook laptops "in coming months."