

**LATEST
LAPTOPS**
PAGE 43

**TOYOTA
PRIUS V**
PAGE 54



**SAFETY ALERT
APPLIANCE FIRES**
PAGE 22

**INTERIOR
PAINTS**
PAGE 46



MARCH 2012 | CONSUMERREPORTS.ORG

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America's Top Stores

- ▶ 26,000 savvy shoppers help us rate big chains on price, service & more
- ▶ How to get real deals



Best TVs

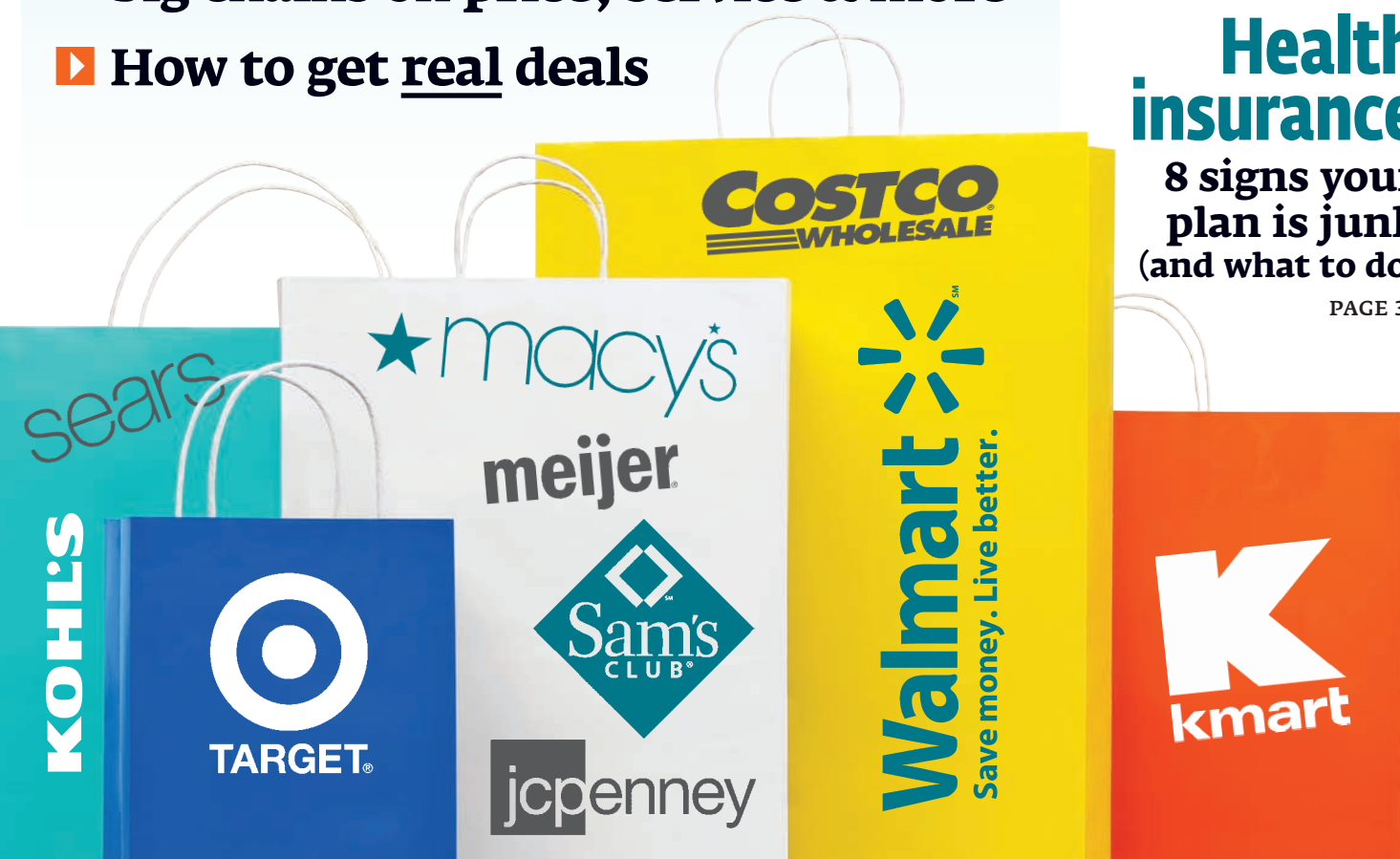
Dazzling LCD
& plasma sets
Plus Get a
perfect picture

PAGE 34

Health insurance

8 signs your
plan is junk
(and what to do)

PAGE 30



PLUS Best & worst store websites

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Contents

CONSUMER REPORTS MARCH 2012

Volume 77 No. 3



SPECIAL TV SECTION

34 | **Best LCD & plasma TVs**

High-tech features are transforming television.

PLUS Get the best picture.

LCD Ratings pages 37-41

Plasma Ratings page 42

COVER STORY

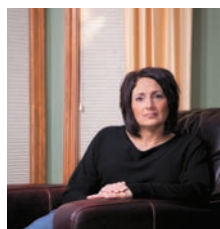
16 | **Top stores**

More than 26,000 readers rate the biggest national chain retailers' stores and websites.

Ratings pages 18-21



FEATURES



22 | **Appliance fires**

CR Investigates Millions of appliances have been recalled for fire hazards.

PLUS Safety steps you can take.

30 | **Junk health insurance**

Some health insurance plans offer very little protection.

LAB TESTS

43 | **Lighter laptops**

New Ultrabooks make mobile computing easier.

44 | **Pro-style ranges**

Exclusive Ratings of 30- and 36-inch models.

44 | **Air cleaners**

The dirt on portable air purifiers.

45 | **Toasters & toaster ovens**

The best choices among 61 we tested.

46 | **Interior paint**

A new winner tops our list.
Ratings pages 47-48

49 | **Vacuums**

Our latest tests find nine great choices under \$200.
Ratings pages 50-51



Continued on next page

DEPARTMENTS

5 | Ask our experts

5 | Letters

6 | Viewpoint

Web privacy for kids.

6 | From our president

No hiding the hazards.

7 | Up front

■ Detergents: "Ultra" confusing.

■ Battle of the almost-butters.

■ **BY THE NUMBERS** Buy American?

■ **CLAIM CHECK** Burger King's new fries.

■ **SCAM ALERT** Who's calling, please?

■ Movie-theater food: A scary story.

■ Distracted driving tops list of safety worries.

■ Match the drug to its side effects.



12 | Health

Don't be starstruck by supplements.



13 | Money

Avoid costly retirement mistakes.

14 | Safety alerts

61 | About us

62 | Index

63 | Selling it

This issue by the numbers

What you'll save

\$2,370 Buy a BMW X3 **luxury SUV** and save this much over a Range Rover Evoque.

\$780 Buy a Hoover Tempo Widepath **upright vacuum** for \$100 and save this much over a Miele S 7580 Bolero.

\$150 Get a JVC 42-inch **LCD TV** and save this much over a Vizio model.

Best & worst scores

Costco online store

SCORE

88

COSTCO
COM

Jeep Wrangler

SCORE

20



Coming in April

Annual Auto Issue, with profiles of more than 200 vehicles, best and worst cars, safety ratings, and used-car reliability.

CARS

53 | News

Clearing up your headlights.

54 | Road tests

The Toyota Prius V wagon, BMW X3, Land Rover Range Rover Evoque, a Volkswagen Tiguan update, and the Jeep Wrangler.

Ratings page 56



Who we are

Consumer Reports

is the world's largest independent consumer-product-testing organization. We also survey millions of consumers about their experiences with products and services. We're based in Yonkers, N.Y., and are a nonprofit organization.

What we do We buy all the products we rate.

What we don't do We don't accept paid advertising; we get our money mainly through subscriptions and donations. We don't accept free test samples from manufacturers. And we don't allow our name or content to be used for any promotional purposes.

How to reach us Write to us at Consumer Reports, 101 Truman Ave., Yonkers, NY 10703-1057, attn: Customer Service.

- To send a letter to the editor, go to ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor.
- For news tips and story ideas, go to ConsumerReports.org/tips.
- E-mail submissions for Selling It to SellingIt@cro.consumer.org.
- For subscription information, go to ConsumerReports.org/magazine or call 800-666-5261. See page 61 for more details.

Ratings We rate products using these symbols:

● Excellent ● Very good ○ Good ● Fair ● Poor

✓ CR Best Buy Products with this icon offer the best combination of performance and price.

✓ Recommended product Models with this designation perform well and stand out for reasons we note.

✓ Recommended car These tested well, are reliable, and performed adequately if crash-tested or included in a federal rollover test.

✗ Don't Buy We label products with this icon when we judge them to be safety risks or to have serious performance problems.

Arsenic in juice

As the father of two young boys, I am shocked, appalled, and frightened by your great exposé “Arsenic in Your Juice” (January 2012). Any parent in their right mind would not even consider giving apple or grape juice to their children anymore.

Steven Campiglia
Bellmore, NY



Password purgatory

“Hack-proof Your Passwords” (January 2012) left out the growth in demand for needless passwords. When online security vendors outdo each other by selling software requiring so many difficult passwords, it’s no wonder people throw up their hands and use 123456.

Jim Parker Austin, TX

Many websites that require registration don’t accept special characters or even caps. How do you create a more secure password under those guidelines?

Don Lawson Gardner, MA

Make the password as long as possible—nine or 10 characters if you’re allowed; begin with a number rather than a letter; and use digits and letters.

Supplement sources

“Fish-Oil Pills vs. Claims” (Up Front, January 2012) didn’t mention vegetarian sources for omega-3 fatty acids. Algae-based products avoid the health risks from fish.

Jean Bettanny Port Townsend, WA

Clinical trials show that the omega-3 fatty acids DHA and EPA in fish and fish oil reduce heart-attack and stroke risk. Algae supplies mainly DHA, which alone has not been proved to reduce cardiovascular risk.

Hands-on advice

Here’s another tip for table-saw safety (Safety Alerts, January 2012). I still heed my father’s adage from when I began using his tools: “Always give both hands a job. It’s the one that’s just hanging out that gets hurt.”

John Jacobs Mystic, CT

Correction

TD Ameritrade requires no minimum balance to open an account. A Ratings chart in February on discount online brokerages indicated otherwise.

SEND YOUR LETTERS TO www.ConsumerReports.org/askourexperts.

Ask our experts

I want a new 46-inch LCD TV. Will I be able to use my VHS tape player and recorder and my DVD disc player?

Luther Haas Colorado Springs, CO

Yes, your old VCR and DVD player will work with a new LCD or plasma TV. All TVs have video-input connections that work with the latest equipment and older products. But the S-video-type connector is becoming rare on TVs, so check whether a certain model has that connection if you need it.

Is a certain percentage of synthetic motor oil required for the oil to be called semi-synthetic?

Tim Quandt Thornton, CO

No. Standards for motor oil are based on performance, not a formula, the American Petroleum Institute says. Oils labeled “API certified” meet performance requirements set by U.S. and international vehicle and engine makers and the lubricant industry.

How do I find a financial planner for my in-laws? I need an expert in senior issues such as in-home and long-term care.

Dimitrios Jaffe New York

They need a comprehensive financial plan. A Certified Financial Planner, Chartered Financial Consultant, or certified public accountant/personal financial specialist has taken courses and passed exams in relevant subjects. Ask about their experience with seniors and whether the planner pro-

vides services with the “duty of care of a fiduciary,” meaning they’re obliged to base their advice on your in-laws’ best interests and disclose conflicts of interest. Check for red flags at www.cfp.net/search, www.finra.org/brokercheck, and www.adviserinfo.sec.gov.

Why do twirly compact fluorescent lights brighten quickly and twirly CFLs inside floodlights brighten slowly?

Simon Lichtenstein Brooklyn, NY

A covered CFL, such as a floodlight, usually runs hotter than an open spiral bulb, and the heat can limit light output. To compensate, many bulb makers use a mercury amalgam that improves light levels. But it makes the bulbs slower to brighten.

My optometrist insists that I use a brand-name contact solution, not a less expensive store brand. He claims the store brand is inferior. True?

Jon Leif Byron, MN

No. Brand-name contact-lens solutions are cleared by the Food and Drug Administration. Once a company gets clearance, it can sell the formula to companies such as Rite Aid and Walmart, which may distribute the product under the store name. But a store brand can’t change the formula unless it, too, gets FDA clearance.

SEND YOUR QUESTIONS TO www.ConsumerReports.org/askourexperts.



THE TEST Motor oil labeled “API certified” meets certain performance criteria.

This page highlights efforts of Consumers Union, the policy and action arm of Consumer Reports, to improve the marketplace. Here's some of what we're focused on now.

FROM OUR PRESIDENT

No hiding the hazards



It has been one year since a veil began to be lifted. In March 2011 the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission launched a consumer-friendly database, at www.saferproducts.gov, that lets people report

product-safety issues and makes the reports public and easily searchable.

Before then, complaints to the CPSC were largely hidden while they were investigated. The new database lets you check for safety issues before you buy, file a safety complaint about a product you own, and learn whether others have had the same problem. A strong consumer law enacted in 2008 created the database, setting the stage for a change to the old system.

Now your single report not only reaches the CPSC but is also forwarded to the manufacturer and posted for other consumers to read.

We see a pattern

Safety groups, including Consumer Reports, are digging into the database. It was one of the first sources our reporters turned to for an investigative article in this issue on appliance fires (see page 22). The database had more than 850 reports of fires or fire hazards involving about a dozen types of common appliances.

SaferProducts.gov also helps us understand which products present serious hazards to our children. Kids In Danger, a nonprofit that works to make children's products safer, analyzed the database at the four-month mark. It found that some 20 percent of the entries involved kids' products or injuries to kids. Among them were complaints about already recalled toys and children's products with loose screws and breaking parts. Getting those out of homes quickly can literally save life and limb.

The database can be one of the best safety resources available. Your complaints will be visible in a whole new way—to other consumers, to safety groups, and to the press.

Jim Guest
JIM GUEST
President

2.5 million

► The number of young adults who can stay on their parents' insurance plans through age 26 because of health-care reform. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's National Health Interview Survey shows that since September 2010 there has been a significant jump in the percentage of young adults covered by private health insurance.

WHERE WE STAND

Web privacy for kids

THE ISSUE Children's movements online are being tracked due to a disturbing lack of protections for personal information.

OUR TAKE Even parents who try to monitor what their children do online find few options to stop marketers from tracking and profiling their kids.

Companies can follow children around the Internet, keeping track of the sites they see. Worse, marketers can trail the places they go in the real world as well through software that pinpoints the location of their cell phones and

other mobile devices.

A bill in Congress called the Do Not Track Kids Act (H.R. 1895), which has bipartisan support, would give parents the right to refuse to allow online tracking of their children and would put sensible limits on online marketing aimed at kids and teens.

Consumers of every age should have greater online privacy protections. That should start with the most vulnerable of all Internet users—children.



WINNERS CIRCLE

Parents for Window Blind Safety is one of the five finalists for Consumers Union's first Excellence in Advocacy Award. The group's mission is to test window coverings for safety, pressure the industry to eliminate the hazards, and support parents whose children were killed or injured by corded window blinds and shades.

Linda Kaiser, the group's founder, says the modifications to cords that manufacturers have proposed aren't enough. "The standard they want to pass does not address anything regarding the operational



CUT THE CORD
Linda Kaiser hopes exposed cords on window coverings will be a thing of the past.

cords, which means the accident rate will not be reduced." Almost 500 children in the U.S. have been killed or seriously injured by cords in the past several decades.

Kaiser and other safety advocates are working with federal regulators to find a solution. "My goal is to see operational cords become inaccessible if not eliminated." That, she says, would lead to a significant reduction of window-covering accidents. For

details on the award finalists and winner, go to www.ConsumerReports.org/consumeraward.

QUOTABLE

'Sorry Ma Bell but no Ma Cell for you. ... It's time they ditched this merger and invested in improving their woeful customer service.'

—MANEESH PANGASA, ON AT&T'S WEBSITE, DEC. 6, 2011. The comment was a response to AT&T's blast of a Federal Communications Commission recommendation against allowing it to merge with the T-Mobile cell carrier. Consumers Union urged regulators to reject the merger, citing the negative effect it would have on competition and prices. Faced with a Justice Department lawsuit, AT&T dropped its bid in December. The carrier was bottom-rated among service providers in Consumer Reports' latest survey of more than 66,000 subscribers.

Up front

Tips, trends, everyday products



Detergent doses: 'Ultra' confusing

Although today's washers have made doing laundry easier than ever, concentrated laundry detergents have not. Some claims are puzzling, measuring cap sizes are all over the place, and if manufacturers really wanted to lighten your load on washday, they'd make it crystal clear how much detergent is needed to get the job done.

Concentrated detergents—2X, 3X, and even 8X—have less water (and other nonessential ingredients) than conventional products, and packaging is smaller, so less plastic and cardboard are used and transport is more efficient. The X's don't have a standard definition, says Petra Stovickova, a spokeswoman for Procter & Gamble, Tide's maker, but they're "usually linked to a previous formula," so 2X would give equal performance for half the dose. But the benefits go down the drain if you use too much detergent.

That's easy to do. Some of the caps' fill lines are hard to decipher, and the line for the largest load may be only halfway up the cap (see box). Many people use twice the recommended amount, says Brian Sansoni, spokesman for the American Cleaning

Institute, a trade group that includes detergent manufacturers. That could be due to poor cap design, a "more is better" philosophy, misreading the caps' lines, or simply not reading directions. Using too much detergent not only wastes money but also can prolong the rinse cycle: Some washers keep going when the water is too sudsy.

In time, measuring detergent may become easier. Starting this spring, for example, caps on Arm & Hammer and Extra will bear a thick vertical dosing line instead of a thin horizontal line, said Kevin Kuchinski, a spokesman for Arm & Hammer detergents. In February, according to Stovickova, P&G planned to launch Tide Pods, with pre-measured detergent. A few manufacturers have already introduced detergents in pre-measured capsules and easier-to-dispense pump bottles.

Bottom line. Until caps are crystal clear, follow label directions. Use a marker to highlight fill lines, and measure, don't just pour. For a front-loading washer or high-efficiency top-loader, use HE detergents. Others produce too much suds.

Washday blues

1 Purex vs. Purex. Both bottles, found side by side on a store shelf, contain 50 fluid ounces and claim 33 loads. Why the different caps? The company launched the newer, wider one, a customer rep said, to standardize its cap sizes.

2 Silly claim. "50% more loads," says this 75-ounce bottle. Great ... until you read the fine print: "vs. 50 oz. detergents."

3 X marks the spot. Era 2X Ultra contains 50 ounces and does 32 loads, two more than Tide Plus Febreze, whose bottle makes no Ultra or X claim. And 32 ounces of 3X Ultra All? It does 28 loads.

4 Easy does it. Sometimes the fill lines are so close together (about one-sixteenth inch between two doses in this Era cap) that you'd need an eyedropper to measure properly.

5 Hidden lines. You can't see the lines in this All cap, but neither could we, unless we held it an inch from our eyes.

Battle of the almost-butters

Everything's not better with Blue Bonnet on it. Despite the ad claim, Blue Bonnet 53% Vegetable Oil Spread rated lowest of 15 butter alternatives our trained tasters sampled, due to its fatty residue, stale taste, and lack of dairy flavor. Other findings:

Taste. Best of the bunch was Land O Lakes Spreadable Butter with Canola Oil (the oil shaves off some saturated fat). It has a whipped-butter taste and lacks the slight to moderate movie-popcorn fake-butter flavor (officially diacetyl) found in other products.

Several very good, somewhat cheaper alternatives are listed in the Ratings. Like top-rated Land O Lakes, they have a clean flavor (no off-tastes) and a sharp melt (after a slight delay they melt suddenly, sharply, and smoothly). The rest of the butter

stand-ins have a slower melt and slight flaws: Some taste stale; some leave an oily residue or fatty feeling in the mouth. The lower-rated products are mostly sticks, not tubs.

Nutrition. As fat is replaced with water and other ingredients, calories decrease. Although both Land O Lakes products have 100 calories per tablespoon, the same as butter, the rest have 45 to 80. All the excellent and very good products are free of trans fat, but except for top-rated Land O Lakes they contain palm oil or palm kernel oils, which are highly saturated and therefore less than healthful. The tested products with trans fat are all sticks, which need a partially hydrogenated oil with trans fat to keep their form.

Most of the products claim to have added vitamins, a few claim added omega-3 fatty acids, and one (Benecol) claims plant stanol esters. (See Close-Up.) Omega-3s can reduce the risk of heart attacks and strokes; people with coronary heart disease require about a gram a day. Plant stanols appear to reduce the amount of cholesterol the body absorbs from food and can lower LDL (bad) cholesterol and therefore may reduce the risk of heart disease. The potential heart benefits of those products should be weighed against their fat and calories, of course, and against any side effects they might have

▣ CLOSE-UP

People might benefit from products that claim to contain the following:

Omega-3 fatty acids Land O Lakes Spreadable Butter with Canola Oil, Smart Balance Buttery Spread Original, Olivio Original Spread, Promise Buttery Spread, Land O Lakes Margarine.

Plant stanol esters Benecol.

Vitamins All the tested products contain vitamin A, several contain vitamin D, and a few have E and B vitamins.



▣ DID YOU KNOW?

1 tablespoon of real butter has 100 calories, 11 grams total fat, 7 grams saturated fat, no trans fat, and 95 milligrams sodium.

(stanols can cause diarrhea, for instance).

Some of the tested products also come in "light" versions, with even less fat and fewer calories.

Price. Package prices range from 92 cents for 1 pound (four sticks) of Imperial to \$4.83 for a half-pound tub of Benecol. Per tablespoon, that's 3 to 30 cents. Shedd's Spread Churn Style costs just 4 cents per tablespoon, less than half the price of many other prod-

BOTTOM LEFT: ISTOCKPHOTO/YURIY KIRSANOV; ILLUSTRATION: ALISON SEIFFER

▣ BY THE NUMBERS

Buy American?

A recent nationally representative poll by the Consumer Reports National Research Center asked

Americans 18 and older about shopping for U.S.-made products.

74%

had tried to buy a U.S.-made product in the past year.

60%

said they'd always or sometimes rather buy U.S.-made goods than those from another country. People 55 and over were much more likely than those 18 to 34 to feel that way.

41%

of respondents who tried to buy a U.S.-made product in the past year said that they couldn't identify which ones were made in the U.S.

39%

said no products in the relevant category were made in the U.S.



▣ CLAIM CHECK

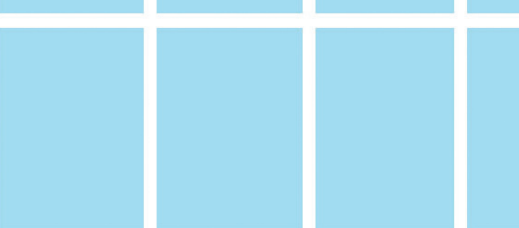
Burger King's new fries

The claim. Burger King has updated its french fries, "delivering a new golden, crispy fry that promises to create a whole new level of irresistible," according to a press release. "A thicker cut of potato gives each bite more fluffy, potato flavor on the inside and crispy, golden-brown deliciousness on the outside."

The check. Five staffers tasted fries at two Burger King restaurants near our Yonkers, N.Y., headquarters.

Bottom line. The new fries are appealing,





ucts, but its tub is 45 ounces compared with 15 ounces for most others. Benecol is priciest but doesn't taste very good.

Bottom line. Land O Lakes Spreadable Butter with Canola Oil tastes best but has more calories and fat than most. If you're concerned about those levels, try I Can't Believe It's Not Butter Light Spread or Brummel & Brown 35% Vegetable Oil Spread. People who don't get enough nutrients through their regular diet might consider one of the products that include plant stanols or omega-3s. Bear in mind that we tasted the products straight; even the lower-rated ones might taste a bit better with food.



but not irresistible. They have decent potato flavor and a baked-potato texture inside, and they're moderately salty and fairly crispy. They're better than the chain's former fries, which were low in flavor and had a fatty taste, and now are closer in quality to fries from McDonald's. But the fast-food-fry winner among the top three chains remains Wendy's, whose fries have a distinct potato taste, a moist interior, and a slightly earthy, browned-skin flavor that's balanced by salt and oil.



