Samsung’s recall fix for overheating washers is a software update — and a dongle

As companies have announced smart appliance after smart appliance, some people (myself included) have questioned why on earth you’d want to connect something like a washing machine or refrigerator to the internet. Samsung, however, has come up with a very compelling, if admittedly niche, use case: the company announced in December that it’s issuing an over-the-air software patch as part of the recall for some top-load washing machines that “can short-circuit and overheat, posing a fire hazard.”

It’ll even send some customers a dongle in case their washers can’t connect to Wi-Fi.

Welcome to the “first-ever over-the-air software recall remedy in the home appliances industry.”

According to Samsung, your washing machine should automatically download the update via its SmartThings app if you already have it set up and connected to Wi-Fi. It is, however, advising consumers to check what software version their machines are running and to “immediately download this software update” before using the machines again if it isn’t already installed. People who haven’t connected their Wi-Fi-enabled machines can do so by following the company’s instructions here.

Samsung says the issue is that the control panel of around 14

models sold in the US between June 2021 and December 2022 could potentially overheat, causing it to smoke, melt, or even catch on fire. There are around 663,500 units affected, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission, the regulator that deals with recalls. The CPSC also notes “51 reports of smoking, melting, overheating or fire involving the washers; 10 of which resulted in property damage.” Three people were also apparently injured due to smoke inhalation.

Washing machine recalls aren’t exactly unusual — Whirlpool and GE have both recalled units thanks to fire concerns, and Samsung famously settled a class action suit over some machines that would vibrate excessively and potentially come apart while doing so, leading to what the CPSC described as “impact injuries.” But this method of recalling them isn’t common, at least for appliances (Tesla famously fixes a lot of recalls via software updates). Samsung calls this the “first-ever over-the-air software recall remedy in the home appliances industry.”

For those that are stuck dealing with a recall, having to do so via a software update may be less of a hassle than having to schedule an in-home repair or get a heavy, bulky machine taken out of their homes.

I do say “may” because, like many IoT devices, there are a few caveats that people may run into if they have to connect their washing machine to the internet for the first time. Samsung says you won’t be able to connect to a network if it has something other than letters and numbers in its name and that it has to be a 2.4Ghz network — a lot of routers these days will use the same SSID for both 2.4 and 5Ghz networks, and while devices should theoretically be able to navigate that situation, it doesn’t always work perfectly. (I personally have separate 2.4 and 5Ghz networks for that reason, though not everybody will be able to figure out how to set that up.)

While those might be relatively minor hurdles for tech-

inclined people, they could definitely be difficult for others if their Wi-Fi setup happens to be a little out of the ordinary. Then there are the machines that don’t have Wi-Fi built-in. If you have one of those, you can contact Samsung to get a dongle that plugs into a special port on your machine. According to a Samsung instructional video, the dongle will automatically update your washer’s software after you plug it in.

It’s obviously not great that this issue happened in the first place, but I’ll give some kudos to Samsung for coming up with what appears to be a reasonable solution here, even with the potential Wi-Fi pitfalls. Washing machines are important appliances in many households, and having to spend a week or two without one wouldn’t be fun. And while fixing an issue via a software update won’t be possible in every scenario — and Samsung is oddly vague on whether the problem results from a software bug in the first place — in this case, it should mean that people can have their machines back up and running safely in an hour or two.

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