

FreeCharge 12V

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Free, clean renewable energy for gadgets

FreeCharge 12V is to mobile devices as a bicycle pump is to bike tires. Forget about using fossil-fuel generated juice from a wall outlet and lugging multiple power bricks when you travel. [FreeCharge 12V](#) reenergizes cellphones' and music players' drained lithium-ion batteries via a renewable and plentiful source —human crank-power.

This product consists of a 2" x 2.4" x 5.3" bean-shaped case made of black and blue plastic molding which houses a 3-phase alternator with 3-phase rectification and a transmission (gears and shafts). At one end of the case is a ~16" cable leading to a cigarette lighter socket resembling the one in your car. On the case's front side is a flip-out, glass-filled nylon hand crank with a hub and bush at the end where the crank joins the case and a knob for the user to grasp with thumb and fingers at the other end (Figure 1).



Figure 1 shows the FreeCharge 12V with the crank retracted (left) and with the crank in action (right).

Eco-friendliness is FreeCharge 12V's most important feature, and it begins with the product's packaging. The unit ships in a plastic wrap that is recyclable—it comes with a big, fat "#1" on the bulge for the FreeCharge 12V's body—and the informational insert is printed on recycled paper. In addition, according to its specs, the outer casing has been manufactured without environmental nasties (cadmium and chlorine), plus it is fully recyclable. Unlike other rechargers, however, FreeCharge 12V does not contain a battery that you recharge and then use to recharge another device; instead, crank-powered electricity flows directly to your mobile gadget with the aid of a third-party USB adapter which you plug

into the aforementioned socket. Did I mention that FreeCharge 12V generates electricity without emitting greenhouse gases?

Social responsibility is FreeCharge 12V's number 2 virtue. It helps recruit supporters for the non-profit foundation that Freeplay Energy established in 1998 "to transform lives through dependable, self-sufficient and environmentally friendly technologies. We work primarily in sub-Saharan Africa with a special focus on the needs of orphans and other vulnerable children, women, refugees and people who are ill." For more details, visit their [web site](#).

If saving the environment and/or humanity is not your thing, a third plus is FreeCharge 12V's wallet-friendly \$30.00 MSRP and two-year warranty against defective materials or construction. However, the package lacks a socket-to-USB adapter, so that's a separate purchase/cost if your mobile device also came without one.

This is a product that I really want to endorse, but hesitate to do so. What's not to like? For starters, although FreeCharge 12V's minimalist packaging helps protect the environment, it lacks operating instructions. The printed insert only refers the user to Freeplay's home page from which you have to really dig deep to find [them](#).

A potentially more serious consideration is FreeCharge 12V's ergonomics and usability. In my hands, the unit's bulk is a bit difficult to hold and crank for more than a few minutes at a time without fatigue, and its mechanism has an inherent resistance which could make cranking just plain daunting for a child or owner whose wrists possess ordinary levels of strength and endurance. What's more, FreeCharge 12V requires a considerable amount of cranking to make a difference in recharging your mobile device. The company claims that 360 turns—about three minutes of wrist exercise or stress, depending upon your point of view—translates into 9–11 minutes of talk time, while 60 seconds of cranking produces 2–4 minutes of talk time. Your mileage will depend upon a host of factors including the brand and model of mobile device, signal strength, battery condition, etc. My testing involved an iPod touch, and despite the FreeCharge 12V's green LED indicating that electricity was flowing, I could not detect any movement in the touch's battery charge-level icon before my wrist (and patience) pooped out.

Lastly, FreeCharge 12V is made in China which (at least in my mind) raises questions about whether the manufacturing process is environmentally friendly, sustainable, and socially responsible. Unfortunately, I could not find any relevant answers on the printed insert or at the company's web site.

In conclusion, FreeCharge 12V's underlying concept has considerable merit and potential, the price is right, and this product could make a dent in your electric bill. If only its size, weight, and ease of use were comparable to that of hand-crankable flashlights, then buying FreeCharge 12V would be a no-brainer.



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