Ratings Butter substitutes

In order of taste.

☒ Recommended

	Product	Type	Per serving (1 tbsp.)	Comments
Rec.			Cost Calories Total fat (g) Sat. fat (g) Trans fat (g) Sodium (mg)	

EXCELLENT

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Land O Lakes Spreadable Butter with Canola Oil	tub	13¢ 100 11 4 0 85	Like whipped butter, soft; big, slightly sweet dairy flavor.
-------------------------------------	---	-----	-------------------	--

VERY GOOD

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Smart Balance Buttery Spread Original	tub	11 80 9 2.5 0 90	Hint of dairy, slight oily residue.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I Can't Believe It's Not Butter Light Spread	tub	10 45 5 1.5 0 85	Hint of sour cream/yogurt flavor.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Brummel & Brown 35% Vegetable Oil Spread	tub	10 45 5 1.5 0 90	Sour cream/yogurt flavor.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	I Can't Believe It's Not Butter Original Spread	tub	10 70 8 2 0 90	Hint of dairy.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Shedd's Spread Country Crock Original	tub	8 60 7 2 0 100	Hint of dairy, saltier than most.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Olivio Original Spread	tub	8 80 8 1.5 0 95	Hint of dairy, slight oily residue.

GOOD

	Shedd's Spread Country Crock Churn Style	tub	4 60 7 2 0 85	Slightly sour, hint of dairy, slight fatty feeling and oily residue.
	Promise Buttery Spread	tub	11 80 8 1.5 0 85	Slight oily residue.
	Imperial 53% Vegetable Oil Spread	stick	3 70 7 1.5 1.5 105	Dense and firm, slight fatty feeling, oily residue, stale tasting.
	Benecol 55% Vegetable Oil Spread	tub	30 70 8 1 0 110	Very soft, slightly fatty feeling, oily residue.
	Land O Lakes Margarine	stick	6 100 11 2 2.5 105	Dense and firm, fatty feeling, fatty and oily residue, stale tasting.
	Fleischmann's Original Spread	stick	7 80 9 2 1.5 110	Dense and firm, slightly fatty feeling, fatty and oily residue, saltier than most.
	Parkay 60% Vegetable Oil Spread	stick	5 80 9 1.5 1.5 130	Dense and firm, slightly fatty feeling, fatty and oily residue, stale tasting.
	Blue Bonnet 53% Vegetable Oil Spread	stick	3 70 8 1.5 1.5 125	Dense and firm, fatty and oily feeling, big fatty residue, stale tasting.

SCAM ALERT

Who's calling, please?

"Caller ID spoofing" is a cute name for a scam that's anything but: Several states, including Arkansas, Minnesota, North Dakota, and Pennsylvania, have warned consumers about the practice.

What it is. You check caller ID before taking a call, but the caller isn't the person or company who's listed.

How it works. Caller ID spoofers log onto one of several websites, create an

account by paying a small fee, and enter a name and number they want to pretend to be calling from—a bank or credit-card company, for instance. The phone network then displays that information on a recipient's caller ID.

What to do. Never give personal information over the phone, and if someone claiming to be from a financial institution calls and asks for personal data, hang up, call the correct company number, and let a rep know what happened.





Movie-theater food: A scary story

Anyone over PG-13 knows that movie-theater food bears no resemblance to tofu and sprouts. But our new tests show it can be a nutritional nightmare on Elm Street.

We tested the largest available sizes of popcorn (with and without butter-flavored sauce), cheese nachos, pretzel pieces with cheese, and Coke or Pepsi from three of the nation's biggest movie-theater chains: AMC, National Amusements, and Regal. For each chain, food came from two or three theaters in New York, New Jersey, or Connecticut. We analyzed popcorn for calories, total fat, sodium, and fiber; nachos and pretzel pieces for all but fiber; and sodas (with ice) for calories and sugars.

It turns out that a large tub of buttered popcorn and a large Coke can supply all the calories the average adult is supposed to eat in a day. OK, maybe you'd share that pop-

corn, but even one serving of pretzel pieces with cheese can provide up to half a day's calories, almost half a day's fat, and more than a day's sodium.

The table below lists nutrient ranges for each food. Amounts for a given size (and nutrition) varied, even within a chain. AMC gave us 18 to 23 cups of unbuttered popcorn in a "large" tub; National Amusements, 14 to 16 cups; Regal, 20 to 25 cups. At AMC, the

Nutrition nightmare

Largest size	Calories	Fat (g)	Sodium (mg)	Sugars (g)
Popcorn, buttered	844 to 1,591	54 to 113	436 to 2,038	—
Popcorn, plain	697 to 1,269	37 to 81	365 to 2,013	—
Cheese nachos	728 to 907	38 to 54	1,033 to 3,132	—
Pretzels and cheese	581 to 1,056	15 to 32	743 to 3,556	—
Soda	384 to 696	—	—	96 to 174

DID YOU KNOW?

Recommended daily amounts

Calories 2,000

Fat 65 grams

Fiber 28 grams

Sugars There's no recommended amount, but the American Heart Association suggests a limit of about 6 teaspoons daily for women and 9 for men.

Sodium Less than 2,300 milligrams

buttered popcorn's fat ranged from 69 to 113 grams (the equivalent of 17 to 28 pats of butter). You could blame an individual worker's heavy hand with butter topping, but even unbuttered popcorn varied in fat content: 49 to 81 grams at AMC, for instance.

A snack-by-snack summary

Popcorn. Some large tubs with butter had three-fourths of the 2,000 calories most people should eat in a day and up to 174 percent of the recommended daily fat limit, 65 grams. Sodium levels ranged from 436 to 2,038 milligrams at the theaters where we bought. That's as high as 89 percent of the recommended daily limit.

By our estimates, even medium and small tubs of popcorn with butter would have had as much as 118 percent of the daily fat limit, and 318 to 1,080 calories.

Skipping butter lowered fat and calories by roughly 20 percent on average.

Fiber is no reason to eat that much pop-

Safety worries: Distracted driving tops the list

When we asked 1,000 Americans recently about a range of safety issues, they said that distracted driving is their biggest worry. Eighty-seven percent are highly concerned about drivers who, for example, talk or text on cell phones or drive while drunk. On the other hand, 40 percent of Americans said that the nation's autos are much safer than they were 25 years ago. Here, more findings from a nationally representative survey conducted by the Consumer Reports National Testing Center.

Safety issue	Highly concerned	Much worse than 25 yr. ago	Much better than 25 yr. ago
Distracted drivers	87%	62%	6%
Patient safety	69	13	21
Auto safety	63	11	40
Clean air and drinking water	61	18	18
Prescription-drug safety	59	14	23
Food safety	56	14	24
Toy safety	46	9	28

corn, but at least it's there: Our large tubs with butter had 18 to 34 grams, up to 121 percent of the recommended daily value.

Nachos. Most had about 800 calories and about 40 to 50 grams of fat, much more than half the recommended total fat per day. Nachos tended to have even more sodium than popcorn: at least 45 percent of the daily limit.

Pretzels. Sodium was the issue here, too. A few of the pretzel snacks we bought exceeded the daily limit.

Soda. The large and jumbo colas had 96 to 174 grams of sugars—about 24 to 44 teaspoons—and 384 to 696 calories.

Hungry?

Mix and match, and the numbers climb: That large tub of buttered popcorn and soda can provide not only a day's calories but also almost two days' worth of fat and almost a cup of sugars. For about the same number of calories, you could eat 1 cup of Cheerios with low-fat milk and a banana, 2 ounces of turkey on whole-wheat bread with a tablespoon of mayo, 2 cups of lettuce with tomato and 2 tablespoons of reduced-fat dressing, 6 ounces of salmon with a cup of green beans and a baked potato, and a glass of wine. Oh—plus a slice of chocolate cake with icing.

If the nutrition doesn't scare you, the prices may. We paid up to \$8 for large popcorn, \$7 for nachos, \$5.50 for pretzel pieces with cheese, and \$5.75 for a jumbo soda.

Bottom line. You can't sneak your own food into movie theaters, so eat sensibly beforehand, buy the smallest size of theater treats, or share. If you watch movies at home, have air-popped popcorn or microwave it yourself. Orville Redenbacher Light, for example, has 120 calories, 5 grams of fat, and 190 milligrams of sodium per serving, which is about 5½ cups when popped.



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES/CONICA/MARK HARWOOD; ILLUSTRATION: ALISON SEIFFER

Match the drug to its side effects

Pharmaceutical companies spent almost \$4 billion on television, print, and radio ads in 2010 (the latest year for which records are available), pushing everything from Abilify to Viagra. The Food and Drug Administration requires a company advertising a drug by name to list the most serious side effects—which explains those so-scary-they're-almost-funny lists spoken over images of couples posing in bathtubs. To see how well you've been listening (or reading), take this quiz. We've listed only major side effects for each drug. The answers are below the quiz.

Bottom line. Weigh a drug's potential help against its potential harm—especially if a problem is mild or you haven't exhausted non-drug measures. Risks vs. benefits: Now, that's a reason to talk to your doctor.



▶ Drug

A. Advair Diskus 250/50

(salmeterol/fluticasone): asthma, COPD

B. Chantix (varenicline): smoking cessation

C. Cialis (tadalafil) and **Viagra** (sildenafil): erectile dysfunction

D. Cymbalta (duloxetine): depression, generalized anxiety disorder, chronic osteoarthritis or lower-back pain, fibromyalgia, diabetic neuropathic pain

E. Humira (adalimumab): rheumatoid arthritis, plaque psoriasis

F. Lipitor (atorvastatin): high cholesterol

G. Lovaza (omega-3-acid ethyl esters): high triglycerides

H. Lyrica (pregabalin): fibromyalgia, nerve pain due to diabetes or shingles

I. Reclast (zoledronic acid): osteoporosis

J. Seroquel XR (quetiapine): schizophrenia, treatment-resistant depression, bipolar depression

K. Toviaz (fesoterodine): overactive bladder

L. Uloric (febuxostat): gout

▶ Possible side effects

1. Severe fungal infections, tuberculosis, cancer
2. Burping, change in sense of taste, possible increase in LDL (bad) cholesterol
3. Severe or fatal worsening of asthma symptoms, reduced adrenal function, decline in bone density, weakened immunity, slowing of growth in children
4. Muscle pain or weakness, liver damage, kidney problems and/or kidney failure
5. Strange or vivid dreams, increased risk of heart problems, increase in hostility, agitation, depressed mood, suicidal thoughts
6. Mental confusion, blurred vision, trouble emptying bladder
7. Severe kidney problems; loss of bone in jaw; extreme pain in bones, joints, or muscles
8. Back pain, muscle aches, sudden decrease or loss of vision or hearing
9. Dizziness, liver problems, low blood pressure and fainting, higher blood pressure, problems with urine flow, suicidal thoughts in young people
10. Weight gain, rise in blood sugar and cholesterol, higher death risk in older people with dementia, possible increase in suicidal thoughts in young people
11. Weight gain, swelling in the hands and feet, severe allergic reactions, suicidal thoughts or actions
12. Liver problems, joint pain, rash

ANSWERS: A3, B5, C8, D9, E1, F4, G2, H11, I7, J10, K6, L12

Don't be starstruck by supplements

SPORTS IDOLS and reality-TV stars have been touting dietary supplements recently, including the former Dallas Cowboys head coach Jimmy Johnson pitching a sex-enhancement pill for men and the Kardashian sisters promoting weight-loss formulas. We've long told consumers to beware of supplements marketed to help them slim down or improve their performance in the gym or the bedroom. Like all supplements, those products are allowed to come to market without proof they're safe and effective. And testing by the Food and Drug Administration has increasingly found hidden and potentially harmful ingredients—controlled substances, undisclosed prescription drugs, and untested pharmaceutically active ingredients—in products marketed for those purposes.

"We've had more than 400 recalls of spiked products since 2008," says Daniel Fabricant, Ph.D., director of the FDA's division of dietary-supplement programs.



GAME TIME Jimmy Johnson has pitched ExtenZe.

Most were marketed for bodybuilding, sexual enhancement, and weight loss.

Specific lots of the Johnson-endorsed ExtenZe were voluntarily recalled in 2011 after the FDA found that some packages were counterfeit and contained undeclared drug ingredients that could pose a serious health risk. They included the prescription erectile dysfunction drugs sildenafil (Viagra) and tadalafil (Cialis), and sibutramine, a weight-loss drug that was voluntarily withdrawn from the U.S. market in 2010 because of evidence that it

increased heart-attack and stroke risk.

Trade groups that represent the supplement industry have said they support the FDA's crackdown on spiked products.

We spoke with representatives for MusclePharm and RipFire Xcelerate, two of the products in the box below, who said their supplements are independently tested and certified to help ensure they don't contain banned or undeclared substances. A representative for MYO-T12 said in an e-mail message that it is produced and tested in a facility that complies with the FDA's standards for good manufacturing practices.

Bottom line. Consult a doctor or pharmacist before trying a supplement. To slim down, focus on diet and exercise. Build muscles by weight training. And consult a doctor if you need help in the bedroom, since it could indicate an underlying health problem. To get FDA alerts on supplements or report an adverse event, go to www.fda.gov/food/dietarysupplements.

Celebrity endorsements: Who's selling what

Endorsements "must reflect the celebrity's honest experience or opinion," according to the Federal Trade Commission. We called or wrote to representatives of the following famous names to ask whether the person used the supplement they were plugging and how much they were paid.

Bodybuilding

Who: Michael Vick, quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles.

Product: MusclePharm, a line of supplements the company claims can enhance performance and mental function, boost endurance, build muscle, speed recovery, fuel fat loss, improve sleep, or enhance libido.

Pitch: "Our sport is our life," says an ad featuring Vick in a MusclePharm T-shirt.

Does he use it? "I take MuscleGels and the Armor-V every day," Vick said in an e-mail message from his rep. His three-year, \$1.55 million endorsement deal includes performance bonuses.

Who: Pro running back Ray Rice of the Baltimore Ravens.

Product: RipFire Xcelerate, a supplement marketed to

enhance overall workout performance and maximize results.

Pitch: "With Ripfire you'll feel increased energy and endurance with every workout," says a TV commercial that features Rice.

Does he use it? Rice was not available for an interview, a representative said.

Who: Hockey legend Wayne Gretzky.

Product: MYO-T12, which the company says inhibits the body's production of myostatin, a protein that restricts muscle growth.

Pitch: "Keeping in shape is tough work," Gretzky says in a national magazine ad. "It gets tougher as we get older."

Does he use it? Gretzky takes the product every morning, his agent said. His one-year, \$150,000 deal includes company stock.

Weight loss

Who: Kim, Khloé, and Kourtney Kardashian of the E! reality show "Keeping Up With the Kardashians."

Product: QuickTrim, a line that includes supplements with the claim that they help burn calories and boost metabolism.

Pitch: "Create the body you deserve!" Kourtney says, wearing a purple bikini in an online ad. "I've reached my

goal!" Kim says in another.

"I love my new body!" Khloé says.

Do they use it?

The sisters were not available for an interview, a representative said.

Who: Ronnie Ortiz-Magro, a star of the MTV reality series "Jersey Shore."

Product: Xenadrine Ultra, a supplement that is supposed to help users "lose more weight."

Pitch: "I'm Ronnie from 'Jersey Shore' and keeping it real is what it's all about," Ortiz-Magro says in a TV commercial. "That's why I use Xenadrine."

Does he use it? Multiple attempts to reach Ortiz-Magro were unsuccessful.

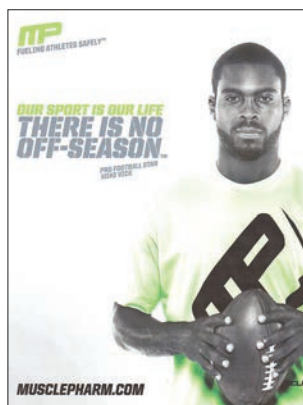
Sexual enhancement

Who: Jimmy Johnson, two-time Super Bowl-winning coach and Fox Sports analyst.

Product: ExtenZe, a sexual-enhancement supplement for men.

Pitch: "If you're like me and want maximum performance, give ExtenZe a try," Johnson says in a TV commercial that ran last year.

Does he use it? Multiple attempts to reach Johnson were unsuccessful.



Avoid costly retirement mistakes

THE SHAKY ECONOMY has caused many Americans to rethink their retirement plans. Some say they'll put off retiring and try to save more money. Others say they don't expect to retire, either because they don't want to or they can't afford to.

While none of us can control the economy, you can take steps to increase the odds of a successful retirement on whatever timetable you choose. That's one key takeaway from the Consumer Reports National Research Center's survey of retired and soon-to-be retired online subscribers conducted last fall. Our fifth such survey since 2007, it asked 21,714 people from 55 to 75 what they did right or wrong in preparing for retirement.

Starting too late and saving too little topped the retirees' list of regrets. But several less obvious mistakes also emerged from our survey data:

1 Underestimating expenses

Nearly a third of the retirees we surveyed said their expenses were greater than they had anticipated before retiring, while only 11 percent said their expenses were lower. That turned out to have a significant bearing on how satisfied the retirees were overall. Adjusting for the effects of other significant variables, our survey analysts estimated that 76 percent of retirees whose expenses didn't exceed their expectations were highly satisfied with retirement. For those whose expenses proved to be higher, the number dropped to 56 percent.

What to do: Make a comprehensive list of all your current expenses, cross out those that will end when you retire, and add any new ones, including fun stuff such as travel. Before you retire, consider living on that budget for six months to a year just to see if it's a comfortable fit. And don't be surprised if your retirement expenses actually exceed your preretirement ones, at least for the first few years.

2 Investing too conservatively

Retirees who characterized their overall investment style as conservative reported median savings of \$478,000, compared with \$617,000 for their aggressive counterparts. Readers who considered themselves moderate risk takers fell be-



tween those two groups, with \$563,000.

What to do: If you're saving for retirement and all your money is in conservative investments like CDs, money-market funds, and bonds, you might want to add stocks or stock funds to the mix. Financial planners generally suggest retirees also maintain a reasonable exposure to stocks, in part as an inflation hedge. For example, if you were to put \$100,000 in a five-year jumbo CD paying a recent interest rate of 2.65 percent, and inflation continued at its recent pace of around 3.5 percent, your investment would lose about \$4,800 in value by the end of five years, according to the Consumer Reports Money Lab.

3 Not diversifying enough

We asked readers who said they planned to retire by 2015 what investment vehicles and asset classes they had used to save. Their choices included 401(k) and 403(b) plans; their homes; IRAs; saving accounts and CDs; stocks, bonds, and mutual funds held outside a retirement plan; and half a dozen other options. Adjusting for the effects of other variables, readers with three or fewer types of investments reported median retirement savings of \$246,000, compared with \$539,000 for those with seven or more types.

Of course, people who have more money might be expected to have it in more places. But the finding held true across income levels, and people with lower in-

comes who diversified widely often accumulated more than those with higher incomes who didn't. For example, people with incomes under \$85,000 who used seven or more investment types reported median savings of \$368,000; those with incomes of \$125,000 to \$199,999 and money in three or fewer places had \$315,000.

What to do: If your money is in just a few investments, now might be the time to broaden your horizons. If you need help, consider consulting a fee-only financial planner, who can model different allocations based on your risk tolerance and likely retirement date. You can get names from the National Association of Personal Financial Advisors (www.napfa.org).

How to take a pension

Some 55 percent of our preretired readers said they had a defined benefit pension. When they retire they'll need to decide whether to take their benefits as a lump sum, a series of monthly annuity payments, or some combination of the two. We asked our retired readers with pensions what they had done and how satisfied they were.

Type of payout	Readers who did it that way	Those very or completely satisfied
Lump sum	7%	80%
Monthly annuity	83	90
Combination of the two	10	71

▶ Bolt of trouble

Nissan is recalling 14,718 Nissan and Infiniti vehicles for the 2011-12 model years. Some of the bolts that connect the engine oil cooler and the engine oil filter to the engine may break and cause an oil leak. That could lower the engine oil pressure and cause the engine to seize, risking a crash. Models are the '11 Infiniti FX, '12 Infiniti M, '11-12 Nissan Xterra and Pathfinder, and the '12 Nissan Frontier and NV. Dealers will replace connector bolts free of charge.



▶ ON THE RECORD

'Whatever was inside the handle got all over my kitchen. Including getting into my eyes and mouth.'

-CONSUMER COMPLAINT TO SAFERPRODUCTS.GOV about liquid-filled Pampered Chef ice cream dipper, which was recalled because the cap could fly off the handle's base when exposed to warm water.



▶ Lighting hazard

Big Lots stores are recalling about 43,700 floor lamps because wiring for the light sockets can become exposed, potentially shocking users. In addition, standard 40-watt bulbs, recommended for the lamps, can generate excessive heat and melt the plastic shades. The models, which have gray or multicolored shades, are called Classic Quarters Five Light Floor Lamps, with the model number G-1843-5 underneath the lamp base. The lamps were sold only at Big Lots stores from April 2010 through November 2011 for \$30 to \$50. Consumers should immediately stop using the lamps and return them to the store for a refund. You can contact Big Lots at 866-244-5687.

▶ CONSUMER NOTES

Tainted meat pulled

Hannaford, a Maine-based grocery chain, is recalling an undetermined amount of ground beef that may contain salmonella. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said that 19 illnesses have been reported that might be associated with the contamination and that the illnesses have been reported in seven states. The salmonella strain is resistant to multiple common antibiotics.

Tyson Fresh Meats, of Dakota City, Neb., is recalling almost 41,000 pounds of ground beef that could be contaminated with E. coli 0157:H7. The beef was sent to stores in 16 states. No illnesses have been reported.

House of Raeford Farms, of Raeford, N.C., is recalling 4,140 pounds of cooked chicken breasts that may be contaminated with Listeria. The chicken was sent to delis and food service institutions for further processing in Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina.



\$550,000

▶ The box says burst-resistant fitness ball, but the Consumer Product Safety Commission says EB Brands knew of 25 incidents of its balls unexpectedly bursting when overinflated by users. The \$550,000 fine settles charges that EB Brands failed to immediately inform the agency of problems. By the time the balls were recalled in April 2009, there were 47 reports of incidents, including some injuries. EB Brands sold 3 million of the fitness balls from May 2000 through February 2009.



RECALLS

HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTS

Rayovac NI-CD cordless tool battery packs

Replacement pack can explode unexpectedly, with risk of serious injury.



PRODUCTS: 111,800 battery packs sold at BatteriesPlus stores and online at www.batteriesplus.com between June 2008 and October 2011 for \$60. Packs were sold in voltages between 2.4 and 18 volts. There have been five reports of exploding batteries.

WHAT TO DO: Remove the pack from tools. Call BatteriesPlus at 877-856-3232 or go to www.batteriesplus.com for instructions on how to return product for store credit.

Hamilton Beach chrome two-slice toasters

When toasters are first plugged in, heating element can be energized although toast lifter is in up or off position, which poses a risk of fire.



PRODUCTS: 14,000 toasters model 22602 sold nationwide from August 2011 through November 2011 for \$19 to \$34. Some of the toasters were sent as replacements for toaster model 22600, which was recalled in June 2011 for a fire hazard.

WHAT TO DO: Do not use the toaster. Call Hamilton Beach at 800-576-6600 or go to www.hamiltonbeach.com for instructions on how to get a free replacement toaster.

Sterno 5-Hour Tea Lights

The wax in these tea lights can overheat, with the wax catching fire and causing a hazard.



PRODUCTS: 10,000 cases of wax candles clad in an aluminum cup, item numbers 505TL and 505S with codes 11060 to 11151. The lights were sold in bulk, with 500 to a case, through food distributors and restaurant supply stores from April 2011 through October 2011 for \$36 to \$50 per case.

WHAT TO DO: Stop using these candles immediately and return unused candles to the place of purchase for a full refund. For more information, you can call Sterno at 877-478-3766 or go to the company website at www.sterno.com.

