

# VLOOKUP vs XLOOKUP vs INDEX/MATCH — Quick Reference Card

Full Comparison · Decision Framework · Failure Modes · TechFitFlow.com

Default rule: use XLOOKUP (M365/2021) for single-condition lookups. Use INDEX/MATCH for two-condition, two-dimensional, or pre-2021 environments. Never use VLOOKUP in shared workbooks where columns may be inserted.

FULL CAPABILITY COMPARISON			
Capability	VLOOKUP	XLOOKUP	INDEX/MATCH
Excel version	All	M365/2021 only	All
Look left	X	✓	✓
Immune to column insertion	X Breaks silently	✓	✓
Built-in not-found fallback	X Needs IFERROR	✓ 4th argument	X Needs IFNA
Last match (most recent)	X	✓ search_mode=-1	Workaround
Two-condition (no helper col)	X	Workaround needed	✓ Boolean array
Two-dimensional lookup	X	Nested XLOOKUP	✓ INDEX+2xMATCH
Approximate match	✓ TRUE	✓ match_mode=-1/1	✓ match_type 1/-1
Safe in shared workbooks	X No	✓ Yes	✓ Yes

## 4-QUESTION DECISION FRAMEWORK

#	Question	Answer and function to use
1	Will anyone open this in Excel 2019 or earlier?	Yes → INDEX/MATCH only (XLOOKUP shows #NAME? in older versions) No → XLOOKUP is available for single-condition lookups
2	Do you need to match on two conditions simultaneously?	Yes, no helper col → INDEX/MATCH boolean array: INDEX(Return, MATCH(1,(Col1=A)*(Col2=B),0)) Yes, helper col OK → XLOOKUP on concatenated key (Payer&" "&ServiceType;) No → single-condition lookup; any function works
3	Do you need the MOST RECENT match (duplicate keys)?	Yes → XLOOKUP with search_mode=-1 — clearest solution VLOOKUP always returns first match; INDEX/MATCH workaround is complex
4	Could someone insert a column into the lookup table later?	Yes → Never use VLOOKUP — hardcoded col_index breaks silently Use XLOOKUP or INDEX/MATCH — both reference by address or column name No → VLOOKUP is acceptable IF all other conditions are also met

## THREE SHARED FAILURE MODES — ALL FUNCTIONS

Failure	What happens	Fix
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<b>Duplicate lookup values</b>	All three return only the first match. Multiple rows matching the key are silently ignored.	Use FILTER (M365) to return all matching rows. Use SUMIFS/COUNTIFS for numeric aggregation across duplicates.
<b>Text vs number type mismatch</b>	197 (number) ≠ "197" (text). #N/A returned silently. Left-aligned cells = stored as text.	Use VALUE() to convert text-numbers, or TEXT() in reverse. Best fix: clean in Power Query before worksheet.
<b>Trailing spaces in strings</b>	"BCBS " ≠ "BCBS". Lookup fails with #N/A even when the value looks identical.	Wrap lookup value and array in TRIM. Best fix: Text.Trim() in Power Query Applied Steps.

## VLOOKUP → XLOOKUP / INDEX/MATCH CONVERSION MAP

VLOOKUP argument	Maps to in XLOOKUP	Maps to in INDEX/MATCH
lookup_value (A2)	lookup_value (A2)	MATCH lookup_value (A2)
table_array col 1 = lookup column (\$F:\$F)	lookup_array (\$F:\$F or TableName[Code])	MATCH lookup_array (\$F:\$F or TableName[Code])
table_array col n = return column (\$G:\$G)	return_array (\$G:\$G or TableName[Desc])	INDEX return_range (\$G:\$G or TableName[Desc])
range_lookup FALSE = exact	match_mode 0 = exact (default)	MATCH match_type 0 = exact
IFERROR wrapper = fallback	if_not_found 4th argument = fallback	IFNA wrapper = fallback (#N/A only)