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Where to buy almost anything

More than 26,000 readers rate the nation's major chain stores

MEIJER, A RETAILER headquartered in Grand Rapids, Mich., is generally credited with opening the first one-stop shopping supercenter in 1962, some 26 years ahead of Walmart. Today Meijer stores sell auto supplies, clothing, electronics, furniture, groceries, sporting goods, and just about everything else.

By now, so many superstores, department stores, warehouse clubs, and online counterparts offer the same goods that it's hard to know where to shop.

To help you decide, the Consumer Reports National Research Center surveyed subscribers who told us about 55,108 shopping experiences at Costco, JCPenney, Kmart, Kohl's, Macy's, Meijer (pronounced MY-er), Sam's Club, Sears, Target, and

Walmart. For the first time, some shoppers also told us about their experiences at many of those retailers' online stores.

The main news: Costco pleased survey respondents better than any other store.

Whatever store you choose, try its website, too. Our respondents said the quality, selection, and value of the goods online equaled or surpassed those of store-bought purchases. Although in-person interaction is impossible on the Web, 63 percent of the online shoppers said the service they received was excellent or very good; only 47 percent of in-store shoppers rated the quality of sales help that high.

"Smart merchants not only make it easy to find products on their websites, they also provide help by phone, e-mail, or online chats," says Will Ander, a senior partner

at McMillanDoolittle, a Chicago retail consulting company. All the stores in our Ratings have customer service available by phone. Sears and Kmart offer website links to online customer-service chats; Macy's offers a chat link at checkout.

Readers also said that buying was easier online than in stores. Among shoppers who rated both walk-in and online experiences, 81 percent said the ease of checking out online was excellent or very good; just 46 percent said the same about the speed of store checkouts. "Go into a big department store around 8 o'clock at night, and it can be difficult to find someone to check you out," says Jack Abelson, a retail consultant in Leawood, Kan. "But you can buy online at that time, and it's quick and convenient."

The most prevalent problems walk-in

customers said they faced were long checkout lines, a lack of sales help, and out-of-stock items. Twenty-nine percent said checkouts were jammed. And no chain stood out for customer service.

The best ... and worst

Costco was the only chain to earn an outstanding grade for the overall quality of its merchandise, whether in stores or online. And it earned above-average scores for all 10 product categories we rated, including electronic entertainment, jewelry, and sporting goods. Its website did better than its walk-in stores on all counts except product quality (for which the two types tied) and earned top marks for layout, product value, and checkout.

In-store shoppers found a few chinks in Costco's armor: The chain's walk-in stores scored below average for selection, checkout (because of long lines), and service, and its shoppers were more likely than those elsewhere to complain about a lack of fitting rooms.

Kohl's and **JCPenney** earned above-average scores for the quality of their goods in all product categories for which we had sufficient responses. People were especially happy with the value and layout at Kohl's stores. "Kohl's has expanded the number of exclusive brands it sells over the past few years," Abelson says. "That has allowed it to steal some market share from JCPenney."

Target boasts that its stores are easy to navigate, and our readers rated its layouts higher than for some other chains. Otherwise, the in-store shopping experience was just average, and Target's website was not especially easy to use.

Macy's stores rated better than average for product quality and layout. Macy's was the only chain besides Costco to receive raves for its kitchenware and personal-care products. Readers also praised the chain's clothing and home-décor selections.

Meijer scored better than some others for layout and the quality of kitchenware, personal-care items, and electronic entertainment, but scores for its clothing were lukewarm.

Sears' overall scores for its walk-in stores and website were similar, but the chain's online customer service rated lower than its walk-in service. Respondents said Sears, Costco, and Sam's Club were better places to buy hardware.

Sam's Club stores, both virtual and real, scored about the same as Sears overall.

Readers who shopped at its walk-in stores complained of long checkout lines and limited selection but rated product quality and layout as better than average.

Walmart and **Kmart** walk-in stores scored much lower than those of other retailers. Walmart might be associated with low prices, but respondents said the product value was better at Costco and Kohl's. Kmart was the only chain to score below average for value. Kmart also

Costco stands out among 10 major stores.

received low marks for selection, service, and checkout speed.

Walmart was the only chain to earn below-average scores for the quality of its men's, women's, and children's clothing. (Kmart received below-average scores for men's and women's clothing.) Walmart

shoppers were especially likely to complain about long checkout lines and inadequate customer service. In addition, 23 percent of the Walmart shoppers who returned an item to one of its stores the previous year reported at least one problem, significantly more than at any other retailer. (The problem was usually that they were offered only store credit.)

In-store shoppers rated the layouts as middling for both Walmart and Kmart. According to a report by the market-research firm Interbrand, Walmart stores have actually become more cluttered since a clean-aisles initiative was started in 2009. Its goal: to pare inventory and make shopping "fast, clean, and friendly."

Thirteen percent of Walmart and Kmart customers reported hidden or missing price tags, more than at any of the other retailers in our Ratings.

Bottom line. In almost every case, the online stores scored at least as high as their walk-in counterparts. Overall, Costco pleased readers best.

Why Costco's website works

The website for the warehouse giant received our readers' top overall score. It also earned the highest praise for the price, quality, and value of its goods and its ease of navigation and quick checkout. Kohl's site came in second; JCPenney's and Macy's sites tied for third.

Costco's site sells about the same number of products as its walk-in stores (about 4,000). And it carries many of the same categories, including appliances, baby products, electronics, books, DVDs, office supplies, gourmet foods, and jewelry. But only about 10 percent of the items are identical online and in stores.

Fewer food items are available online—not surprising, considering that some of them are perishable. But you'll see a larger selection of bulky items that would be tough to squeeze into the trunk of a family sedan. For example, the site recently offered nine different funeral coffins, six home saunas, four pianos, and two vending machines. You could even pick up a new car, motorcycle, RV, or boat from one of Costco's approximately 2,300 franchise dealer-partners around the U.S.

We also found a broader selection of some smaller goods than you'd typically find in Costco's stores, such as 918 ink and toner cartridges, 91 video games, and 444 rings (including 198 proposal-ready diamond solitaires). "Costco gives shoppers

breaks on luxury-quality goods," says Will Ander, a senior partner at the consulting firm McMillanDoolittle.

The soon-to-be-betrothed and other shoppers don't have to be Costco club members to make a purchase; nonmembers can buy online by paying an additional 5 percent of the purchase price. If that amount totals more than the \$55 annual membership (after all, one of the saunas retails for \$3,500), they can add the cost of a membership to their cart.

One thing is available only in stores: long lines. Although in-store shoppers said checking out at Costco stores was a pain, online shoppers found it a virtual breeze.



Ratings Overall satisfaction

In order of reader score.

1 Costco

THE FACTS. 432 warehouses in 40 states. \$55 yearly membership fee for individuals and businesses. Products from the company's private label, Kirkland Signature, have often done well in our tests. All of Costco's merchandise comes with a money-back guarantee.

HOW TO SAVE. Costco doesn't accept manufacturers' coupons but sometimes distributes its own. Members can also purchase a variety of discounted services, including those for check printing, payroll processing, online savings accounts, 24-hour roadside assistance for vehicles covered through an auto-insurance program, and some travel benefits. For an additional \$55 a year, members can join the Executive Group, which gives added breaks on services and a 2 percent annual reward (up to \$750) on most Costco shopping that's applied to future purchases.

WALK-IN READER SCORE	84	ONLINE READER SCORE	88
Quality	●	●	●
Selection	●	○	○
Value	●	●	●
Checkout	●	●	●
Service	●	●	●
Layout	●	●	●

6 Meijer

THE FACTS. Nearly 200 stores in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky. They've been expanded to include fresh produce and meat, pharmacies, electronics, garden centers, and apparel.

HOW TO SAVE. Check the website for daily "Big Steals" and the online clearance section for price breaks that can be more than 50 percent off. Meijer credit-card owners get 5 cents off each gallon of gas bought at the store and other special savings deals. Meijer's mPerks program sends coupons to your cell phone that are redeemable at checkout.

WALK-IN READER SCORE	78	INSUFFICIENT ONLINE DATA	
Quality	○		
Selection	○		
Value	○		
Checkout	●		
Service	○		
Layout	●		

2 Kohl's

THE FACTS. 1,127 stores in 49 states. Expanding private-label list now includes Bobby Flay, Candie's, Dana Buchman, Jennifer Lopez, Marc Anthony, Simply Vera Vera Wang, and Tony Hawk.

HOW TO SAVE. Kohl's cardholders receive an extra 15 to 30 percent off all goods. Sign up for e-mail alerts and you'll save on your next in-store or online order. Occasional promotions provide \$10 in "Kohl's Cash" for each \$50 spent on purchases. (The reward must be used on designated days.) On Wednesdays, shoppers 60 and older save an extra 15 percent on in-store purchases.

WALK-IN READER SCORE	81	ONLINE READER SCORE	84
Quality	○	●	●
Selection	○	○	○
Value	●	●	●
Checkout	○	●	●
Service	○	●	●
Layout	●	●	●

7 Sears

THE FACTS. Nationwide, 842 full-line and 1,354 specialty stores (including appliance showrooms and home-décor centers). But as of late December, Sears Holdings, owner of Sears and Kmart, said it planned to close up to 120 stores after a drop in sales. Sears sells a wide range of appliances, tools, electronics, apparel, lawn equipment, and auto products. The Craftsman brand, formerly exclusive to Sears, is now sold at Costco, too.

HOW TO SAVE. "Flash deals" in-store and online offer discounts. Find a lower price on the same item at a local store and Sears will match the price and give you 10 percent of the difference. (Bring the competitor's ad to Sears within 14 days of your purchase.) "Today's Real Deal" on the website has discounts that can be 50 percent or more.

WALK-IN READER SCORE	77	ONLINE READER SCORE	77
Quality	●	●	●
Selection	○	●	●
Value	○	○	○
Checkout	○	○	○
Service	○	●	●
Layout	●	○	○

3 JCPenney

THE FACTS. About 1,100 stores nationwide. Brands include Cindy Crawford Style and Joe by Joseph Abboud; Sephora boutiques are in many stores. The chain will begin selling Martha Stewart wares next year. "They recently hired Ron Johnson to run the company, who was formerly in charge of Apple stores," says Bob Phibbs, author of "The Retail Doctor's Guide to Growing Your Business." Johnson has said the chain will start a new pricing strategy this spring.

HOW TO SAVE. JCPenney has teamed with location-based social-networking websites like Foursquare to reward customers with special offers when they "check in" to a store. Sign up for mobile alerts for coupons, giveaways, events, and free shipping offers on Penney's apps for the iPhone, iPad, and Android. (For links to mobile apps, see the JCPenney website.)

WALK-IN READER SCORE	80	ONLINE READER SCORE	82
Quality	●	●	●
Selection	○	○	○
Value	○	●	●
Checkout	○	●	●
Service	○	○	○
Layout	○	○	○

8 Sam's Club

THE FACTS. 610 clubs nationwide. \$40 annually for individual membership. There's a limited choice of products in many categories, and surprises like tanning beds. Services include tire installation, optical stores, health screenings, and hearing-aid centers. A retail expert we spoke with said its warehouses can be a bit drearier than Costco's.

HOW TO SAVE. Upgrade to a Sam's Club Plus Membership (\$100 a year) for discounts including 8 percent on brand-name drugs, discounts on generics, and express shipping. All membership levels offer a money-back guarantee if you're not happy with savings.

WALK-IN READER SCORE	77	ONLINE READER SCORE	79
Quality	●	●	●
Selection	●	●	●
Value	○	●	●
Checkout	●	●	●
Service	●	●	●
Layout	●	○	○

Better ← → Worse
 ● ○ ○ ● ●

4 Target

THE FACTS. 1,767 stores nationwide. The company continues to expand its grocery departments and its private-label brands, which now include Josie Natori, Merona, and Missoni. Target recently announced plans to open five smaller urban stores in 2012, with more planned in the next few years.

HOW TO SAVE. Target will match the price in any competitor's current ad for an identical product. Sign up for text or e-mail alerts and receive coupons, deals, and weekly ad reminders. Check Target's website for daily specials and clearance items (30 to 70 percent off). Open a Target REDcard charge account and receive 5 percent off your purchases. Pay for five prescriptions with a Target REDcard and qualify for an extra 5 percent off one day's purchases on top of the usual REDcard discount of 5 percent.

WALK-IN READER SCORE	79	ONLINE READER SCORE	80
Quality	○	Quality	●
Selection	○	Selection	●
Value	○	Value	●
Checkout	○	Checkout	●
Service	○	Service	○
Layout	●	Layout	○

5 Macy's

THE FACTS. About 810 stores in 45 states. Macy's tries to stand apart from competitors by having its stores reflect local tastes. As a result, sizes, colors, and products may differ from one store to another a few exits up an interstate. "Our store inventories reflect the fact that customers prefer dresses with cap sleeves, while at another location men like pants with cuffs," says Jim Sluzewski, senior vice president of corporate communications and external affairs. In-store shoppers can use free personal-shopper services.

HOW TO SAVE. Macy's cardholders hear about exclusive sales and get coupons through its Star Rewards program. The deals and promotions section of Macy's website recently offered all shoppers 15 percent off purchases as well as free shipping for a limited time.

WALK-IN READER SCORE	78	ONLINE READER SCORE	82
Quality	●	Quality	●
Selection	○	Selection	●
Value	○	Value	●
Checkout	○	Checkout	●
Service	○	Service	○
Layout	●	Layout	●

9 Kmart

THE FACTS. About 1,300 stores nationwide, including standard ones, 24-hour Kmart Super Centers (a supermarket, restaurants, and other services), and Big Kmarts. Our experts say that the company lacks unique brands and that many stores need to be freshened up.

HOW TO SAVE. Join the "Shop Your Way" program (it's also good at Sears and Lands' End) to receive discount offers through e-mail. You will earn 10 points for every dollar you spend. You need to spend \$100 to get \$1 back.

WALK-IN READER SCORE	71	INSUFFICIENT ONLINE DATA	
Quality	●		
Selection	●		
Value	●		
Checkout	●		
Service	●		
Layout	○		

10 Walmart

THE FACTS. 3,790 in the U.S. and 5,200 in 27 other countries. Supercenters include a supermarket and usually restaurants, a portrait studio, a pharmacy, a hair salon, a bank, a tire center, and a vision center and health clinic. Walmart.com sells more than 1 million products, which can be shipped free to your local store for pickup.

HOW TO SAVE. Check the website or sign up for e-mail alerts on new "rollback" price discounts and special offers. Walmart Discover cardholders can save 5 cents a gallon on gas at its stores, and earn 0.25 percent to 1 percent cash back on purchases depending on how much is charged.

WALK-IN READER SCORE	71	ONLINE READER SCORE	77
Quality	●	Quality	○
Selection	●	Selection	○
Value	○	Value	●
Checkout	●	Checkout	●
Service	●	Service	○
Layout	○	Layout	○

COSTCO
WHOLESALE

KOHL'S

jcpennney

TARGET

★ macy's

meijer

sears

Sam's
CLUB

K
kmart

Walmart
Save money. Live better.

Guide to the Ratings

Scores are based on 55,108 Ratings of walk-in stores and their online counterparts by 26,344 readers in the spring of 2011. **Reader score** reflects overall satisfaction with the shopping experience. A score of 100 would mean that all respondents were completely satisfied; 80, that respondents were very satisfied on average, and 60, that respondents were fairly well satisfied. Differences of fewer than 4 points are not meaningful. Scores for product **quality**, **selection**, **value**, **checkout**, customer **service**, and store or Web **layout** reflect how respondents rated each retailer. (Scores for checkout, service, and layout aren't directly comparable between walk-in and online retailers.) For walk-in stores: Checkout, customer service, and layout reflect speed of checkout, quality of sales help, and ease of getting around. Online: Those attributes reflect ease of checkout, Web customer support, and ease of site navigation. We lacked enough responses to rate the websites of Meijer and Kmart. Our findings reflect the experiences of CONSUMER REPORTS subscribers, who may not be representative of the U.S. population in general. Store facts and savings information were current as of January 2012.

More ways to save



Use bots to compare online prices.

Sites like BizRate, DealTime, MySimon, PriceGrabber, and Shopping.com spare you from having to go to dozens of stores to collect prices. They scour the Web or their own massive databases for the items you want, then provide a list of prices and places to buy. They'll even let you set alerts that reveal when the price of an item drops. We've found that no one bot always sniffs out the best deal; check at least two. Factor in shipping costs before buying. (PriceGrabber includes shipping in its results.)



Work your apps. Some free smart-phone apps help you compare deals while you're in a store. For example, Red Laser (redlaser.com; iPhones and Android) scans barcodes and searches for the best deals online and at stores near you. Price Check by Amazon (for iPhone and Android) scans barcodes in stores and shows the Amazon price for goods sold on its site, along with customer reviews.

Red Laser and the ScanLife app (www.scanlife.com; for iPhone, Android, BlackBerry, and Windows) also scan QR codes, those boxes you often find on product packaging or store displays. (They look like a maze that's been put through a blender.) Retailers and manufacturers use the codes for giveaways and special coupon deals. But the Better Business Bureau warns that scammers have been covering legitimate QR codes with stickers bearing codes that lead to malware sites. Before scanning a QR code, look closely to make sure it's the original.



Check daily deals. Hundreds of daily-deal sites, including Groupon and Living Social, offer discounts on goods and local services. Kohl's, Target, Meijer, and Sears also offer daily deals on their sites. Google has jumped in with Google Offers. Sign up to be notified of deals if you live in one of its 30-plus metro regions, or to find out when your area is added, at www.google.com/offers. Warning: Don't nab more deals than you need, or you'll waste money instead of saving it. As many as one in five daily deals purchased is never used, according to the industry trackers Daily Deal Media and Yipit. If you do end up with "Groupon regret," you can try to sell a deal at the resale website DealsGoRound. The company takes a 10 percent transaction fee.

Ratings Store products

In order of reader score.

Better \longleftrightarrow Worse
● ● ● ● ●

Store	Clothing			Watches, jewelry	Personal care	Hardware	Home décor	Kitchenware	Electronic entertainment	Sporting goods, toys	Readers with complaints		
	Men's	Women's	Kids*								Returns	Price tags	Fitting rooms
Costco	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	8%	3%	7%
Kohl's	●	●	●	●	●	*	●	●	●	●	11	5	3
JCPenney	●	●	●	●	●	*	●	●	*	*	8	5	3
Target	○	○	○	○	●	○	○	●	●	●	10	6	1
Macy's	●	●	●	●	●	*	●	●	*	*	9	5	3
Meijer	○	○	○	○	●	*	○	●	●	○	13	10	2
Sam's Club	○	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	15	5	5
Sears	○	○	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	14	4	1
Kmart	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	18	13	2
Walmart	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	○	●	○	23	13	2

* We did not have enough responses to rate these products.



Get free shipping. If you order online, shop on sites that offer free shipping with no minimum purchase, including L.L.Bean, Nordstrom, and Zappos.com. Target's super-discounted Daily Deals ship free, as do most orders over \$50 and Target REDcard purchases. Other chains will ship most purchases to any local store free. Find more free-shipping offers at—where else?—www.freeshipping.org.

Why readers shopped where they did

Readers tended to choose low prices over high quality. Asked the top three reasons for choosing a particular walk-in store, about two-thirds of all readers said low prices, slightly more than half chose convenient location, and about a third cited a variety of products, allowing for one-stop shopping. Just 28 percent cited high-quality products as a major reason to shop at these stores. But shoppers' responses varied by retailer, as shown below.

Store	Top reason for going
Costco	Low prices
JCPenney	Location
Kmart	Location
Kohl's	Low prices
Macy's	High-quality products
Meijer	Location
Sam's Club	Low prices
Sears	High-quality products
Target	Location
Walmart	Low prices

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Sample age	Yearly rate
62	4.5%
73	5.5
81	7.0
90	9.0

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76 / 73	5.0%
83 / 80	6.0

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Appliance fires: Is your home safe?

Millions of dishwashers, fridges, ranges, and more are on recall lists



RON AND STACY NICOL were enjoying a Fourth of July family picnic in 2008, about an hour's drive from their home in Oakland Township, Mich., when they got the call every homeowner dreads. The local sheriff's department reported that a fire had broken out at the Nicols' condo, where their two Labrador retrievers and a lifetime of possessions were trapped.

By the time the couple got home, firefighters had extinguished the blaze, after a daring neighbor rescued their soot-covered dogs. But the kitchen was destroyed, along with Ron Nicol's collection of 375 cookbooks and paperwork from his training as a chef. Fire, smoke, and water had ravaged almost everything, and just a few months before their first child, Sienna, was born.



AFTERMATH The Nicols moved to a new home, left, after their kitchen was destroyed in a fire that officials say started in a microwave oven that was not in use.

PHOTO LEFT: DAVE LEWINSKI | PHOTO RIGHT: THE NICOLS

"It was not the kind of fireworks you want to see on the Fourth of July," says Ron Nicol, whose lingering sense of anger and loss is fueled by the unusual circumstances of the fire. Though the couple hadn't cooked that morning and were just back from a 10-day vacation, the official cause of the fire, according to fire department and county sheriff reports, was their over-the-range GE microwave oven.

A months-long investigation by their insurance company finally ruled the fire an accident, but the report was not more detailed. The Nicols learned of a class-action suit filed in 2009 against GE, alleging that some of its microwave ovens had started up by themselves and caused fires. They're considering joining the suit, but the Nicols don't ever expect to fully recover their losses, which well exceeded their insurer's standard contents coverage. "It got to be too disheartening, so we stopped tallying the losses after \$18,000," he says.

It could have been worse. The Consumer Product Safety Commission, using estimates from 2006 through 2008, says that major appliances caused more than 150,000 residential fires each year, resulting in 3,670 injuries, 150 deaths, and \$547 million dollars in property damage.

Human error certainly plays a role, especially in fires involving cooking appliances and clothes dryers. But when CONSUMER REPORTS conducted an in-depth

■ DID YOU KNOW?

23%

That's the percentage of appliance fires clearly attributable to mechanical, electrical, or design problems, according to our analysis of data from the National Fire Incident Reporting System.

analysis of federal fire data, we found that only about half of appliance fires could be blamed on human mistakes, such as unattended cooking, or natural causes such as storms or animals. Much of the rest appear to be due to problems with the appliances themselves, according to our review of safety records, fire reports, and court documents. Among the findings:

- More than 15 million appliance units have been recalled in the past five years for defects that could cause a fire, according to our analysis of CPSC records, with 1,942 incidents reported. Almost half of the recalled units were dishwashers, and the CPSC told us that it is investigating the problem. The large number of recalls is a sobering reminder of how important it is for consumers to register their products with manufacturers so that they receive

notices if the product is recalled.

- Recalled products aren't the only concern. When we analyzed data from the National Fire Incident Reporting System (NFIRS) from 2002 through 2009, the latest available, we found more than 69,000 fires in which an appliance was the primary cause. (The CPSC's larger estimate is a national extrapolation that includes more structures, such as hotels and dorms, and many smaller, confined fires.) Digging deeper, we found at least 15,700 fires clearly linked to problems with a product, much greater than the instances involved in recalls. The number could be closer to 35,000 if you consider cases in which there were either no contributing causes or they were undetermined.

- Since the CPSC's March 2011 launch of SaferProducts.gov, a database for consumers to report problems and review product-safety complaints, more than 850 reports about appliance fires have been posted.

- Companies that are taken to court by consumers over defective products frequently use legal tactics to keep safety information secret. If the companies petition, courts will often shield safety information included in pretrial discovery. And if companies settle a lawsuit, the agreements are often confidential.

- More safety measures could be built into appliances to help prevent fires. Early-warning technologies are possible for

8 ways to protect yourself

■ **Register new appliances.** That way you should be notified promptly if a product is recalled. Appliances usually come with a registration card for you to fill out and mail to the company, or you can register on the manufacturer's website or by phone. Worried about junk mail? Then you can just provide your name, contact information, and model number.

■ **Check for recalls.** You can find a central website for several government agencies at www.recalls.gov, and some let you sign up for alerts. If you move into a home with existing appliances, record their make and model and check the websites for recalls. Also review consumers' experiences with those products at www.saferproducts.gov. And if you experience a problem, report it on the same website and let us know at ReportApplianceFires@CR.consumer.org.

■ **Install fire-prevention equipment.** Almost two-thirds of home fire deaths occur in homes that lack working smoke alarms.

Each level of your home and every bedroom should have one. We recommend smoke alarms having both photoelectric and ionization sensors to provide the fastest response to any type of fire. We also recommend you keep one full-floor fire extinguisher (rated 2-A:10-B:C or greater) on every level, plus a smaller supplemental unit in the kitchen.

■ **Inspect power cords.** Look out for frayed power cords and never route electric cords (including extension cords) under carpeting, where they can overheat or be damaged by furniture.

■ **Check your home's wiring.** The electrical wiring in older homes can't always handle the demands of modern appliances. Have your system inspected by a qualified electrician. They might recommend arc-fault circuit interrupters, which detect dangerous arcing of electrical currents caused by damaged wires, faulty appliances, and other problems. The upgrade might cost several

hundred dollars, but considering that 30,000 fires are caused each year by arcing faults, it may be worth the expense.

■ **Practice kitchen safety.** Unattended cooking is a common fire-starter, whether you are using a range or a microwave oven. If small children are home, maintain a kids-free-zone of at least 3 feet and use back burners when possible. Unplug small appliances, including toasters and coffeemakers, when they're not in use or you are away for long periods.

■ **Clear range hoods.** Grease buildup in range hoods is another fire hazard, so be sure to clean the vents regularly.

■ **Keep dryer vents clear.** Clean your dryer's lint screen regularly to avoid lint buildup, which was listed as a factor in many fires. Use rigid metal dryer ducts instead of flexible ducts made of foil or plastic, which can sag and let lint build. And check them regularly to remove any lint buildup.

some appliances, such as clothes dryers, which had 13,723 fires in our analysis of NFIRS data. Lint buildup was cited as a factor in 2,609 of those cases.

Andrea Gabor, a quality-management expert and Bloomberg Professor of Business Journalism at the City University of New York’s Baruch College, who has studied the appliance, automobile, and electronics industries, says the number of appliance fires isn’t surprising. “We’ve seen a race to the bottom in terms of cheap parts and disposable products,” she says.

But manufacturers such as GE defend their products as safe: “GE and its suppliers design and manufacture safe, high-quality major appliances that meet or exceed government and industry standards,” the company says. “GE continuously reviews those products for possible improvements.”

Increased complexity

Appliance design has come a long way from the days of pilot lights, rotating dials, and push-button controls. You’d be hard-pressed to find a gas range today without electronic ignition or a microwave oven that doesn’t have touchpad controls. Those innovations make appliances easier to use, but the complexity can also lead to other problems.

“If you compare a first-generation blender that had only an on/off switch with one today that has 14 speeds and a data-storage center [microprocessor], there’s a lot more that can go wrong with the newer unit,” says Stuart Lipoff, vice president of publications at the Institute of Electrical

DID YOU KNOW?

7.3million

That’s the number of dishwasher units that have been involved in CPSC recalls over the past five years because of fire hazards.

and Electronics Engineers (IEEE).

That point is echoed by fire investigator Jack Sanderson, president of Fire Findings, a forensic engineering laboratory in Benton Harbor, Mich. He says that more refrigerators are ending up in his labs for analysis. “It usually has to do with components associated with new compressors,” he says. “I can’t tell you what the problem is exactly, but manufacturers have obviously made a design change that’s having unintended consequences.”

People don’t normally think of refrigerators as posing much fire danger, but Sanderson says they have heaters and draw plenty of current. And once the electrical components catch fire, he says, plastics in the rest of the appliance provide more fuel.

In fact, in one of the biggest appliance recalls in our review, 1.6 million Maytag refrigerators were recalled in March 2009 because of an electrical failure in the relay, the component that turns on the compressor. The biggest recall in our analysis was for 2.5 million GE dishwashers in May

2007, with 191 reports of overheated wiring because of a short circuit. In 12 cases, fire spread beyond the dishwasher.

There were several cases of devices that could turn on by themselves, including the October 2010 recall of 122,000 Electrolux-manufactured cooktops and ranges that could unexpectedly auto-start if liquids pooled under their control knobs. The 70 reported incidents included three fires resulting in property damage and three that caused burns. Hamilton Beach toasters were recently recalled because they could turn on when first plugged in.

The NFIRS, which is maintained by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, provides more extensive information on fires and their causes, collecting fire reports from about 23,000 departments nationwide. We sorted through 1.6 million fire records from 2002 through 2009 to analyze more than 69,000 appliance fires in single-family and multifamily dwellings. When we excluded human error and natural conditions, such as damage from storms or animals, we found up to 35,297 cases that could be due to electrical, mechanical, or design problems. More than 15,700 fires were clearly attributable to those problems, and much of the remainder probably were because the appliance was identified as the primary source of ignition, with contributing causes listed as “none” or “undetermined.”


The most incidents were attributed to ranges, followed by dryers, air conditioners, refrigerators, and dishwashers. The NFIRS is the largest national database of fires, but participation is voluntary and varies

By the numbers: Fires and their causes

Products	Total fires 2002-09	Fires linked to electrical or other problems*	SafeProducts.gov complaints related to fires in 2011	Recalled units 2007-11	Common problems reported
Ranges	44,708	16,824	293	176,600	• Stove left unattended. • Self-starting controls.
Clothes dryers	13,723	8,717	29	5,200	• Lint blockage. • Gas leaks.
Microwave ovens	2,308	1,705	81	135,000	• Running without food inside.
Refrigerators	1,514	1,514	149	1.6 million	• Relay switch short-circuit. • Light bulb stays on when door is shut.
Toasters and toaster ovens	1,335	902	36	1.2 million	• Toaster can turn on by itself. • Mechanism jams while toasting.
Dishwashers	1,015	1,015	199	7.3 million	• Control-panel problems. • Liquid rinse-aid leaks into circuitry.
Washing machines	657	657	15	632,000	• Water leakage can cause a circuit-board fire.

Source: Analysis of fires from NFIRS database, complaints from SaferProducts.gov, and recalls and problems from CPSC records.

*Includes manufacturing, mechanical, and design defects and contributing causes listed as “none” or “undetermined”.



POSTED A consumer sent a photo of this destroyed dishwasher to SaferProducts.gov.

yearly, so it was not possible to use that data alone to determine national trends over time.

The safety concerns arise as more appliances, or their components, are manufactured abroad. Almost four of every five recalls in our tally involved products made outside of the U.S., with the majority coming from China. John Drengenberg, safety director with Underwriters Laboratory (UL), which tests and certifies appliances and other products, says there can be a “distance barrier and a language barrier” between U.S. producers and foreign suppliers. “We investigate every recall,” he says. “Very often the problem can be traced back to a substandard part that’s coming from an outside supplier.”

Gabor, the Baruch College professor, who wrote a biography of quality guru W. Edwards Deming, says, “The best manufacturers work very closely with their suppliers on everything from the design of components to their implementation in the final product.”

Industry officials insist that standards are the same whatever the parts’ origins, whether made domestically or in China. Whirlpool, which bought Maytag in 2006, says in a statement, “The same safety system applies regardless of the source of our products or components.”

Who’s watching the store?

The majority of safety standards for appliances are voluntary, developed by a consensus of consumer groups, government agencies, producers, retailers, and suppliers. UL and other testing labs certify products for companies to make sure they meet certain standards. ASTM International and the American National Standards Institute (ANSI) provide a framework to develop those standards.

If the CPSC feels that voluntary measures are not adequately protecting consumers, it can ask standards-setting bodies to make standards tougher. And if that doesn’t happen or if the CPSC has concerns about compliance, it can start a rule-making process for tougher mandatory standards.

But in that kind of system, responsibility can be unclear. Len Morrissey, a director at ASTM International, says, “We have not taken up the issue of appliance fires. It doesn’t fall under the jurisdiction of what we typically do.” Susanah Doucet, ANSI communications manager, says her organization doesn’t specialize in appliance



MICROWAVE MYSTERY Kermit and JoAnna Moreau of Lumberton, Texas, say electrical arcing ruined their GE microwave oven even though it wasn’t being used at the time.

fires and that they fall more under the purview of UL or the National Fire Protection Association.

But fire investigator Sanderson says, “Saying something is UL listed is just not adequate. That’s a bare minimum.”

UL’s Drengenberg says, “We’ve made great strides, but our mission is to eradicate the risk of appliance fires completely. To that end, we are constantly evaluating our standards to see if modifications could be made to better protect consumers.”

The CPSC has authority to work with companies on recalls but has limitations in other realms. It agrees that regulations in China, for example, are not as stringent as many U.S. rules. “We’re sending technical experts to Beijing to do training sessions with our offices there aimed at building safety into the products,” says CPSC spokesman Scott Wolfson. “One key element of this is adhering with U.S. safety standards, and we don’t discriminate between voluntary and mandatory standards. We want Chinese manufacturers complying with both.”

Wolfson says the CPSC has not yet engaged directly with Chinese manufacturers and importers in the appliance sector the

way it has with factories that make toys and fireworks. Instead, the commission is working with trade associations and foreign government quality-control entities.

The potential for problems is one reason consumers need to make sure they are aware of product recalls. With 130 million households in the country filled with multiple appliances, the recalls we analyzed of 15 million appliances represent only a fraction of what’s out there. But consumers still need to pay attention to protect themselves. A majority of people said they never or rarely mail in product registration cards, according to a 2010 survey by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. And almost a third of those who owned a recalled product took no action. But manufacturers and retailers could do more, for example, by providing postage-paid registration cards and by using the contact information they already have to notify customers of a recall.

Consumers voice concerns

SaferProducts.gov, a website run by the CPSC, provides vivid detail about what consumers are experiencing. Launched in March 2011, it posts consumer complaints

within 20 days after notifying the manufacturers involved and giving them a chance to respond. Several thousand complaints have been posted to the website, including more than 850 related to appliance fires, our analysis discovered. For example, we found that consumers reported at least 149 refrigerator-related fires, involving at least 16 injuries.

From a June 16, 2011, report: “This evening our kitchen filled with smoke. We called the fire department. The fireman determined that our 7-year-old Whirlpool Gold side-by-side refrigerator caught fire. The condenser overheated and the surrounding wiring and plastic ignited ... After the incident, I searched on-line and saw that our refrigerator fire was not the first.” Whirlpool did not respond to the posting.

Our review found 39 fires related to coffee makers, with two injuries. Here’s an incident from June 23: “My husband made coffee this morning as usual. When he returned to get a cup he found the coffee to be boiling in the carafe and the unit to be smoking.” One report cited concerns about the recall system. In a report of a dishwasher fire on July 4, 2011, the consumer says, “We had a Bosch dishwasher that was included in the 2009 recall. Though we sent our registration card in, we were never notified by Bosch of a recall.”

SaferProducts.gov has proved to be a useful forum for sharing safety concerns, but it has encountered resistance from companies that contend the information publicly posted is unverified. In October 2011, an unnamed company went to U.S. District Court in Maryland and sued to block the CPSC from posting a consumer’s report of harm allegedly caused by one of the company’s products. Consumers Union, the advocacy arm of Consumer Reports, has joined other groups in asking the court to deny the company’s motion.

“A challenge to an important product-safety law should not proceed in secret just because the company wants to avoid bad publicity about one of its products,” says Scott Michelman, a lawyer for Public Citizen, representing the groups. As of press time, no hearing had been scheduled.

The tactics of secrecy

Companies also use legal strategies to cloak product-safety information when cases reach the stage of a lawsuit.

Like the Nicols, Timothy Hennigan of Rochester Hills, Mich., says he had a problem



AWAITING ANSWERS Elizabeth Loboa of Cary, N.C., says that her KitchenAid dishwasher caught fire over the Thanksgiving weekend, and that she has been frustrated with the company’s response.

with a GE microwave that started up on its own, causing smoke and sparks. He filed a class-action suit in U.S. District Court in Eastern Michigan, alleging that GE has known that its microwaves were defective since at least 2002. The case hinges in part on a series of presentations made to GE’s Microwave Safety Council between 2005

Safety problems can be hidden away in lawsuits.

and 2009, allegedly containing reports of specific problems involving microwave ovens and opinions regarding the cause of self-starts and fires, according to the federal court papers.

But the presentation documents themselves are sealed under a protective court order. Companies often use that stratagem, claiming trade secrets or competitive injury, according to legal experts. “Protective orders were designed for sensitive information like medical records and financial information,” says Lucy Dalglish, executive director of the Reporters Committee for

Freedom of the Press. “But in an effort to speed along cases, judges rubber-stamp the requests without doing the careful analysis needed to determine what is sealable and what is not.”

The GE case went to mediation in mid-December 2011. No action had been taken as of press time. When we asked for details of the case from GE, a spokeswoman responded that “as a matter of policy, GE does not comment on pending litigation.”

Outside parties can try to obtain protected information by filing an access motion under the First Amendment, but such litigation might cost as much as \$50,000, with a 50/50 chance of success at best. “Mainstream media outfits used to fight for disclosure, but most of them no longer have the money or the resources,” Dalglish says.

Kermit Moreau of Lumberton, Texas, had a similar experience with a GE microwave. He was home one afternoon in June 2010 when he heard a strange noise in the kitchen. “Our GE microwave had turned on and the electric arcing was so violent that the turntable had cracked and the bottom of the unit was scorched,” he says. GE came to pick up the unit, he says, but



Test Your HEART SMARTS

True or False: (Check your answers below)

True False

- | | | |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| 1. Everyone should have an exercise stress test for their heart | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. Avocados are one of the best fruits for your heart | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. A simple test on your legs can help prevent a heart attack | <input type="checkbox"/> | <input type="checkbox"/> |

he has not heard from the company since.

Settling cases out of court is another way to keep potentially compromising information from reaching the public. Take the class action filed against LG in 2010, alleging that certain French-door refrigerators contain a defect that causes their interior light to stay on, presenting a fire hazard to consumers. LG submitted an October 2011 settlement in which it agreed to reimburse consumers' out-of-pocket expenses for repairs related to the interior light. But the settlement has not resulted in a product recall, nor does LG "concede any infirmity or weakness in its defenses or its products." But complaints about LG refrigerators continue to pile up online, including several SaferProducts.gov postings involving models covered in the settlement.

Another settlement by LG involved a 2006 fire in Floresville, Texas, that resulted in the death of Christina Arocha, 32, and her two sons, 8-year-old Jonathan and 2-year-old Nicholas. The cause of the fire was cited as undetermined on the official fire-incident report, but survivors brought suit against LG, Sears, and the local power company, claiming that the ignition source was either an LG microwave, a Sears freezer, or faulty electrical service. A confidential settlement was reached with LG in 2007 before any theories about defects were developed beyond general allegations. The other defendants also settled out of court, according to Joseph Dunn, the plaintiffs' attorney.

A more recent class action was filed against Whirlpool in November 2011. It alleges that a defective circuit board in two brands of Whirlpool-produced dishwashers can cause the units to overheat, emit smoke, and even erupt into flames. The lead plaintiff in the case, Steve Chambers of Frederick, Md., says he saw his KitchenAid dishwasher on fire in March 2009 just minutes after it started a wash cycle.

He contacted Whirlpool, which he says refused to investigate or to refund the cost of the ruined appliance. Chambers then started the website KitchenAidFire.com, which contains more than 400 consumer reports of dishwasher fires.

Elizabeth Loba of Cary, N.C., added her story to the website in November 2011, reporting that her KitchenAid dishwasher's control board had caught fire over the Thanksgiving weekend. "The repairman said he had never seen anything like it," Loba says, adding that the repairman wouldn't fix the unit unless

Often, it's the little-known facts like these that can make a huge difference in your life. That's why you'll want to read CONSUMER REPORTS ON HEALTH. It brings you objective facts to help you make smart decisions about your health.

1. No, most people can do without an exercise stress test.

Experts say that it yields too many false-positive results, resulting in unnecessary treatments and anxiety.

2. Yes, avocados can be good for your heart because they contain certain vitamins that help reduce levels of artery-damaging homocysteine in your body.

3. And yes, if you have pain in your legs, you should be tested for peripheral artery disease—which makes you 5 to 7 times more likely than others to suffer a heart attack or stroke.

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she signed a liability release because he believed the dishwasher would continue to pose a fire hazard. Lobo's calls to KitchenAid ended in frustration. "To be honest, they were really horrible," she says. "They had absolutely no regard for the danger of the situation and seemed concerned only about gathering data for a legal case. As a single mom with two young children, I was livid."

Rick Retallick of Fredericton, New Brunswick, says that his Whirlpool dishwasher filled with smoke and sparks in December 2010. "My big concern is that we normally set the dishwasher to run at night while we're asleep," Retallick says. "We're just lucky that we were running it earlier that night while we were still up." He says Whirlpool sent a truck to get the dishwasher, but he has heard nothing since.

Because litigation is pending in the Chambers case, Whirlpool said it could not comment on specifics, but spokeswoman Kristine Vernier says, "Whirlpool Corporation builds its dishwashers with, among many other state-of-the-art safety features, components that turn off power to the electronic control board in the extremely unlikely event that the control board begins to overheat. The safety features are designed to limit potential damage to the unit."

■ DID YOU KNOW?

18 years

That's how long it has been since legislation was introduced in Congress to make it harder for companies to shield product-safety information in civil cases.

Toward safer products

Manufacturers have made significant design enhancements in the past to improve safety—automatic shutoff on coffeemakers, for example, and the antijamming mechanics on toasters. But there's a lot more that could be done to improve appliance safety. Here are four areas:

Dryers. Approximately 7,000 fires, 200 injuries, and 10 deaths are attributed each year to dryer fires, according to CPSC estimates. A new voluntary standard that takes effect in March 2013 will require that fires starting inside the tumbler or base of the chassis be contained within the dryer. Industry should now address one of the biggest causes of dryer fires: the ignition of accumulated lint. A 2011 study by the CPSC concluded that status indicators,

akin to the "check engine" lights on automobiles, could be a reminder to empty lint filters and alert consumers to mechanical failures. Although the results of our tests with standard-equipment lint-detectors were inconsistent, an aftermarket system we reported on in 2011 worked.

Cooking equipment. Forty percent of home fires relate to cooking equipment, the CPSC says. Since at least the mid-1980s, engineers have been trying to come up with a technology that would detect fires before they start, for example, by monitoring stovetop temperatures, which are a reliable indicator of pending ignition. "There was a big push by the CPSC and others to develop these sensors, but the technology was never refined enough to the point where it was considered reliable," says the UL's Drengenberg. The CPSC still believes in the technology enough that it's paying a private contractor \$300,000 to develop a viable solution.

Electromagnetic interference. In 2009, a Magic Chef gas range in a Brooklyn, N.Y., home was mistakenly being turned on by a mobile digital device. Whirlpool, which owns Maytag, confirmed that the range required a suppressor to keep signals from the device from firing it up. Stories like that are rare, but because of the ever-increasing use of mobile devices and electronic-enhanced appliances, preventing electromagnetic interference (EMI) is more important than ever.

"It's hard to find an appliance these days that's not supported by some kind of microcomputer," says the IEEE's Lipoff. "If that device isn't specifically tested, its wires could act like an antenna, picking up electromagnetic interference that could be the equivalent of pressing the start button." The Federal Communications Commission regulates how much electromagnetic interference certain appliances generate but not how much they receive. The European Union regulates both. Many U.S. manufacturers do their own EMI testing, which can be more stringent than the standards.

Better tracking data. Appliances usually have manufacturer stickers indicating when and where they were built, but those stickers can be destroyed in fire. Fire investigator Jack Sanderson suggests requiring a code stamped onto a nondestructible component of appliances for tracking purposes. In addition, although the form that the NFIRS uses to gather and analyze fire reports has a field for appli-

Do you own a recalled appliance?

Largest recalls for fire hazards since 2007. For details go to www.cpsc.gov.

Date	Company	Product	Units recalled
5/16/07	GE Consumer & Industrial	GE, Eterna, Hotpoint, and Kenmore dishwashers	2,500,000
2/1/07	Maytag	Maytag and Jenn-Air dishwashers	2,300,000
6/3/10	Maytag	Maytag dishwashers	1,700,000
3/10/09	Maytag	Maytag, Jenn-Air, Amana, Admiral, Magic Chef, Performa by Maytag, and Crosley refrigerators	1,600,000
5/20/10	Walmart	GE 12-cup digital coffee makers	900,000
4/24/08	Waxcessories	Simmer pots	830,000
6/23/09	Applia Consumer Products	Black & Decker Spacemaker coffeemakers	584,000
4/6/09	Atico International USA	Signature Gourmet 12-cup programmable coffee-makers and Kitchen Gourmet 10-cup coffeemakers	500,000
3/6/08	Hamilton Beach	Hamilton Beach and Proctor Silex Toasters	482,000
1/15/09	BSH Home Appliances	Bosch and Siemens dishwashers	476,500
06/30/11	Hamilton Beach	Hamilton Beach toasters	300,000
9/30/08	Walmart	GE Toasters	210,000
01/11/11	GD Midea Air Conditioning Equipment	GE and Professional Series dehumidifiers	198,000
11/7/07	Carrier	Carrier air conditioners and heat pumps	185,000

Source: Consumer Product Safety Commission

ance make-and-model information, fire departments could and should do a better job of entering the data when available.

The industry itself says it is using techniques to identify other hot spots in the home. "What really drives a product recall isn't actual incidences," says Larry Latack, Whirlpool's director of global products safety. "We've had recalls where there weren't any incidences, but our engineering analysis said we could expect them down the line."

What's ahead

The number of recalled appliance units can be a sign that surveillance is working, but Consumers Union, the advocacy arm of CONSUMER REPORTS, believes that the large number of recalls warrants a comprehensive examination of appliance fires, not just dishwasher fires, by the CPSC. The increased use of new technologies and materials sometimes present unforeseen risks. And Consumers Union supports the development of strong standards to improve appliance safety.

Consumers Union also support efforts to protect and promote SaferProducts.gov as a way to publicly provide early warning of potential product problems. Consumers should be encouraged to share their experiences with unsafe products on the website to provide real-life experiences that can contribute to safety.

Also important would be passage of the Sunshine in Litigation Act, which would limit the use of secrecy in the proceedings of civil cases involving safety concerns and in the settlement of those cases. Sen. Herb Kohl, D-Wis., first introduced it 18 years ago and says it's still relevant today. "We are all familiar with cases where protective orders and secret settlements prevented the public from learning about the dangers of silicone breast implants, IUDs, a prescription painkiller, side-saddle gas tanks, defective heart valves, tires, and most recently, prescription drugs," Kohl says. "Had information about these harmful products not been sealed by court orders, injuries could have been prevented and lives could have been saved."

Could more attention help reduce appliance fires? "The more information we get, the more we have to go to companies and say we have a problem here," says CPSC spokesman Alex Filip. "Every single appliance fire concerns us, and we'll want to investigate the cause to determine if there was a product defect."

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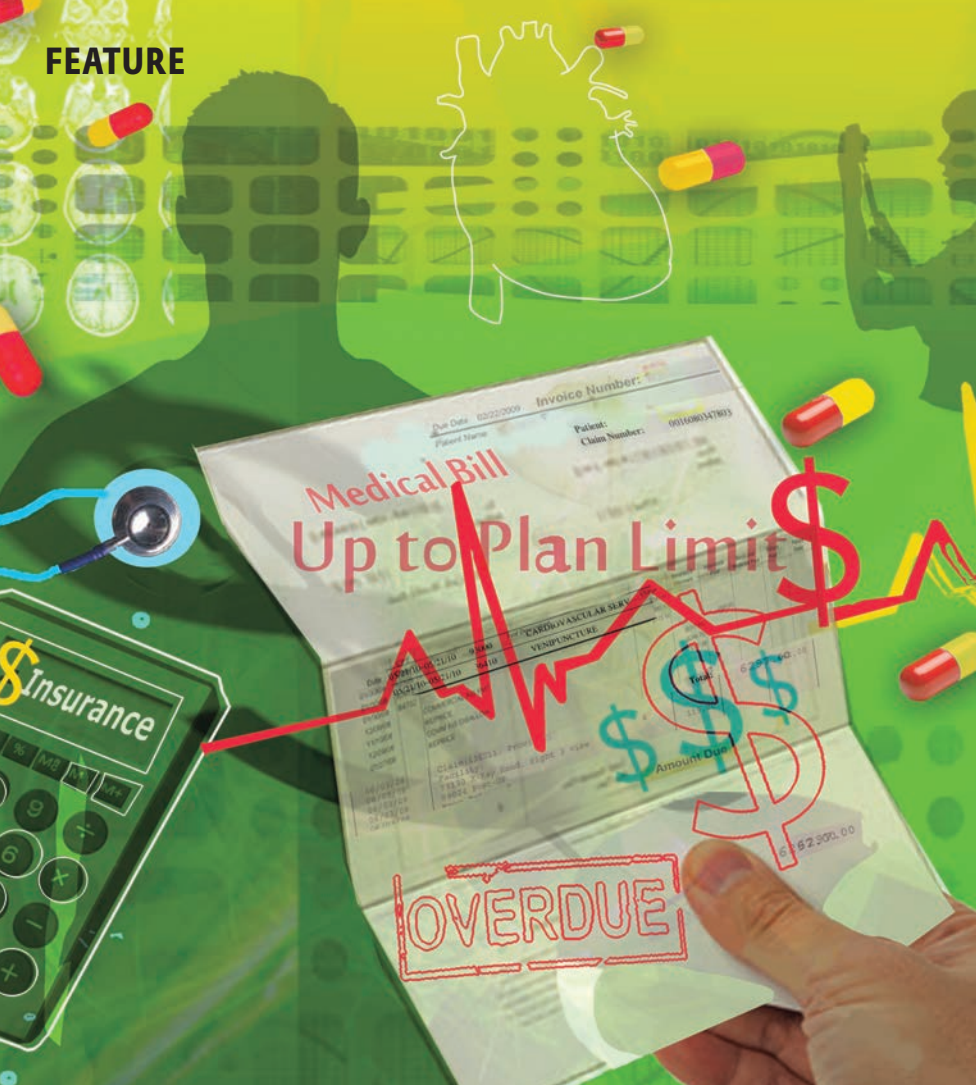
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Junk health insurance

Stingy plans may be worse than none at all

IT MIGHT SEEM to be health insurance, if you don't look too closely, and most people don't. The premiums are surprisingly affordable. And so millions of unemployed people, service industry workers, and those taken in by fast-talking telemarketers sign up. They may think they're insured—until they have a medical problem and find out that their coverage is as skimpy as a hospital gown.

The Affordable Care Act was supposed to usher in a new era of consumer-friendly health care. For instance, insurers are no longer allowed to put outrageously low limits on the amount they pay out for medical care in a year or lifetime.

While millions of Americans have benefited from that and other reforms, many are still prey to the kind of skimpy “junk” plans the new law was designed to eliminate. Some plans, known as mini-meds, are operated by employers and brand-name insurance companies with special dispensation from the federal government. Others, such as health discount cards and fixed benefit indemnity plans, from companies you've probably never heard of, are so meager that regulators don't consider them to be health insurance at all—though that's frequently not clear to consumers. And some of the companies operate one step ahead of the law.

Legal but inadequate

Judith Goss, 48, of Macomb, Mich., believed that the Cigna plan she obtained through her job at the Talbotts retail chain was “some type of insurance that would cover something.” When the store she worked at closed in January 2011, she even paid \$65 a month to keep the coverage through COBRA.

“I was aware that it wasn't a great plan, but I wasn't concerned because I wasn't sick,” she says. But in July 2011 she was diagnosed with breast cancer, at which point the policy's annual limits of \$1,000 a year for outpatient treatment and \$2,000 for hospitalization became a huge problem. Facing a \$30,000 hospital bill, she delayed treatment. “Finally my surgeon said, ‘Judy, you can't wait anymore.’ While I was waiting my tumor became larger. It was 3 centimeters when they found it and 9 centimeters when they took it out.” After a double mastectomy, radiation treatments, and reconstructive surgery, Goss is taking the drug tamoxifen to prevent recurrence.

The Talbotts Cigna Starbridge plan is one of many similar mini-med insurance products aimed at workers in industries such as retail, food service, and temporary staffing agencies. Their hallmark is extremely limited benefits, often, as with the Talbotts plan, no more than a few thousand dollars a year. A Cigna promotional brochure touts the plans as “coverage for everyone” and reassures employers that they don't have to contribute to the cost of the coverage if they don't want to.

“Employers want to be able to tell employees they have something in the area of health insurance,” says David West, director of the Center for a Changing Workforce, a research and advocacy organization based in Seattle. “And most consumers have very little understanding of the details of health insurance until they're faced with a catastrophic illness.”

Mini-med plans like these were supposed to become history after the passage of the Affordable Care Act in 2010. The new law says that health plans can no longer put an annual or lifetime cap on essential health benefits such as doctors, hospitals, tests, and prescription drugs.

But then, in the fall of 2010, the Wall Street Journal reported that McDonald's threatened to drop its mini-med plan, with annual coverage limits as low as \$2,000, rather than offer the more generous coverage the new law required.

(The company later said that the real threat was that if its insurance company had to stop offering the plan, it would have to hastily seek out “the best affordable available options” that “would not measure up” to the ones it currently offered.) Other companies with low-wage workers were also complaining. Around the same time, the government started granting temporary waivers allowing existing mini-meds to continue until 2014. That’s when the health reform law goes fully into effect and low-wage workers will be able to obtain comprehensive subsidized coverage on their own or qualify for Medicaid.

As of January 2012, the government had given waivers to 1,231 plans covering 3.9 million people. The Cigna Starbridge

products, including Goss’s plan, were some of the largest to receive a waiver.

“I’m not here to defend this coverage,” says Neil Trautwein, vice president and employee benefits policy counsel for the National Retail Federation. “It’s simply a fact of life in many industries, including retail and restaurants. In those industries, the difference between the cost of labor and the price on the shelf is pretty thin. And insurance is part of compensation.”

“There was hope that the mini-meds would be quickly gone,” recalls John E. McDonough, now a professor at the Harvard School of Public Health who, as a Senate staff member, helped draft the reform law. But the law’s creators also realized that their hopes might be unreal-



SURGERY DELAYED With a \$2,000 annual limit on her mini-med, Judith Goss put off cancer surgery while she searched for a way to pay for it.

Buying insurance on your own? How to avoid pitfalls

❑ **Don't shop from a search engine.** If you Google “affordable health insurance,” you’ll see sites that promise instant quotes. Stay away from them. It’s impossible to tell which ones are legit, and you run the risk of getting a call from a telemarketer pushing junk. “Few licensed health insurance companies market to consumers in this way and even fewer sell directly to consumers,” says Mila Kofman, a research professor at the Georgetown University Health Policy Institute and former superintendent of insurance in Maine.

❑ **Don't respond to flyers on telephone poles, faxes, robo-calls, or late-night infomercials.**

❑ **Look up real plans at Healthcare.gov.** On this federal website you can search for all legitimate licensed health plans sold to individuals in your state. But you can’t buy a plan directly from the site. (If you live in Massachusetts, the one state that already mandates health insurance for all residents, you can buy directly from its online health exchange, MAHealthConnector.org. As of 2014, all states will have similar exchanges.)

❑ **Consult a licensed independent broker.** They handle plans from multiple reputable carriers and “know which products are real and which ones are scams,” says Monica Lindeen, Montana’s commissioner of securities and insurance. They can walk you through the plan options and pricing, and may be able to find you coverage even if you have certain pre-existing conditions. Your auto and homeowners insurance broker might also offer health insurance. Or ask friends and relatives for recommendations.

❑ **Check with your state insurance department.** Consumers who contact us with health insurance questions are rarely aware that health plans sold to individuals are regulated by the states. Most state insurance department websites have a guide that explains which major medical plans are licensed by the state. And 26 states now have federally funded consumer assistance programs. To find yours, search for “consumer health” at Healthcare.gov.

❑ **Make sure everything's covered.** Until health reform goes fully into effect in 2014, insurers can sell plans that don’t cover some basic medical services. Many plans don’t cover prescription drugs, or cover only generics. (Generics are a great way to save money, but some costly drugs come only in branded versions.) Some plans sold in New Jersey cover only \$500 a year in outpatient diagnostic tests and don’t cover drugs or cancer chemotherapy. Avoid these types of plans, even if you don’t need the services right now. The purpose of health insurance is to protect you if and when you do.

❑ **Find out whether your group plan is a mini-med.** The government requires all mini-meds with waivers to include a disclaimer that reads something like this one on a Cigna plan: “Your health coverage ... does not meet the minimum standards required by the Affordable Care Act.” “If the premium is almost as much as the outpatient benefits, stay away from it,” advises Karen Pollitz, a senior fellow at the Kaiser Family Foundation. “A few of the better plans cover up to \$100,000 a year. That’s still not great but may be worth it if you have no alternative.”

❑ **Know your COBRA rights.** If you leave your job and your workplace has 20 or more employees, the federal COBRA law entitles you and your dependents to stay on your group plan for up to 18 months (or more in certain situations) so long as you pay the full premium yourself, which can be costly. To learn more about COBRA’s provisions, which can be complex, go to the Department of Labor’s website, at www.dol.gov, and type “Cobra” into the search box. Many states have “mini-COBRA” laws protecting employees of smaller companies.

❑ **Consider Pre-existing Condition Insurance Plans and high-risk plans.** If you have a serious pre-existing condition and can’t find a carrier who will insure you, you are eligible for coverage under the Pre-existing Condition Insurance Plan created by the health reform law. Thanks to federal subsidies, premiums for the plans are comparable to commercial plans sold to healthy people. The catch is that you have to have been uninsured for at least six months to be eligible. Look up your state’s plan at PCIP.gov. Thirty-five states also offer separate high-risk plans for people who don’t want to “go bare” for six months, but premiums tend to be higher. You can find a list of these plans at www.naschip.org/states_pools.htm.

❑ **Investigate public programs.** If your income is on the low side, your children may be eligible for free or low-cost insurance through your state’s CHIP program, and depending on your state’s eligibility rules, you may be able to get on Medicaid. Contact your state or local social services agency to find out whether you or your children are eligible for coverage.

istic, given that until 2014, “if you lose your mini-med, you would most likely just end up with no coverage at all,” he says.

‘Insurance’ that isn’t

Other misleading products, such as fixed indemnity plans and discount cards, are aimed at people who don’t have employer group insurance, not even a mini-med, and may be having a hard time buying on their own because they can’t afford it or have a pre-existing condition.

If you’ve ever received a fax or robo-call or seen a late-night TV ad offering affordable health insurance, it was most likely for one of those products. And they’re all over the Internet.

“People go to Google and type in ‘affordable health insurance,’” says Robert Lisson, deputy commissioner of consumer

Many bogus plans are advertised as ‘affordable’ health insurance.

services at the North Carolina Department of Insurance. “Chances are they’re going to get a bunch of hits on websites that exist solely to generate leads for marketers who call them back in 10 minutes. The sales pitch is that this stuff is great, as good as what you had.”

That’s exactly what happened to Ted Tenenbaum, 59, of Honolulu, who went on Social Security disability in late 2011 because of a serious chronic pain condition. He was able to continue his regular group health insurance, a \$440-a-month Hawaii

Blue Cross-Blue Shield PPO, through COBRA but expected to have to give it up when he and his wife moved to Florida in early 2012 to be near his brother.

“So I just went online, and at one point or another an application came up to fill in, and I gave my phone and e-mail address,” Tenenbaum says, “and very shortly after that I got a phone call from this one young lady, who left me a message, very excited, saying she had a plan for me and she had worked with people in my situation before.”

The key feature of these products is that they are not health insurance as most people think of it. What are they instead? Usually one or both of the following:

Fixed benefit indemnity plans. These plans will reimburse you a set sum, generally low, for medical services, after which you’re on your own, most likely with a load of medical debt if you experience a major health problem. The \$450-a-month plan Tenenbaum was sold was a typical one; it pays \$100 apiece for up to five doctor visits a year, \$50 a year for screening tests, and \$1,000 a day for up to 30 days in the hospital. A typical hospital stay runs about \$1,850 a day, and these plans cover little if any of the associated costs, such as tests, medications, and surgery. Unlike mini-meds, which though stingy function like real insurance policies and charge very low premiums, indemnity plans can cost as much as major medical insurance.

Medical discount cards. They promise you, as the name implies, discounts on medical services and other products in exchange for a monthly fee.

While neither of those products is illegal, neither are they major medical health insurance. In fact, fixed benefit indemnity plans are not subject to the provisions of the new health reform law, and come 2014, when everyone must have some kind of health plan or pay a tax penalty, they won’t qualify as coverage.

The problem, say regulators and consumer advocates, is that all too often they’re sold to unsuspecting consumers as if they were health insurance—these days, sometimes with the implication that the plans are part of health care reform. “It’s amazing how quickly these companies appear and disappear,” says Stephen Finan, senior director of policy for the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network. “They’re small operations that are one step ahead of the sheriff.”

Sometimes, however, the sheriff catch-

8 signs the plan you’re pitched might be junk

❑ Vague, generic-sounding names.

Fixed-benefit indemnity and discount card plans are often sold under generic-sounding names like USHealth Group, Health Care One, and Allied Health Benefits. When in doubt, check with your state’s insurance department.

❑ **A required membership in an association you’ve never heard of.** This one is tricky. Reputable associations, such as business associations or professional groups, can and do arrange for major medical insurance for their members. But the “association” you’re asked to join as a condition of buying a junk plan may exist mainly to sell you insurance, not for any other reason, and a significant portion of your monthly payment may be going to the association, not toward your actual policy benefits.

❑ **Guaranteed acceptance.** Until 2014, real health insurance companies can continue to turn away people with pre-existing conditions for individual plans. Any plan other than a high-risk pool or Pre-existing Condition Insurance plan that lets you enroll even if you are in poor health is almost certainly junk, carefully structured to limit the plan’s maximum payout to a few thousand dollars.

❑ **A bargain-basement premium.** There are no bargains in health insurance. A plan generous enough to cover the policyholder’s medical needs has to collect enough money to do that. The only safe way to lower your premium is to get a plan with a higher deductible.



❑ **“Not major medical.”** If you see that phrase, beware. The policy is not comprehensive health insurance.

❑ **Discounts of “up to” a certain amount.** Hucksters know that real insurance often pays a substantial percentage of your bill, often 80 percent. They’ll toss around percentage terms to make you think that’s what you’re getting with a discount card. You’re not.

❑ **No deductible.** Junk marketers also know consumers hate deductibles, so this promise goes up front. They don’t tell you that their maximum payout tops out at only a few thousand dollars.

❑ **It’s marketed as “Obamacare.”** A lot of people are still unsure about the provisions of the health reform law. Marketers take advantage of that by using pictures of the American flag or the White House to suggest their plans are the “affordable care” promised by the new law. They’re not. Those come in 2014.



LIMITS REACHED Expenses for his baby daughter's ear tubes used up her entire annual benefit under the pricey mini-med policy that Geoff Hirsch obtained through his temporary job.

es up. Here are examples drawn from recent regulatory actions:

- In California, regulators shut down HealthcareOne, a telemarketed Arizona-based discount card program that advertised itself as “A Real Healthcare Plan Starting For As Little As About 25 Cents a Day” and “a comprehensive Healthcare Program that makes healthcare affordable for everyone.” When consumers tried to use the program, which sold for as much as \$90 a month, they couldn’t find providers willing to offer the promised discounts. The receiver appointed to manage HealthcareOne’s affairs estimated that the company was bringing in \$500,000 to \$600,000 a month.

- The National Better Living Association, a Georgia company peddling a fixed indemnity policy, misleadingly told a Montana consumer with a heart condition “that his preexisting condition was covered and, had to be, because [of] new federal health reform legislation,” according to an investigation by the Montana Department of Insurance. A pregnant customer was told “that NBLA would reduce her hospital bills by 70 percent through negotiations with the hospital.” The discounts never materialized and she was left with more than \$20,000 in bills. Regulators are seeking fines and restitution from the company.

- In September 2010, Missouri regulators issued more than \$1 million in fines against 13 companies and individuals that sold discount plans misrepresented as comprehensive health insurance. Regulators said many were promoted through faxes advertising “AFFORDABLE HEALTHCARE PLANS!” and consumers were told, “This is not a discount plan!” One woman

bought a plan to get the advertised free flu shot. A year and a half later, all she had to show for her \$1,717 in payments was one denied claim ... for the flu shot.

Adding to the confusion, many plans combine indemnity and discount features “in such a way as to parrot the coverage of conventional health insurance,” says a 2010 report by Colin Gordon, senior research consultant to the Iowa Policy Project.

“One strategy is to have the same plan with eight different websites and eight different names but the same pitches,” Gordon says. They are “sold and resold, branded and rebranded, down a pyramid of third-party vendors and marketers.”

Ted Tenenbaum, for instance, bought his plan through a website for an entity called USHealth Group, but his membership card displays 12 other brand names, including the real name of the company, Freedom Life Insurance Corp. of Texas, that provides the fixed indemnity plan.

“Don’t buy fixed benefit plans,” says Karen Pollitz, a senior fellow at the Kaiser Family Foundation and an expert on individual insurance. “You’ll still be uninsured but out a bunch of money.”

Are there alternatives?

The consumers targeted by these junk plans by definition have few or no alternatives—or are led to believe they don’t. But some may have pathways to real insurance if they know where to look and are not fooled into misleading coverage.

Tenenbaum found out that his Hawaii COBRA PPO will continue to cover him when he moves to Florida after all—for \$10 a month less than the poor coverage of the

fixed indemnity plan.

Judith Goss, the ex-Talbots employee with breast cancer and a widow with four children living on Social Security survivor benefits, eventually qualified (after several unsuccessful tries) for a Medicaid program that kicks in every month after she has spent \$400 on medical bills.

And consider Geoff Hirsch, age 35, a molecular biologist from Brighton, Colo., who enrolled in an Aetna SRC mini-med when he signed on with Aerotek, a temporary staffing company, after the company he worked for folded. The plan, which cost \$89 a week (about \$386 a month) for himself, his wife, and their infant daughter, pays a maximum of \$5,000 a year per person, with an outpatient maximum payout of just \$1,500 per person per year.

After his daughter “went in to have an ear tube insertion that shot her benefits for the year,” he consulted an independent insurance broker. The broker found a PPO from Anthem Blue Cross and Blue Shield, costing about \$275 a month, for which the family qualified because of their good health. It has a high family deductible of \$5,000, but it’s fully compliant with the health reform law, meaning that it covers preventive services in full, with no deductible and no limit on what the insurer will pay for health care.

Largest mini-med sellers

Fifty health insurance companies have federal waivers to offer “mini-med” policies until 2014. We asked the four companies with the highest enrollment why they provide those plans.

■ **Cigna Starbridge** 265,000 enrollees. “Policies are offered to ... workers who typically are not eligible for any other employer sponsored-group health coverage.”

■ **Aetna SRC** 209,423 enrollees. “It’s still some basic coverage for people who may not have any other options.”

■ **BCS Insurance** 115,000 enrollees, including McDonald’s hourly employees. “It’s a matter of affordability. These are largely part-time and hourly workers.”

■ **American Heritage Life Insurance Co.** (Allstate) 69,945 enrollees. “Employers ... wanted to provide a more affordable voluntary benefit option to their ... lower-wage employees.”



THOROUGH Testers Matt Ferretti (left) and Chris Andrade evaluate a model's 3D performance, one of the new features altering the TV landscape.

LCD & plasma TVs

High-tech features are transforming viewing

YOU'RE IN FOR some fun if you haven't shopped for a TV in a few years. Streaming Internet videos and 3D are adding excitement to TV viewing, and Wi-Fi and full Web browsers make it easy to expand your online horizons. Remote controls are evolving as well, giving you new ways to interact with your TV. And prices continue to fall, so you'll get more for your money.

There's much more to come. Over the next few months, new technologies—such as super-wide screens, a new type of TV designed to combine the best of LCD and plasma displays, and screens with ultra-high resolution—should start showing up. Here are more details on those de-

velopments, along with the latest news from our tests of 142 TVs.

Bigger and better TVs abound

The models we test are carefully selected to represent a microcosm of the market, so our Ratings will give you a good idea of what you'll see in stores. Bigger screens are an obvious trend. There are 10 TVs with 60-inch or larger screens in the Ratings, including a 70-inch Sharp LCD TV, and 30-plus models with 50- to 60-inch screens. Big as they are, many of those sets are super-slim—2 inches or less in depth.

The vast majority of the tested LCD and plasma models have 1080p resolution, and most LCD sets 42 inches and larger have

120Hz or higher refresh rates designed to reduce motion blur. Both features can enhance picture quality when they're implemented well.

Very good or excellent HD picture quality is almost a given, with 135 of the 142 tested TVs achieving that level. We found a number of sets from secondary brands that delivered commendable picture quality at relatively low prices. They might not

WATCH OUR VIDEO

Using your smart phone, download the ShopSavvy or the RedLaser app, then scan the code at right.



PHOTO: MICHAEL SMITH

have all the newest features, but they're worth considering if you want a basic TV.

The growing ranks of 3D-capable TVs made a strong showing. Most of the 3D-capable LCD and plasma TVs had excellent scores for regular 2D high-def picture quality, and most of the plasma TVs scored very well for 3D picture quality as well. The LCD sets were less consistent in their 3D performance, though the newest models were among the better performers.

Sound quality, sad to say, doesn't come close to matching picture quality. Only a dozen or so tested models had very good sound, and twice as many as that were judged fair or poor, especially in the 32-inch and smaller categories. Most models had good sound—which is to say, decent for a variety of routine programming but unable to provide the depth and impact you want for movie sound tracks and music. Substandard sound dragged down the overall score on many sets that otherwise were quite good and worth considering if you'll connect them to external speakers.

Models that did everything right rose to the top, with an impressive number scoring 75 or higher. Plasma TVs, especially 3D models, were well represented among the top scorers.

There's more to watch online

Connecting your TV to the Internet might be the single biggest thing you can do to expand your viewing possibilities. Many new TVs have Internet capability built in, including more than half of the 40-inch and larger models in our Ratings. But even if you buy a basic TV (or already own one) that lacks Internet connectivity, you can connect it to an Internet-enabled Blu-ray player, streaming media player, or game system; prices start at less than \$100. (Many require an HDMI input on the TV, but others work with analog inputs.)

To access your broadband service, you can connect the TV (or set-top box) via Ethernet cable to your Internet modem or router, but that can be inconvenient if all the gear isn't in the same room. Many new TVs (as well as boxes) have built-in Wi-Fi for wireless connectivity to your network. Others let you add an optional wireless adapter that costs about \$70 or \$80.

Once you're able to access your broadband service, you'll find a wealth of online content. There are free videos from YouTube, and movies and TV episodes from subscription and pay-per-view services such as Amazon Instant Video, Blockbust-

er OnDemand, CinemaNow, Hulu Plus, Netflix, and Vudu. Music fans can connect to online music sites and services, such as Napster/Rhapsody, Pandora, Slacker, and Spotify. Some offer limited service free of charge and enhanced service for a fee.

And watching isn't all you can do: Many Web-connected TVs let you update your Facebook page, send tweets via Twitter, follow eBay auctions, and share photos on Flickr and Picasa. With some Internet-capable TVs, you can place Skype

Many 3D TVs are top-notch for regular HD, too.

video calls by connecting an optional webcam to your set. Seeing your far-flung friends and family on a big-screen TV rather than on a small laptop can make a huge difference.

Most Internet-capable TVs limit you to specific sites and content partners, but the growing number of "smart TVs" add full browsers that let you go anywhere on the Web. Google TV, which uses the Chrome browser, hasn't made much headway since its introduction more than a year ago, but recently added access to the

Android apps market could spark interest. Sony has a few TVs that use the Google platform, and LG, Samsung, and Vizio recently announced Google-powered TVs. LG and Samsung also have TVs with proprietary browsers and app markets, and other brands could follow suit.

Tip: Even if your TV isn't Web-enabled, you can enjoy your digital photos, videos, and music on it. Just insert a thumb drive into the USB port, connect a camcorder to an HDMI input, or put a memory card into the TV's SD slot. A DLNA-certified TV that's connected to your wireless network can play music, videos, and images from compatible devices (such as a phone, computer, or MP3 player) that are also on your network. Even without DLNA capability, you can connect a laptop computer to your TV's HDMI or VGA input to play content.

3D is worth considering

There are good reasons to get a 3D TV even if you don't plan to use that feature now. Remember, these are HD sets that have an extra viewing mode for 3D, so you can watch regular programming as you normally do, without glasses. Many of the 3D TVs in our Ratings are among the highest-scoring sets we've ever tested, and they often have other features you might want, such as Internet access and Wi-Fi.

First things first

What screen size? Think big so that you can fully enjoy the impact and detail of high-quality HD programming. We recommend at least a 40- or 42-inch set for a main TV in an average-sized living room, and a 50-inch if you'll be sitting at least 8 to 10 feet from the screen. In a spacious great room, a 55-inch or larger screen would be appropriate.

LCD or plasma? Both types can offer top performance, but they have different characteristics, and you may prefer one over the other. LCD TVs offer you a choice of more brands and screen sizes, and those with LED backlights have ultrathin designs and top energy efficiency. LCDs, in general, tend to be better in very sunny rooms. It's worth choosing a TV with a 120Hz or higher refresh rate if you want to minimize motion blur. But the limited viewing angle of most LCDs may be a concern if anyone will be watching the TV from other than front and center.

Plasma TVs, which come in 42-inch and larger sizes, give you more screen for the

money and an unlimited viewing angle, which means the color and brightness will look the same from any viewing position. They also offer blur-free motion, along with a more movielike picture. Contrary to what you might have heard, plasma TVs aren't disappearing, and you can expect years of good service from one, as with an LCD. Newer models don't suffer from permanent image burn-in during normal viewing, and they use about the same energy as many LCD sets.

Buy now or wait? With TV technology changing so rapidly and prices in flux, you might be hesitant to buy a new TV for fear you'll see a better, or cheaper, set soon after you pull the trigger. Relax. Prices have fallen to attractive levels, and we don't expect new technologies such as OLED and 4K TVs to be offered at mainstream pricing anytime soon. So unless you're an early adopter, today's state-of-the-art TV should satisfy you for a long time. Just choose a well-rated model with the features you want and a price you like, then enjoy it.

Prices have fallen sharply, so it won't cost you a fortune to buy a 3D TV. Among our recommended 3D-capable models, a 32-inch LCD sells for \$450, a 42-inch plasma for \$550, and several 50-inch plasmas for about \$1,000.

Performance is improving, too. Plasma TVs have displayed fine 3D quality from the start, and several in the Ratings have excellent scores for both 3D and HD. Some new LCDs were judged very good, an improvement over first-generation models, which had problems with ghosting (double images visible even when you're wearing 3D glasses). But we still see issues with some LCD models, including less than full 1080p resolution in 3D mode.

"Active-shutter" 3D glasses used with all plasma and many LCD TVs have gotten

lighter than early models, and some now use Bluetooth instead of less-reliable wireless connections to sync up with the TV. Prices start at about \$30. A number of LCD sets use "passive" 3D technology, with

Coming this year: TVs with ultra-high definition.

lightweight, low-cost glasses like the ones you get in theaters. You often get four pairs with a TV; extras cost \$10 to \$30.

Currently, you'll probably be watching regular HD most of the time, but more 3D content is steadily rolling out. At least 100 or so 3D Blu-ray discs are available (which

require a 3D-capable player) as is a growing selection of broadcast programming from cable, satellite, and telecommunications service providers.

Even if 3D viewing is not a high priority for you, consider buying a 3D set to future-proof your purchase for a time when you might be more interested in 3D content.

Tip: You can connect a 3D digital camera or camcorder to your TV and view photos and videos in 3D. It's eye-opening, almost like being there in person.

Keep an eye on the horizon

TV makers have more developments in the works. Perhaps the most important is OLED (organic light-emitting diode) technology. This isn't a variation of the LED backlighting used in some LCD TVs. It's a new technology designed to combine the best attributes of LCD and plasma TVs: ultra-slim designs measuring a half-inch or less in depth, vibrant colors, wide viewing angles, great energy efficiency, and very deep blacks.

We tested a Sony OLED TV a few years ago, and its black levels were so dark that we needed new equipment to test it. But it had a tiny 11-inch screen and a hefty \$2,500 price. We'll see bigger OLED sets this year. LG and Samsung have announced 55-inch 3D OLED TVs, which are expected to cost \$6,000 or more. Until prices fall, OLED won't be mainstream.

Ultra-definition (UD) TVs are also coming soon. Their displays have 4K (roughly 4000x2000) resolution, four times that of 1080p sets. LG will introduce an 84-inch UD set this year, and other makers—including Samsung, Sharp, Sony, and Toshiba—are developing 4K sets. Sharp reportedly has an 8K model as well.

There's no UD content except for digital cinema video, but the TV itself (and a few receivers and Blu-ray players) can upconvert 1080p to quasi-4K resolution, much like 480p video is upconverted to 1080p. 4K will usher in what many consider the ultimate 3D TV experience: glasses-free viewing, which is already possible on some phones and laptops, and expected from at least one TV brand this year.

Also in the works are 21:9 screens, which are wider than current 16:9 sets. A 21:9 television more closely mimics the 2.35:1 aspect ratio of many movies, so you won't see black bars above and below the image, as you do on a 16:9 TV. Vizio said it will have three 21:9 models this year, with 50-, 58-, and 71-inch screens.

7 steps to the best picture quality

In our labs, we fine-tune each TV before evaluating the picture. The models in our Ratings would have lower scores if we didn't. Here's how to get the best picture quality your television can offer.

❑ The first time you use a TV, choose the Home setting in the startup menu.

❑ Connect the TV to a Blu-ray player or HD cable/satellite DVR with an HDMI cable. Freeze on an image with faces and detail, such as a news or talk show.

❑ Press the menu button on the TV remote and find "picture settings" in the onscreen menu. Find picture modes and switch among them to see how the image changes. Try that with various images, such as darker, brighter, or more colorful scenes. If a THX mode is available, that might be the best choice. If not, try a mode such as Movie, Cinema, or Pro; those generally provide an accurate, natural-looking picture. Other modes such as Natural or Standard might trade off color accuracy for more brightness, so see how they look to you. Avoid modes called Vivid or Dynamic (names vary by brand), which are overly bright and harsh.

❑ You can usually fine-tune specific attributes within the chosen picture mode, though some TVs will let you do that only within the Custom mode. Turn sharpness down to zero and raise it slightly only if the image looks soft or edges are indistinct. Turn off noise-

reduction and enhancement controls, which tend to reduce image detail. Turn off dynamic and power-saving controls, which can create brightness fluctuations in the image, along with "motion smoothing" features, which give film-based movies a soap opera look.

❑ Next, get the shadows right. Freeze on a dark scene from a movie. Raise the brightness control (black level) to expose those shadow details. Now incrementally lower the same brightness control so that you get the deepest black without obscuring detail in the darkest areas.

❑ After that, freeze on a scene or image that contains bright, near-white shadows, such as a wedding dress. With the contrast (white level) set to middle, raise the contrast to the setting that gives you a comfortably bright image that still reveals subtle details, such as the buttons or folds in the wedding gown.

❑ Now get the colors right. Find "color temperature" in the menu and select warm or low. Find the tint/hue and color controls and set them at the middle of their range. Adjust tint so that flesh tones look natural, neither too red nor too greenish-yellow, and color level so that colors don't appear too hyped up.

TIP: For the best effect, make picture adjustments using the same room lighting in which you usually view the TV. Don't worry about messing up—if you don't like the results, find the Reset button in the onscreen menu to restore default settings and start over.



B1 Vizio



C1 LG



C2 Samsung

Overview

Many of the LCD TVs in the Ratings, which include 3D models, offer fine performance. Below, we highlight some of the recommended models for the reasons noted. Other TVs in the Ratings with very good or excellent picture quality are worth considering if they have the features you want at a good price and you can put up with a drawback such as fair sound (which drags down the overall score) or a limited viewing angle. If you want a screen size other than a tested model's, check the last column for other sizes in that series.

✓ CR Best Buy

These recommended models offer the best combination of price and performance.

✓ Recommended

These are high-performing models that stand out for the reasons noted.

52- to 55-inch LCD:

B1 Vizio \$1,300 **CR Best Buy**

B1 has a wider viewing angle than many LCDs and full-array LED backlighting with local dimming that enhances black levels and contrast. Built-in Wi-Fi makes it easy to access Internet content, and the remote control has a Bluetooth-enabled, slide-out QWERTY keyboard.

46- to 47-inch LCDs:

C1 LG \$1,100

C2 Samsung \$1,150

C3 Samsung \$1,100

C4 Bose \$5,000

C1, **C2**, and **C3** have edge LED backlights and Internet connectivity via a Wi-Fi adapter (included with the LG, optional with the Samsungs). **C1** has a 120Hz frame rate that was very effective at reducing motion blur, and its viewing angle is wide for an LCD set. It's also among the few tested models that has very good sound, as does **C4**.

40- to 42-inch LCDs:

D1 Samsung \$720

D2 Panasonic \$1,000

D3 LG \$650

Ratings LCD TVs

In performance order, within types. (Types designated A, B, etc.)

● Excellent
● Very good
○ Good
○ Fair
● Poor

Recommendations	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results					Features			
					High-def. picture quality	Standard-def. 3D performance	Viewing angle ⁽¹⁾	Sound quality	Ease of use	Menu	LED backlight	Highest frame rate (Hz)	Internet

A 60-INCH AND LARGER Both have 1080p resolution.

1	Sharp	Aquos LC-70LE733U	\$3,000	60	●	●	NA	N	○	○	●	●	●	240	●	●	●	70
2	Westinghouse	VR-6025Z	950	37	●	●	NA	M	●	○	●	●	●	120	●	●	●	60

B 52- TO 55-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

1	Vizio	XVT553SV	1,300	74	●	●	NA	W	○	○	○	○	●	240	●	●	●	55, 47, 42, 32
2	LG	55LK520	1,100	66	●	●	NA	W	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55, 47, 42
3	Vizio	E551VA	1,200	65	●	●	NA	W	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55
4	Sanyo	DP55441	850	62	●	●	NA	W	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55
5	Insignia	NS-55L780A12	850	53	●	●	NA	W	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55, 46, 42
6	Toshiba	55G310U	900	52	●	●	NA	N	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55
7	Philips	55PFL4706	1,400	49	●	●	NA	N	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55, 46, 40
8	Philips	55PFL5706	1,050	45	●	●	NA	N	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55, 46, 40
9	Dynex	DX-55L150A11	800	41	●	●	NA	W	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55

C 46- TO 47-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

1	LG	47LV5500	1,100	77	●	●	NA	W	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55, 47, 42
2	Samsung	UN46D6300	1,150	72	●	●	NA	N	○	○	○	○	●	240	●	●	●	55, 46, 40
3	Samsung	UN46D6000	1,100	70	●	●	NA	M	○	○	○	○	●	240	●	●	●	55, 46, 40, 32
4	Bose	VideoWave Entertainment System	5,000	67	●	●	NA	N	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	46
5	Sony	Bravia KDL-46EX620	1,080	66	●	●	NA	N	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55, 46, 40
6	Sanyo	DP46841	580	63	●	●	NA	M	○	○	○	○	●	60	●	●	●	46, 42
7	Sony	Bravia KDL-46EX523	990	62	●	●	NA	M	○	○	○	○	●	60	●	●	●	46, 40, 32
8	Toshiba	46G310U	700	62	●	●	NA	N	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	46
9	Dynex	DX-46L261A12	500	61	●	●	NA	M	○	○	○	○	●	60	●	●	●	46
10	RCA	46LA55R120Q	600	50	○	○	NA	N	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	46
11	Philips	46PFL5706	750	47	●	●	NA	N	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55, 46, 40
12	RCA	46LA45RQ	500	42	○	○	NA	M	○	○	○	○	●	NS	●	●	●	46, 42, 22

D 40- TO 42-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

1	Samsung	LN40D630	720	76	●	●	NA	M	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	46, 40
2	Panasonic	Viera TC-L42D30	1,000	75	●	●	NA	W	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	42
3	LG	42LK520	650	72	●	●	NA	W	○	○	○	○	●	120	●	●	●	55, 47, 42
4	LG	42LV3700	950	72	●	●	NA	N	○	○	○	○	●	60	●	●	●	55, 47, 42

1 W = wide, M = moderate, N = narrow. 2 Requires optional wireless adapter. 3 Includes four pairs of 3D glasses. 4 Includes two pairs of 3D glasses.

Overview and Ratings continued on page 39. Guide to the Ratings on page 40.

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Remote controls improve

Remote controls are evolving to keep pace with the increasingly sophisticated capabilities of TVs. On some 3D-capable models, the remote lets you switch into 3D mode with a single button push.

Other features make it easy to access the Internet, such as dedicated buttons for going online or launching specific services, such as Amazon, Netflix, or Vudu. You might find a button for accessing online apps markets where you can download games, travel tools, exercise programs, and much more.

Even more advanced are dual-sided remotes that have a full QWERTY keyboard on one side and the usual buttons on the other, and remotes with a slide-out keyboard. A keyboard is useful for entering text to search the Web.

Gesture and voice controls

There are also entirely new ways to interact with your television. Some LG smart TVs include a second, gesture-based "Magic Motion" remote control that you point at the screen to navigate menus and choose programs, much like you do with a Wii game controller. Some new Samsung TVs offer Smart Interaction technology, which lets you interact with the TV without a remote, by hand gestures, voice control, and face recognition. Other products also let you talk to the TV, including Microsoft's Xbox when it's used with its Kinect controller, and new Sony TVs with microphones in the remote. Now you'll have a reason to yell at the TV even if your team isn't losing.



HANDY A keyboard slides out of the Vizio remote (left) and is on the flip side of the Samsung remote (center). The LG Magic Motion remote lets you control some TV functions by gesturing at the screen.

PHOTO: MICHAEL SMITH



D1 Samsung



D6 JVC



E1 Panasonic

Ratings LCD TVs

☒ CR Best Buy
☒ Recommended
● Excellent
○ Very good
○ Good
○ Fair
● Poor

Recommendations	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results	Features
					Picture quality High-def. Standard-def. 3D performance Viewing angle (°) Sound quality Remote Menu LED backlight Highest frame rate (Hz) Streaming video Internet Wi-Fi Available screen sizes (in.; tested size in bold)	
				0 100 P F G V E		

D 40- TO 42-INCH continued

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	Vizio M420SV	\$700	71	● ● NA W ○ ● ● ● 120 ● ●	42
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	JVC JLC42BC3000	550	69	● ● NA W ● ● ● 120	47, 42, 37, 32
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	Samsung LN40D550	600	69	● ● NA M ○ ○ ● 60 [2]	46, 40, 37, 32
	8	Sony Bravia KDL-40BX420	585	65	● ● NA N ○ ○ ○ 60	46, 40, 32
	9	Panasonic Viera TC-L42U30	650	64	● ● NA W ○ ● ● 120	42
	10	Samsung UN40D5500	810	64	● ● NA N ○ ● ● 60 [2]	40, 32
	11	Sanyo DP42841	480	63	● ● NA M ○ ○ ● 60	46, 42
	12	Insignia NS-42E859A11	700	53	● ● NA N ● ● ● 120 ● ●	42, 32
	13	RCA 42LA45RQ	420	50	● ● NA N ○ ○ ○ 60	46, 42
	14	Toshiba 42SL417U	700	42	● ● NA N ● ● ● 120 ● ●	55, 46, 42
	15	Philips 40PFL4706	700	42	○ ○ NA N ● ○ ○ ● 60 ● ●	55, 46, 40
	16	Toshiba 40SL412U	600	41	● ● NA M ● ● ● 60	55, 46, 40
	17	Magnavox 40MF401B/F7	450	37	○ ○ NA M ● ○ ○ 60	46, 40
	18	Westinghouse LD-4070Z	430	36	● ● NA M ● ● ● 120	40
	19	Toshiba 40E210U	500	34	● ● NA M ● ● ● 60	40
	20	ViewSonic VT4210LED	700	32	● ● NA N ● ○ ○ ● 120	42, 32

E 37-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Panasonic Viera TC-L37E3	650	71	● ● NA W ○ ● ● ● 60 ● [2]	42, 37, 32
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	JVC JLC37BC3000	470	69	● ● NA W ● ○ ● 60	47, 42, 37, 32
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Vizio E370VP	530	69	● ● NA W ● ● ● 60	37
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	LG 37LV3500	650	67	● ● NA N ○ ● ● 60	42, 37
	5	Vizio XVT373SV	600	64	● ● NA W ○ ○ ○ ● 120 ● ●	37, 32
	6	Westinghouse VR-3730	330	47	○ ○ NA M ○ ○ ● 60	37

F 32-INCH F1, F2, F4, F5, F7, and F14 have 1080p resolution. The rest have 720p.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	LG 32LK450	450	73	● ● NA M ○ ● ● 60	42, 37, 32
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Samsung LN32D550	480	72	● ● NA M ● ○ ● 60 [2]	46, 40, 37, 32
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Sony Bravia KDL-32BX320	380	70	● ● NA W ○ ○ ○ 60	32, 22
	4	Panasonic Viera TC-L32U3	400	65	● ● NA W ○ ● ● 60	37, 32
	5	Vizio M320NV	400	61	● ● NA W ● ○ ○ ● 60	42, 37, 32, 22
	6	Sanyo DP32671	350	58	● ● NA W ○ ○ ○ 60	32, 26
	7	Vizio E321MV	400	57	● ● NA N ○ ● ○ ● 60	32

Ratings continued on next page.

Overview continued from page 37

D4 LG \$950

D5 Vizio \$700

D6 JVC \$550 CR Best Buy

D7 Samsung \$600

D1, D3, D6, and D7 are fairly basic TVs with relatively low prices. D2, D4, and D5 have streaming services and Wi-Fi—optional on D2, standard on the other two. D2 and D6 have very good sound, better than most. D5's remote has a slide-out keyboard that makes it easier to enter text for online searches.

37-inch LCDs:

E1 Panasonic \$650

E2 JVC \$470

E3 Vizio \$530

All three have very good picture quality and wide viewing angles. E2 and E3 have very good sound as well.

continued

Most and least reliable

Every year, we gather repair experiences from thousands of readers who own TVs to determine which brands have been more—or less—reliable. Our latest survey, which covers 209,000 LCD and plasma TVs bought between 2007 and 2011, shows that only 4 percent of TVs, on average, were repaired or had a serious problem during the first three to four years of use. Most major brands of LCDs were generally reliable, including (in alphabetical order) Insignia, JVC, LG, Magnavox, Panasonic, Philips, Samsung, Sanyo, Sharp, Sony, Sylvania, Toshiba, Vizio, and Westinghouse. Mitsubishi and Polaroid have been among the more repair-prone brands of LCD TV. In the plasma category, LG, Panasonic, and Samsung were generally reliable.

Keep in mind that our data are historical and can't predict future reliability. Still, we think that picking a brand that has been more reliable in the past decreases the likelihood of your having repair trouble in the future.



F2 Samsung



G1 Insignia



H1 Sony

32-inch LCDs:

- F1** LG \$450
F2 Samsung \$480
F3 Sony \$380

The 32-inch **F1** and **F2** have excellent picture quality, and **F2** also has very good sound. **F3** has very good picture quality and a wide viewing angle, plus a lower price.

22- to 27-inch LCD:

- G1** Insignia \$240

This 24-inch model has the best combination of picture and sound quality among the smaller sets we tested.

3D LCD sets:

- H1** Sony \$2,900
H2 LG \$1,100
H3 LG \$1,900
H6 Vizio \$450

All of the recommended 3D sets have excellent or very good HD picture quality, streaming video, and standard Wi-Fi. All except **H6** have LED backlighting and a 120Hz or higher refresh rate to reduce motion blur. **H1** is a 55-inch that uses battery-powered active-shutter 3D glasses. It has a full-array LED backlight with local dimming that improved black levels and contrast and a very fast refresh rate that effectively minimized motion blur. But its viewing angle is narrow. **H2**, a 47-inch model, and **H3**, a 55-inch sibling, stand out for very good 3D performance and wide viewing angles, and they come with four pairs of passive 3D glasses. They are "smart" TVs with full Web browsers and a "magic wand" remote that you point at the screen to move a cursor. The 32-inch **H6** is one of the smallest 3D sets we've seen. Though its 3D performance was below that of the best sets, it provides a reasonably good 3D experience.

Ratings LCD TVs

Recommendations	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results					Features			
					Picture quality	High-def. Standard-def.	3D performance	Viewing angle (°)	Sound quality	Ease of use	Remote	Menu	LED backlight

F 32-INCH continued

8	ViewSonic VT3205LED	\$ 520	49	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				32
9	RCA 32LA30RQD	310	47	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				32, 26
10	Toshiba 32SL415U	400	42	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				32, 24
11	Insignia NS-32E740A12	300	37	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				32
12	Samsung UN32D4000	450	37	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				32, 26, 19
13	Toshiba 32C110U	330	33	NA	M	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				32
14	Philips 32PFL4505D	450	32	NA	M	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				32, 22, 19
15	Westinghouse LD-3235	250	26	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				32

G 22- TO 27-INCH G1, G3, G6, and G7 have 1080p resolution. The rest have 720p.

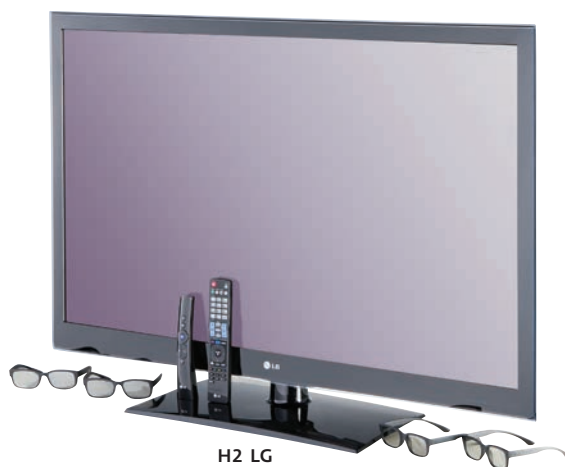
1	Insignia NS-24E730A12	240	60	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				24, 22
2	Sanyo DP26671	280	53	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				32, 26
3	Dynex DX-24LD230A12	250	50	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				24
4	Sanyo DP26640	240	48	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				32, 26, 19
5	Vizio E260VA	290	47	NA	W	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				26, 19
6	ViewSonic VT2730	300	43	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				27
7	Vizio M261VP	350	35	NA	W	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				26
8	Philips 22PFL3505D	230	25	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				40, 32, 22, 19

H 3D MODELS, 32- TO 65-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

1	Sony Bravia XBR-55HX929	2,900	77	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	"960"				65, 55, 46
2	LG 47LW5600	1,100	76	NA	W	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	120				55, 47
3	LG 55LW6500	1,900	76	NA	W	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	240				65, 55, 47
4	LG 55LW9800	2,800	75	NA	W	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	480				55
5	Sony Bravia KDL-55HX729	1,900	73	NA	N	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	"480"				65, 55, 46
6	Vizio E3D320VX	450	71	NA	W	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	60				47, 42, 32

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is based mostly on picture quality but also considers sound quality, ease of use, and viewing angle. On 3D sets, **3D performance** is factored in as well. Displayed scores are rounded; models are listed in order of precise overall score. **Picture quality** scores reflect clarity, detail, and color accuracy of high-definition 1080i signals and standard-definition 480i signals routed via HDMI. **Viewing angle** is our evaluation of picture quality from various horizontal and vertical points off-center. All plasma TVs in the Ratings were judged excellent for



H2 LG



H6 Vizio

✓ CR Best Buy
✓ Recommended

● Excellent
● Very good
○ Good
● Fair
● Poor

Recommendations	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results					Features			
					Picture quality	High-def. Standard-def. 3D performance	Viewing angle (°)	Sound quality	Ease of use Remote Menu	LED backlight	Highest frame rate (Hz)	Internet Streaming video Wi-Fi	Available screen sizes (in.; tested size in bold)

H 3D MODELS, 32- TO 65-INCH continued

✓	7	Samsung UN55D7000	\$2,400	70	●	●	●	N	○	●	●	240	●	60, 55, 46
✓	8	Samsung UN55D7900	2,500	70	●	●	●	N	○	●	●	240	●	55, 46
✓	9	Vizio M3D420SR [3]	700	69	●	●	○	N	○	○	○	"240"	●	55, 46, 42
	10	Sony Bravia KDL-46HX820	1,800	69	●	●	●	M	●	●	●	"480"	●	55, 46
	11	Samsung UN46D6900	1,500	67	●	●	●	M	○	●	●	120	●	60, 55, 46
	12	Vizio M3D460SR [3]	1,050	66	●	●	○	N	○	○	○	"240"	●	55, 46, 42
	13	Vizio E3D420VX [4]	650	66	●	●	○	W	○	○	○	120	●	47, 42, 32
	14	Sony Bravia KDL-60EX720	2,600	65	●	●	●	N	○	○	●	"240"	●	60, 55, 46, 40, 32
	15	Sony Bravia KDL-60NX720	2,980	65	●	●	●	N	●	○	●	"240"	●	60, 55, 46
	16	Sony Bravia KDL-55EX720	1,600	65	●	●	●	N	○	○	●	"240"	●	60, 55, 46, 40, 32
	17	Samsung UN60D6400	2,500	63	●	●	●	M	○	●	●	120	●	60, 55, 46, 40
	18	Vizio XVT3D554SV	1,630	63	●	●	●	W	○	○	○	"480"	●	65, 55, 47, 42
	19	Samsung UN55D6500	1,900	62	●	●	●	N	○	●	●	120	●	60, 55, 46, 40
	20	Sony Bravia KDL-46EX723	1,250	62	●	●	●	N	○	○	●	"240"	●	46
	21	Vizio XVT3D650SV [3]	2,550	60	●	●	●	M	○	○	○	120	●	65, 55, 47, 42
	22	Samsung UN46D6400	1,250	58	●	●	●	N	○	●	●	120	●	60, 55, 46, 40
	23	Sharp Aquos LC-46LE835U	1,320	57	●	●	●	N	○	○	●	240	●	60, 52, 46, 40
	24	Samsung UN55D8000	2,600	57	●	●	●	N	○	●	●	"960"	●	65, 60, 55, 46
	25	Toshiba 32TL515U [3]	700	55	●	●	○	W	●	●	●	240	●	55, 47, 42, 32
	26	Sharp Aquos LC-52LE835U	1,615	52	●	●	●	N	○	○	●	240	●	60, 52, 46
	27	Toshiba 47TL515U [3]	1,400	36	●	●	○	W	●	●	●	240	●	47, 42, 32

Ratings continued on next page.

viewing angle. **Sound quality** combines objective measurements and subjective listening by trained panelists. **Ease of use** assesses the remote control and onscreen menus. For LCDs, **highest frame rate** is how many times the picture refreshes in 1 second. Those enclosed in quotes use various methods to simulate that frame rate. **Available screen sizes** indicates additional sizes in the same series as the tested model, whose size is bolded. **Price** is approximate retail.

Best and worst brands

In addition to rating TVs by model, we've analyzed three years of test data on hundreds of TVs to see which brands have consistently had the highest-scoring TVs. That's helpful if you're considering an untested set. Here's the lowdown on the brands for which we have sufficient data:

LCDs. LG, Panasonic, Samsung, and Sony have consistently been among the top performers, with Hitachi close behind. Sanyo, Sharp, and Vizio sets have consistently done well. An untested TV from any of those brands should be a reasonably safe bet.

Insignia, JVC, Philips, and Toshiba have a less consistent track record, with some TVs that did very well and others with lower scores. We have less confidence that an untested TV from those brands will offer performance comparable to its best tested siblings'.

Magnavox, Sylvania, and Westinghouse LCDs generally had lower overall scores than most, suggesting that untested sets from those brands are less likely to be high performers.

Plasmas. Panasonic plasma TVs have consistently been among the best. Very close behind are LG and Samsung, which consistently did very well. Insignia plasma TVs have done reasonably well. An untested set from those brands is a safe bet for high performance.

For LCD and plasma TVs, we've found that different sizes in a series often score very closely. So a 50-inch set we haven't tested is likely to perform similarly to a 42-inch sibling in our Ratings. (Among TVs smaller than 32 inches, we've seen less consistency and generally lower performance, so your best bet is to stick with a tested model.)

Overview

Many of the plasma TVs in the Ratings, which include 3D models, offer fine performance.

✓ CR Best Buy

These recommended models offer the best combination of performance and price.

✓ Recommended

These are high-performing models that stand out for the reasons noted.

60-inch plasma:

A1 Panasonic \$1,400 **CR Best Buy**

This 60-inch set in Panasonic's lowest-priced 1080p series delivers a lot of screen and great picture quality for the price.

50- and 51-inch plasmas:

B1 Panasonic \$800

B2 LG \$750 **CR Best Buy**

B3 Samsung \$650 **CR Best Buy**

B4 LG \$600 **CR Best Buy**

B1 has excellent picture quality and many features, including optional Wi-Fi and access to online content. **B2**, a more basic set, is one of the few tested TVs with very good sound. **B2**, **B3**, and **B4** are all CR Best Buys.

42- and 46-inch plasmas:

C1 Panasonic \$630

C2 Panasonic \$500

C3 Panasonic \$600

C4 LG \$500

C1 is a 1080p model with excellent picture quality and access to online content. **C2**, **C3**, and **C4** are 720p sets with very good picture quality. **C2** and **C3** are different-sized siblings with more features, including optional Wi-Fi and access to online content. **C4** is part of LG's entry-level plasma series.

Top plasmas with 3D capability:

D1 Samsung \$2,250

D2 Panasonic \$2,150

D3 LG \$900

D12 Panasonic \$1,500

D14 Panasonic \$700

D15 LG \$550

All the 3D plasmas in our Ratings, except one, are recommended. **D1**, 59 inches, and **D2**, 55 inches, have a lot of features, including access to online content. **D3**, a 50-inch set, is well priced for a full-featured model with access to online content; it's also only one of a few tested TVs with very good sound. **D12**, a 60-inch model in Panasonic's entry-level 1080p 3D series, is well priced for a full-featured set of this size. **D14**, 42 inches, is the lowest-priced 3D set with Internet access and optional Wi-Fi. **D15**, a more basic 42-inch TV, delivers very good HD and 3D at a very low price.

A1 Panasonic



D1 Samsung



Ratings Plasma TVs

In performance order, within types. (Types designated A, B, etc.)

● Excellent
● Very good
○ Good
○ Fair
● Poor

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results	Features
				0 100 P F G VG E	Picture quality High-def. Standard-def. 3D performance Viewing angle Sound quality Ease of use Remote Menu Streaming video	Internet Wi-Fi Available screen sizes (in.; tested size in bold)

A 60-INCH AND LARGER Has 1080p resolution.

✓	1	Panasonic Viera TC-P60S30	\$1,400	71	● ● NA U ○ ● ● ● ●	60, 50, 46, 42
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B 50- AND 51-INCH B1, B2, and B7 have 1080p resolution. The rest have 720p.

✓	1	Panasonic Viera TC-P50S30	800	81	● ● NA U ○ ● ● ● ●	60, 50, 46, 42
✓	2	LG 50PV450	750	77	● ● NA U ○ ● ● ● ●	60, 50
✓	3	Samsung PN51D450	650	72	● ● NA U ○ ○ ● ● ●	51, 43
✓	4	LG 50PT350	600	68	● ● NA U ○ ○ ● ● ●	50, 42
	5	Sanyo DP50741	570	64	● ● NA U ○ ○ ● ● ●	50
	6	Insignia NS-50P650A11	600	64	● ● NA U ○ ○ ● ● ●	50, 42
	7	Samsung PN51D530	800	59	● ○ NA U ○ ○ ○ ● ●	59, 51

C 42- TO 46-INCH All have 720p resolution except C1, which has 1080p.

✓	1	Panasonic Viera TC-P42S30	630	78	● ● NA U ○ ● ● ● ●	60, 50, 46, 42
✓	2	Panasonic Viera TC-P42X3	500	73	● ● NA U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	50, 46, 42
✓	3	Panasonic Viera TC-P46X3	600	70	● ● NA U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	50, 46, 42
✓	4	LG 42PT350	500	69	● ● NA U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	50, 42
	5	Samsung PN43D450	500	66	● ● NA U ○ ○ ○ ● ● ●	51, 43
	6	Insignia NS-42P650A11	400	61	● ○ NA U ○ ○ ○ ● ● ●	50, 42
	7	Sanyo DP42740	400	60	● ● NA U ○ ○ ○ ● ● ●	50, 42

D 3D MODELS, 42- TO 60-INCH All have 1080p resolution except D15 and D16, which have 720p.

✓	1	Samsung PN59D7000	2,250	84	● ● ● U ○ ● ● ● ● ●	64, 59, 51
✓	2	Panasonic Viera TC-P55VT30	2,150	82	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	65, 55
✓	3	LG 50PZ550	900	82	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	60, 50
✓	4	Panasonic Viera TC-P50ST30	1,000	81	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	65, 60, 55, 50, 46, 42
✓	5	LG 60PZ950	2,000	80	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	60, 50
✓	6	Samsung PN51D8000	1,800	79	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	64, 59, 51
✓	7	Samsung PN51D6500	1,300	78	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	59, 51
✓	8	Panasonic Viera TC-P60GT30	2,000	77	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	65, 60, 55, 50
✓	9	LG 50PZ750	1,100	76	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	60, 50
✓	10	Samsung PN59D8000	2,300	75	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	64, 59, 51
✓	11	Panasonic Viera TC-P55GT30	1,600	75	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	65, 60, 55, 50
✓	12	Panasonic Viera TC-P60ST30	1,500	73	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	65, 60, 55, 50, 46, 42
✓	13	Samsung PN51D550	900	70	● ● ● U ○ ○ ○ ● ● ●	64, 59, 51
✓	14	Panasonic Viera TC-P42ST30	700	69	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	65, 60, 55, 50, 46, 42
✓	15	LG 42PW350	550	69	● ● ● U ○ ○ ● ● ● ●	50, 42
	16	Samsung PN43D490	550	62	○ ○ ● U ○ ○ ○ ● ● ●	51, 43

① U = unlimited. ② Requires optional wireless adapter. ③ Includes one pair of 3D glasses.

Reports

Pro-style ranges 44

Air cleaners 44

Toasters 45

Interior paints 46

Vacuums 49

Lab tests



A1 Apple



A2 Asus



B6 Toshiba

Light & lively laptops

If you want a computer to take on the road, you have more choices than ever this year. You'll find a growing number of small but capable laptops, including a new breed that Intel calls Ultrabooks.

Designed as the Windows counterpart to the Apple MacBook Air, Ultrabooks are super-lightweight and very thin, and they have a long battery life. Most cost about \$1,000, less than comparable MacBooks.

One example is the 13-inch **B6 Toshiba**, a CR Best Buy at \$800. At a featherweight 2.4 pounds, it's the lightest laptop in our Ratings, weighing less than most netbooks. Despite its size it doesn't skimp on performance. But if you do a lot of typing or have large fingers, beware: The small keyboard is cramped.

Other Ultrabooks in our Ratings include the 11-inch **A2 Asus**, \$1,000, and 13-inch **B3 Asus**, \$1,100. Both performed pretty much on a par with the MacBooks. The **B8 Acer** didn't do quite as well, but it was still judged to be very good overall.

This category of laptop is just getting off the ground. Expect to see many more Ultrabooks introduced in the coming months, possibly even models with larger 14- and 15-inch displays.

With some manufacturers cutting back or discontinuing the production of netbooks, as Dell recently did, Ultrabooks could become the go-to computer for users looking for highly portable models.

Select Ratings

Best choices from our tests of 18 models.

☒ CR Best Buy
☒ Recommended

● Excellent ● Very good ○ Good ● Fair ● Poor

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Specs			Test results				Features					
					Display size (in.)	Memory (GB)	Storage (GB)	Performance	Portability	Ergonomics	Versatility	Display	Battery life (hr.)	Weight (lb.)	DVD drive	Memory-card reader	Multi-touch touchpad
A 11-INCH																	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Apple MacBook Air 11-inch MC968LL/A 1 2	\$1,000	<div>76</div>	11.6	2	64	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	6¼	2.5		<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Asus Zenbook UX21E-DH52 Ultrabook 1	1,000	<div>66</div>	11.6	4	128	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	3¾	2.5		<div></div>	
B 13-INCH																	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Samsung NP900X3A-B01UB 1	1,100	<div>85</div>	13.3	4	128	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	8¼	2.9	<div></div>	<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Apple MacBook Air 13-inch MC965LL/A 1	1,300	<div>84</div>	13.3	4	128	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	9	2.9	<div></div>	<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Asus ZenBook UX31-RSL8 Ultrabook 1	1,100	<div>84</div>	13.3	4	128	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	7¼	3.1	<div></div>	<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Apple MacBook Pro 13-inch MC700LL/A 1	1,100	<div>75</div>	13.3	4	320	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	8½	4.5	<div></div>	<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	Apple MacBook Pro 13-inch MD313LL/A 1	1,200	<div>75</div>	13.3	4	500	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	8	4.5	<div></div>	<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	Toshiba Portégé Ultrabook Z835-P330 1	800	<div>73</div>	13.3	4	128	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	8¼	2.4	<div></div>	<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	Asus U36JC-B1 2	800	<div>72</div>	13.3	4	500	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	8½	3.8	<div></div>	<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8	Acer Aspire S3-951-6646 Ultrabook 1	900	<div>71</div>	13.3	4	320	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	6	3.0	<div></div>	<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9	Lenovo IdeaPad Z370 10252DU	700	<div>69</div>	13.3	6	500	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	6¼	4.7	<div></div>	<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	10	Asus U33JC-A1	660	<div>65</div>	13.3	4	500	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	8½	4.6	<div></div>	<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	11	Toshiba Satellite L735-S3210	440	<div>64</div>	13.3	4	500	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	5½	4.2	<div></div>	<div></div>	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	12	Lenovo IdeaPad U260-08763AU 1	750	<div>61</div>	12.5	4	320	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	<div></div>	5¼	3.0			

¹ Nonremovable battery. ² 1GB video memory.

Pro-style ranges

Beneath the shiny stainless-steel exteriors, powerful burners, and beefy grates of pro-style ranges are substantial differences. Many of the 20 we tested simmered superbly and baked evenly. But an unappetizing smorgasbord of pallid burgers, overcooked sauce, and burnt chocolate shows that some deliver less than their prices and looks suggest.

Among 36-inch models, the **A1 KitchenAid** dual-fuel range, \$6,000, offers impressive baking, broiling, simmering, and self-cleaning. The **A2 GE**, a \$7,500 dual-fuel model, was also superb at simmering and turned out evenly baked cakes. But that range wasn't as good at broiling and took longer to boil water than many models costing thousands less. Broiling was also so-so with the all-gas **A3 Thermador**, \$6,000.

Most of the 30-inch models were a step down in performance,

although a couple came close to making our recommended list. The dual-fuel **B1 Wolf**, \$5,200 was fine at baking, broiling, and simmering, but a smaller capacity and unimpressive self-cleaning kept it off our recommended list. The all-gas **B2 GE**, \$5,000, was better at simmering and has a larger oven, but broiling was only mediocre. At \$3,400, **B3 Kenmore** dual-fuel was a relative bargain, out-cooking similar style ranges costing thousands more.



A1 Kitchen Aid



A2 GE

Ratings

☒ Recommended

● Excellent ● Very good ○ Good ● Fair ● Poor

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Range type	Test results						
						Cooktop high	Cooktop low	Baking	Broiling	Oven capacity	Oven cleaning	High-power burners

A 36-INCH PROFESSIONAL All offer convection cooking.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	KitchenAid KDRU763V[SS] KDRU767VSS, KDRS467VSS, KDRS463VSS, KDRS462VSS	\$6,000	74	dual-fuel	●	●	●	●	●	●	3
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	GE Monogram ZDP364NDP[SS]	7,500	72	dual-fuel	○	●	●	○	●	●	4
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Thermador Pro Grand PG366B[S] Pro PG364GEBS, Pro PG364GLBS	6,000	69	gas	●	●	●	○	●	○	6
	4	Viking VGSC536-4G	7,200	66	gas	●	●	●	○	○	●	4
	5	Kenmore Pro 7962[7]	5,400	52	dual-fuel	●	○	○	○	●	●	2

B 30-INCH PROFESSIONAL All offer convection cooking.

	1	Wolf DF304	5,200	68	dual-fuel	○	●	●	●	○	●	3
	2	GE Monogram ZGP304NRSS	5,000	65	gas	○	●	●	○	●	○	1
	3	Kenmore Pro 7952[3]	3,400	65	dual-fuel	●	●	●	●	●	●	1
	4	Thermador Professional PG304B[S]	5,000	63	gas	●	●	○	●	●	○	4
	5	Jenn-Air JGRP430WP	3,800	62	gas	○	●	●	●	○	●	3
	6	DCS RGU-305*	3,700	62	gas	○	●	○	●	○	NA	5
	7	DCS RGTC305SS	4,700	58	gas	●	●	●	●	●	●	5
	8	Dacor Epicure ER30GSCS*	3,600	58	gas	○	●	○	○	○	NA	3
	9	Viking VDSC530[SS]	5,500	52	dual-fuel	○	●	○	●	●	○	4
	10	Dacor Epicure ER30D	5,300	51	dual-fuel	○	●	○	○	○	●	3
	11	Wolf R304*	4,000	44	gas	●	●	○	○	●	NA	4
	12	Fisher & Paykel OR30SNDGX1*	3,700	42	gas	●	●	●	●	●	NA	1
	13	American Range ARR304*	3,600	32	gas	●	●	○	●	●	NA	3
	14	BlueStar RNB304BSS*	3,700	31	gas	●	●	●	●	●	NA	3
	15	Bertazzoni A30 4GGV XE* Bertazzoni A30 4GGV XS	2,400	24	gas	○	●	●	○	○	NA	1

*Does not have self-clean feature.

The dirt on air purifiers

Concerned about your indoor air? That's exactly what some air-purifier makers are counting on. Even if no one in your household has asthma or allergies, manufacturers would like you to think that an air purifier will help you breathe easy. But some of the 40 models we've tested did little to rid a space of dust and smoke. And one, the **LightAir IonFlow 50F Surface**, \$300, did almost nothing.

This isn't the first time we've tested this air purifier. Back in 2010 we said, "With no fan to aid airflow, the LightAir IonFlow 50F was about as effective at removing dust and smoke in our tests as having no purifier at all." Our most recent tests found that time hasn't improved the unit's performance. It's still a Don't Buy: Performance Problem.

No air purifier alone will relieve asthma or allergy symptoms. That's why we suggest you first take basic steps that could be more effective—such as banning indoor smoking, banishing pets from bedrooms, and opening windows when possible. We also advise against using models that produce even small amounts of ozone, a respiratory irritant that can aggravate asthma, even if they are effective cleaners. You can get similar or better air cleaning using filter-based products, which don't produce any ozone. Two CR Best Buys, the **Whirlpool AP51030K**, \$300, and the **Hunter 30547**, \$260, were effective at removing dust and smoke even at the lower, quieter speeds you might want to use while snoozing or having a quiet conversation.

Whichever purifier you buy, be sure to follow the manufacturer's recommendations for how often you need to change or clean the filter.

Don't Buy: Performance Problem
LightAir IonFlow 50F Surface



WATCH OUR VIDEO

Using your smart phone, download the ShopSavvy or the RedLaser app, then scan the code at right.



Best toasters & toaster ovens

Price has little to do with toasting prowess, according to our latest tests of toasters and toaster ovens.

A1 Cuisinart, \$70, was only a shade better overall than the **A2 Hamilton Beach**, \$35. Both have bagel settings (which toast just one side of the bread) and shiny metal exteriors that are easy to clean. The Cuisinart has a countdown timer, which is nice if you're trying to make sure your toast won't be ready before your eggs are cooked. **A3 Magimix**, \$250, turns making toast into entertainment: Its thick clear glass sides let you watch your bread toasting. **A4 Breville**, \$130, **A8 Krups**, \$60, and **A12 Hamilton Beach**, \$30, are all fine whether you want just one slice of toast or multiple batches, but they weren't as great at providing a wide range of toast shades. **A6 DeLonghi**, \$75, and **A9 Cloer**, \$40, have warming racks. **A7 Proctor Silex**, \$15, doesn't skimp on toasting, though it has few extras and a white plastic exterior. **A11 Hamilton Beach**, \$25, comes with tongs to remove toast and a built-in slot to store them. Any of our four-slice toaster picks would please larger families or toast devotees who don't want to have to wait for seconds.

Toaster ovens do more

They can bake and broil a wide range of foods, but toaster ovens often leave stripes on one side of the bread. They also take longer to toast, though they often fit more slices. Both **Brevilles**, \$250 and \$180, are equally adept at toasting, baking, and broiling, but the toast-shade dial on the less-expensive Breville is a bit harder to use. Both fit a 4-pound chicken. The top-rated Breville also offers convection. But our tests have found that convection isn't as important in toaster ovens because improving airflow makes less of a difference because of the smaller capacity. **3 Hamilton Beach**, **4 Kenmore**, and **5 Cuisinart** were fine at toasting and broiling but weren't as good at baking as the other recommended models, and the Kenmore can't hold a 4-pound chicken. **6 Oster**, \$80, bakes better than toaster ovens that cost more, has a generous capacity, and broils very well. But you'll probably want to keep your toaster.



A3 Magimix

Select Ratings Toasters

Best choices from our tests of 37 models.

☒ CR Best Buy
☒ Recommended

● Excellent ● Very good ○ Good ● Fair ● Poor

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results					
					Color range	Full batch	One slice	Successive batches	Ease of use	Ease of cleaning
A TWO-SLICE TOASTERS										
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Cuisinart CPT-170	\$ 70	75	●	●	●	●	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Hamilton Beach Digital 22502	35	73	●	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Magimix Vision Toaster (Williams-Sonoma)	250	72	●	○	●	●	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Breville BTA820XL	130	72	○	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	KitchenAid KTT340	50	71	●	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	DeLonghi DTT720	75	70	●	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	Proctor Silex Cool-Touch 22203	15	70	●	●	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8	Krups TT6190	60	69	○	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9	Cloer 5053519	40	69	●	●	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	10	Cuisinart CPT-120	30	69	●	●	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	11	Hamilton Beach SmartToast 22323	25	68	●	●	●	●	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	12	Hamilton Beach SmartToast 22408	30	68	○	●	●	●	●	●

B FOUR-SLICE TOASTERS

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Cuisinart CPT-190	90	73	●	●	●	●	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Breville BTA840XL	180	72	●	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Hamilton Beach Digital 24502	55	71	●	●	●	●	●	●

Select Ratings Toaster ovens

Best choices from our tests of 24 models.

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results				
					Toasting	Baking	Broiling	Ease of use	Ease of cleaning
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Breville Smart Oven BOV800XL	\$250	73	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Breville BOV650XL	180	69	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Hamilton Beach 31230	100	67	●	○	●	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Kenmore Elite 126401	95	66	●	○	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	Cuisinart TOB-195	180	63	●	○	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	Oster TSSTTVMNDG	80	62	○	●	●	○	○



1 Breville



3 Hamilton Beach



THE RUB Tester Li Wang checks the gloss-change results that helped put Benjamin Moore on top.

Interior paint

A new winner tops our tests

IT'S OFFICIAL: Benjamin Moore beats Behr by a nose as our top-performing interior paint in two of our three major categories. But when it comes to value, Behr remains several lengths ahead.

Benjamin Moore's Aura Satin and new Regal Select Semi-Gloss are front-runners in part because our tests show that they're better than earlier products at maintaining their gloss after cleaning. Both also leave a smoother finish and stand up better to scrubbing. But at \$50 per gallon even the less-pricey semigloss costs almost \$20 more than the Behr paints, which performed almost as well.

▶ DID YOU KNOW?

Some gallons run short

Gallon cans of white paint can also act as bases for other colors and might be several ounces shy to leave room for the tints. The label will tell you. But even if it is—and you're leaving it white—a good paint will more than make up for those missing ounces.

Paints that require less work and have fewer toxins are a bonus this year, as are more top choices for less than \$30 per gallon. But our tests of almost 60 paints show that some low-priced lines trail the pack in performance. Here are the details:

Low VOCs become the norm. Volatile organic compounds (VOCs) are linked to air pollution and respiratory problems. All of our top paints—and all but three in our Ratings—are now claimed to meet even the toughest, southern California limits of 50 grams per liter or less. More of the best we tested have zero-VOC claims as manufacturers get better at making greener paints perform. Benjamin Moore, Olympic paints from Lowe's, and Valspar also specify zero VOCs for the tints used in their paints; Behr offers low-VOC colorants.

More paints save you some hassle. The ability to hide the old finish with one coat continues to top shoppers' wish lists, which is why we weight this attribute most heavily in our tests. Eleven of our top 24 picks are also made to go on over

old finishes or even bare wood and wall-board without the usual prime coat.

Some paints have hidden costs. You can buy a gallon of Color Place at Walmart for as little as \$8. But so-so results put all three versions of the Glidden-made paints at the bottom of our Ratings. And because many inexpensive paints require more coats for hiding, you might have to buy more than you bargained for. Two better low-priced bets: Glidden's Premium Flat, \$19 per gallon, and Satin, \$23 per gallon, plus our other CR Best Buys.

How to choose

Start by matching the sheen to the area. Low-luster satin and eggshell paints are ideal for most surfaces because the best blend easy hiding and durability. Flat paints are better at hiding flaws, though less stain resistance makes most a dubious choice for kitchens and other busy rooms. Consider semigloss paints for trim and other spots you'll wipe infrequently because most dull after repeated or vigorous cleaning. Here's what else to remember:

Get extra savings. Doing many rooms with the same color? You'll cut costs roughly in half by getting a five-gallon can rather than five one-gallon cans. A free calculator from the Dow Paint Quality Institute, an industry group, can help you avoid buying more than you need. (Go to www.paintquality.com/homeowners and click on Paint Tools, then Paint Calculator.) You can also save by wrapping brushes and rollers tightly in plastic wrap so that you can reuse them over several days without cleaning them.

Don't assume greener is better. Our Ratings include many subpar low- and no-VOC paints along with those that made our winners' circle. You'll also find a growing array of green logos, though some of those certifications are self-awarded. (See "Behind the Green Labels," on page 48.)

Don't buy strictly by brand. Even within a brand, performance often varies widely among finishes and lines. Some paints we tested have since been reformulated as manufacturers tweak their ingredients to cut costs, reduce VOCs, and improve performance. Two of them are Valspar's Ultra Premium and Signature Colors lines, sold at Lowe's. Valspar says the newer versions provide better hiding and a smoother finish. But our tests on satin versions show only slight improvements in both areas. We'll give you a full update in a future issue.

Overview

Our latest tests show that the best interior paints hide with as little as one coat. And like most, they claim to have low or no VOCs. Below, we highlight top performing products that have notable strengths, value, or both.

✓ CR Best Buy

These offer the best blend of performance and low price. All are recommended.

✓ Recommended

These high-scoring paints did well overall in our tough performance tests.

Best for most; less work, low VOCs:

A1 Benjamin Moore \$66

A2 Behr \$33

B1 Behr \$31

C1 Benjamin Moore \$50

C2 Behr \$34

All five topped our Ratings overall and combine impressive hiding with other strengths. They're also claimed to eliminate the usual primer coat. Paying more for the Benjamin Moore products buys better resistance to gloss change after cleaning and, for C1, a smoother finish. A2 and C2 were better at resisting sticking—a plus for windows.

Almost as good for less:

A3 Kilz \$27 CR Best Buy

A4 Glidden \$23 CR Best Buy

A5 Behr \$25 CR Best Buy

B3 Behr \$20 CR Best Buy

B5 Glidden \$19 CR Best Buy

C4 Royal Interiors \$28 CR Best Buy

Among low-luster paints, choose A3 for its hiding, A4 for its resistance to gloss change, or A5 for its smoothness. Among flats, B3 is better for stains and scrubbing, B5 for smoothness. Among semigloss, choose C4 for its well-balanced performance.

For sunny areas:

A6 Benjamin Moore \$50

B4 Benjamin Moore \$55

B6 Valspar \$31

C5 Glidden \$27 CR Best Buy

Among low-luster paints, A6 is best at blending fade resistance with other strengths, just as C5 is for semigloss. For flats, B4 offers better scrubbing and sticking resistance, B6 a smoother finish for less.

▶ WATCH OUR VIDEO

Using your smart phone, download the ShopSavvy or the RedLaser app, then scan the code at right.



A3 Kilz



B1 Behr



B2 Benjamin Moore



C1 Benjamin Moore

Ratings Interior paints

In performance order, within types. (Types designated A, B, etc.)

● Excellent
● Very good
○ Good
○ Fair
● Poor

	Product	Price (per gal.)	Overall score	Test results								VOCs
Recommendation	Rank			Hiding	Stains	Gloss change	Scrubbing	Smoothness	Resists mildew	Resists sticking	Resists fading	Claimed (grams/liter)

A SATIN AND EGGSHELL Balanced strengths make these best for most areas.

✓	1	Benjamin Moore Aura Satin [1] [3] [4]	\$66	85	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	50
✓	2	Behr Premium Plus Ultra Satin Enamel (Home Depot) [1]	33	84	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	50
✓	3	Kilz Casual Colors Satin	27	82	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	50
✓	4	Glidden Premium Satin (Home Depot)	23	80	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	50
✓	5	Behr Premium Plus Satin Enamel (Home Depot)	25	78	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	50
✓	6	Benjamin Moore Regal Select Eggshell [1] [2] [4]	50	75	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	50
✓	7	Royal Interiors by ACE Satin	27	74	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	50
✓	8	Valspar + Satin (Lowe's) [3]	42	74	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	0
	9	Benjamin Moore Natura Eggshell [2]	55	72	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	0
	10	Pittsburgh Paints Manor Hall Timeless Eggshell Plus	57	72	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	45
	11	Olympic Premium Satin (Lowe's)	24	72	○	●	●	●	○	●	●	0
	12	Valspar Signature Colors Satin (Lowe's) [1] [2] [4]	33	72	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	50
	13	Glidden Brilliance Satin (Walmart) [1]	27	71	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	0
	14	Olympic One Satin (Lowe's) [1] [3]	26	71	○	●	●	●	○	●	●	50
	15	Valspar Ultra Premium Satin (Lowe's) [4]	27	70	●	●	○	●	○	●	●	50
	16	Better Homes and Gardens Satin (Walmart)	22	69	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	0
	17	Dutch Boy Refresh Satin [2]	25	64	●	○	○	●	○	●	●	0
	18	Sherwin-Williams Duration Home Satin [1]	49	60	○	○	●	●	○	●	●	42
	19	Color Place Satin (Walmart) [2]	14	57	○	●	○	●	○	●	●	50

B FLAT AND MATTE Best for low-traffic areas and hiding imperfections.

✓	1	Behr Premium Plus Ultra Flat (Home Depot) [1]	31	82	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	50
✓	2	Benjamin Moore Aura Matte [1]	66	77	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	50
✓	3	Behr Premium Plus Flat Enamel (Home Depot)	20	76	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	50
✓	4	Benjamin Moore Natura Flat	55	75	●	●	●	●	○	●	●	0
✓	5	Glidden Premium Flat (Home Depot)	19	73	●	○	●	○	●	●	●	50
✓	6	Valspar Signature Colors Matte (Lowe's) [1] [4]	31	72	●	●	●	●	●	●	●	50
	7	Valspar + Flat (Lowe's)	40	70	●	●	○	●	○	●	●	0
	8	Benjamin Moore Regal Select Flat [1] [4]	50	68	●	○	○	●	○	●	●	50
	9	Olympic One Flat (Lowe's) [1]	25	66	○	●	○	●	○	●	●	50
	10	Pittsburgh Paints Manor Hall Timeless Matte	56	66	○	○	●	○	○	●	●	47
	11	Kilz Casual Colors Flat	24	63	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	50

Ratings continued on next page.

Ratings Interior paints

✓ CR Best Buy
✓ Recommended

● Excellent ● Very good ○ Good ● Fair ● Poor

	Product	Price (per gal.)	Overall score	Test results								VOCs
Recommendation	Rank			Hiding	Stains	Gloss change	Scrubbing	Smoothness	Resists mildew	Resists sticking	Resists fading	Claimed (grams/liter)
			0 100									
			P F G V G E									

B FLAT AND MATTE continued

12	Sears Easy Living Ultra Flat	\$29	63	●	●	●	○	○				53
13	TrueValue Easy Care Ultra Premium Flat ^[4]	23	63	●	○	○	●	●	●	●		50
14	Royal Interiors by Ace Flat	24	60	○	●	○	○	○	●	●		100
15	Sherwin-Williams Duration Home	37	60	●	●	○	○	○		●		41
16	Olympic Premium Flat (Lowe's)	19	58	●	●	○	○	○		●		0
17	Better Homes and Gardens Flat (Walmart)	17	58	○	○	○	○	○				0
18	Glidden Brilliance Flat (Walmart) ^[1]	25	57	○	○	○	○	○				0
19	Color Place Flat (Walmart)	8	56	●	●	●	○	○		●		50

C SEMIGLOSS Best for trim, doors, shelves, and other areas that are infrequently wiped.

✓ 1	Benjamin Moore Regal Select Semi-Gloss ^[1] [4]	50	81	●	●	○	○	○	●			50
✓ 2	Behr Premium Plus Ultra Semi-Gloss (Home Depot) ^[1]	34	81	●	●	○	○	○	●	●		50
✓ 3	Benjamin Moore Aura Semi-Gloss ^[1]	66	80	●	●	○	○	○	●			50
✓ 4	Royal Interiors by ACE Semi-Gloss	28	77	●	●	○	○	○	●			50
✓ 5	Glidden Brilliance Semi-Gloss (Walmart) ^[1]	27	77	●	●	○	○	○		●		0
✓ 6	Behr Premium Plus Semi-Gloss Enamel (Home Depot)	25	76	●	●	○	○	○	●	●		50
✓ 7	Glidden Premium Semi-Gloss (Home Depot)	24	76	●	●	○	○	○	●	●		50
✓ 8	Better Homes and Gardens Semi-Gloss (Walmart)	23	76	●	●	○	○	○			●	0
✓ 9	Benjamin Moore Natura Semi-Gloss ^[4]	55	75	●	●	○	○	○	●			0
✓ 10	Olympic One Semi-Gloss (Lowe's) ^[1]	27	75	●	●	○	○	○	●			50
11	Kilz Casual Colors Semi-Gloss	28	72	●	●	○	○	○	●			50
12	Valspar Ultra Premium Semi-Gloss (Lowe's) ^[4]	29	71	○	●	○	○	○	●	●		50
13	Olympic Premium Semi-Gloss (Lowe's)	24	70	●	●	○	○	○		●		0
14	Valspar + Semi-Gloss (Lowe's)	43	69	●	●	○	○	○				0
15	Valspar Signature Colors Semi-Gloss (Lowe's) ^[1] [4]	34	68	●	●	○	○	○	●	●	●	50
16	True Value Easy Care Ultra Premium Semi-Gloss ^[4]	29	68	○	●	○	○	○	●	●		50
17	Pittsburgh Paints Manor Hall Timeless Semi-Gloss	58	66	●	●	○	○	○		●		46
18	Sherwin-Williams Duration Home Semi-Gloss ^[1]	51	62	○	●	○	○	○	●	●		40
19	Color Place Semi-Gloss (Walmart)	15	57	○	●	○	○	○	●			50

^[1] Self-priming. ^[2] Flatter than labeled. ^[3] Glossier than labeled. ^[4] Manufacturer claims paint has been reformulated since our last tests.

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is mainly hiding, surface smoothness, resistance to staining, scrubbing, gloss change, sticking, mildew, and fading. Volatile organic compounds aren't scored. Most results reflect white, pastel, and medium-tint bases. **Hiding** is coverage of contrasting color with one and two coats (one-coat hiding weighted heaviest). **Staining** is resistance to greasy stains. **Gloss change**

is change after cleaning. **Scrubbing** is ability to resist abrasive cleaner.

Smoothness is absence of roller marks when dry. **Mildew** is inhibition of mildew growth. **Sticking** is resistance to tackiness when dry. **Fading** is resistance to lightening under UV light. **Claimed VOCs**, which are per manufacturer, are maximum grams per liter for untinted base. **Price** is approximate retail per gallon.

Behind the green labels

A new Asthma & Allergy Friendly certification is among the green logos you'll find. Here's what the labels mean:

Asthma & Allergy Friendly

This one comes from the Asthma and Allergy Foundation of America. The foundation measures VOCs emitted during application and prohibits certain harmful chemicals. Companies pay \$7,500 or more to have paints tested and use the logo. Among tested paints, Valspar + has it.



Greenguard

This group allows only trace levels of VOCs, including formaldehyde and styrene. Manufacturers measure emissions from drying paint and pay \$3,000 or more to Greenguard for testing and to use the logo.



Green Seal

This group limits VOCs, bars certain other hazardous substances, and assesses performance. Companies pay \$2,500 to \$9,500 to have paints evaluated and use the Green Seal logo.



Green Wise

This certification limits VOCs and odors and prohibits certain chemicals. As part of their membership fee, companies have products tested by the Coatings Research Group, an industry organization. Three Royal Interiors by Ace paints we tested have it.



GreenSure

This one was created by Sherwin-Williams, is self-regulated, and covers only the company's products. Paints must have VOCs of 50 grams per liter or less and be free of certain other chemical substances and meet durability requirements. Sherwin-Williams Duration has it but scored low in our tests.



Green Promise

This is from Benjamin Moore and covers its products. It requires VOCs of 50 grams per liter or less and zero-VOC colorant. The high-scoring Aura, Natura, and Regal Select have it.



Vacuums

9 picks are under \$200

STELLAR SCORES IN our latest brand-repair survey and stout metal parts instead of the usual plastic could make the \$1,350 Kirby Sentria upright the closest thing to a lifetime vacuum. But our latest tests of 100 models show that you can get top performance without the heirloom price.

Hoover's WindTunnel T-Series UH30300, \$140, and Pet UH30310, \$150, are two additions to a long list of picks that include models priced at \$200 or less. Both bagged uprights whisked away embedded grit and pet hair. We also found top bagless uprights for as little as \$50.

Prefer a canister? Kenmore's new Progressive 21614, \$300, is among the lower-priced bagged models that ranked high in our Ratings. The months we spent vacuuming carpets and floors and measuring the airflow critical for tools also showed us that some lighter new models are lightweight at cleaning. Here are the details:

Promises trump performance. "Never loses suction" is the claim for Eureka's \$80 bagless Endeavor NLS 5400A upright. Suction for tools was strong. But that low-priced vacuum was dead-last at the carpet cleaning that comes first in most homes. Electrolux boasts that more than 50 percent of the plastic in its JetMaxx Green EL4040 canister, \$400, is recycled. But carpet cleaning and airflow were so-so.

Forever could be short. Oreck touts a limited lifetime warranty for its Forever Series uprights, the \$600 Edge and Pilot. It also says its motors should last at least

25 years. But like most warranties, it covers only defects, which usually show up in the first couple of years. And while those models did well at cleaning and were easy to handle, the Edge includes only a light-duty crevice tool, and the Pilot does not accept tools.

When light means lite. Two other new bagged uprights from Oreck—the Graphite, \$350, and XL Element Professional Series, \$200—weigh under 12 pounds but offer mediocre carpet cleaning. Dyson's DC26 City Multi Floor canister, \$400, is similarly wispy. But airflow, a selling point for other Dysons, was poor. And like

the brand's larger and heavier DC23 Turbinehead canister, this one was subpar at carpet cleaning.

How to choose

Start by choosing a type. Uprights do better overall on carpets, while canisters are easier to maneuver, especially on stairs. Here's what else to consider:

Check the features. Major ones are a brush on/off switch to safeguard bare floors and prevent scattered debris, and a motorized brush, rather than suction alone. Manual pile-height adjustment is also a plus, as is suction control for drapes and edge tools for corners.

Consider bagless carefully. Bagless vacs save you the cost of bags but still require filters. And the dust and mess of emptying their bins is a concern if you have asthma or allergies.

Try it out. Even if you order your vacuum online, go to a store first. Push, pull, turn, and lift models you're considering. Check out the controls and features; for example, using tools with the Kirby means removing the powerhead, rather than simply attaching a hose. And ask whether the store is willing to match the lowest price you find in your online search.



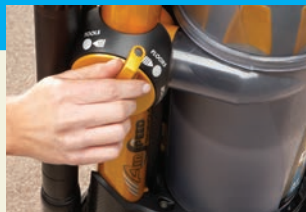
PRICES HIGH AND LOW Kirby's \$1,350 Sentria (left) and Hoover's new \$150 WindTunnel T-Series Pet are top picks. But Kirby did significantly better in our latest brand-repair survey.

Lower price, more work

Even capable vacs can bring some sacrifices at the low end of the price spectrum. Here are two examples:

MORE STOOPING

A low-mounted dial—rather than a foot pedal—requires bending to adjust the powerhead to the carpet on Hoover's new \$140 WindTunnel T-Series UH30300.



AN EXTRA STEP To move from floor cleaning to using tools, Eureka's AirSpeed ASI000A, \$120, requires turning a dial before removing the hose and nozzle.



A1 Hoover

C1 Kenmore

Overview

Vacuums that scored highest did well in our carpet, floor, and airflow tests. Among those picks, we focus below on models with notable strengths, value, or both.

✓ CR Best Buy

These deliver the best blend of performance and price. All are recommended.

✓ Recommended

These models are fine performers and stand out for the reasons below.

Best uprights for most:

A1 Hoover \$230

A2 Miele \$475

A6 Hoover \$100 **CR Best Buy**

A7 Hoover \$180 **CR Best Buy**

A12 Eureka \$160 **CR Best Buy**

A1 is self-propelled but noisy; **A2** is quieter and better on pet hair. Choose **A6** for its carpet cleaning and handling, **A7** for its brush on/off switch. **A12** is also a high-value choice.

If you want a bagless upright:

B1 Hoover \$130 **CR Best Buy**

B4 Eureka \$120 **CR Best Buy**

B8 Bissell \$100 **CR Best Buy**

B9 Dirt Devil \$50 **CR Best Buy**

All are fine picks for pet owners. **B1** offers the most performance for the price. **B4** and **B8** are similar in performance, features, and weight. **B9** is especially light but loud and lacks manual pile-height adjustment.

Best canisters for most:

C1 Kenmore \$550

C4 Kenmore \$300 **CR Best Buy**

C7 Panasonic \$250 **CR Best Buy**

All have BAGS AND DID WELL ON CARPETS. **C1** offers superior airflow and quietness with top pet-hair pickup. **C4** performs almost as well for less. Paying even less for **C7** sacrifices some bare-floor and pet-hair performance.

If you want a bagless canister:

D1 LG \$400

D2 Hoover \$400

Quieter running and better airflow for tools put **D1** at the top of this list. But **D2** is the obvious choice for pet owners.

Ratings Upright vacuums

In performance order, within types. (Types designated A and B.)

		Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Weight (lb.)	Test results							
Recommendation	Rank	Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model.		0100 P F G V G E		Carpet	Bare floors	Tool airflow	Noise	Emissions	Handling	Ease of use	Pet hair

A BAGGED These tend to be best for cleaning carpets.

✓	1	Hoover WindTunnel Anniversary Edition U6485-900 UH50000 [1]	\$ 230	73	21	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	●
✓	2	Miele S 7210 Twist	475	72	22	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	●
✓	3	Kirby Sentria [1]	1,350	72	23	●	●	●	●	●	●	○	●
✓	4	Kenmore Intuition 31100	260	72	21	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	●
✓	5	Miele S 7260 Cat & Dog	715	71	22	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	●
✓	6	Hoover Tempo Widepath U5140-900 [2]	100	71	16	●	●	●	○	●	●	○	●
✓	7	Hoover WindTunnel Max UH30600	180	71	17	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	●
✓	8	Hoover Platinum Bagged UH30010COM [2] [3]	300	70	13	●	●	NA	○	●	●	○	●
✓	9	Kenmore Intuition 31810	270	69	21	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	●
✓	10	Miele S 7580 Bolero Swing	880	69	22	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	●
✓	11	Miele S 7280 Jazz Salsa	600	68	22	●	●	○	●	●	○	○	●
✓	12	Eureka Boss Smart Vac 4870 []	160	67	20	●	●	○	○	●	●	○	●
✓	13	Sebo Felix Premium	600	66	16	●	●	○	○	●	●	○	●
✓	14	Hoover WindTunnel T-Series Pet UH30310	150	65	17	●	●	●	○	●	●	○	●
✓	15	Hoover WindTunnel T-Series UH30300 T-Series	140	65	16	●	●	●	○	●	●	○	●
	16	Panasonic MC-UG471 [2]	150	63	17	○	●	●	○	●	○	○	●
	17	Eureka AirSpeed ABS AS1050A (Walmart) [2]	130	60	18	●	●	○	●	●	○	○	●
	18	Riccar Supralite RSL4 Simplicity Freedom F3600 [2] [4]	470	59	9	●	●	NA	●	●	○	○	●
	19	Riccar Supralite RSL3 Simplicity Freedom F3500 [2] [4]	350	59	9	●	●	NA	●	●	○	○	●
	20	Riccar Brilliance Premium Simplicity Synchrony Premium	900	59	20	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	●
	21	Oreck Forever Series Edge [2]	600	58	16	●	●	●	●	●	○	○	●
	22	Oreck Forever Series Pilot [2] [4]	600	57	12	●	●	NA	○	●	●	○	●
	23	Kenmore Progressive Glide 30100 [4]	100	51	13	●	●	NA	○	●	●	○	●
	24	Lindhaus Diamante 380	900	49	19	○	●	●	○	●	○	○	●
	25	Dirt Devil Featherlite Bagged M085590 [2]	50	49	14	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
	26	Oreck Graphite	350	47	11	○	●	NA	●	○	○	○	○
	27	Oreck XL Element Professional Series	200	47	10	○	●	NA	●	○	○	○	○
	28	Sebo automatic X5	700	47	19	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
	29	Aerus FreshEra [2] [4]	500	44	11	○	○	NA	●	○	○	○	○
	30	Royal Eminence MRV9750	600	43	20	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	31	Cirrus Performance Pet CR99	500	40	22	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	32	Koblenz U610 [2] [4]	300	30	19	○	○	NA	○	○	○	○	○

B BAGLESS These trade a bag for a bin but are messier to empty.

✓	1	Hoover WindTunnel T-Series Rewind Bagless UH70120 UH70110 [2]	130	69	18	●	●	●	○	●	○	○	●
✓	2	LG Kompressor Total Care LuV400T	550	67	22	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	●
✓	3	Dyson DC28 Animal	650	67	21	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	●
✓	4	Eureka AirSpeed AS1000A AS1001A, AS1002A (Target) [2]	120	65	18	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	●
✓	5	LG Kompressor LuV300B	400	65	22	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	●
✓	6	Hoover Platinum Bagless UH70015	270	65	22	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	●
✓	7	LG Kompressor LuV200R	300	64	23	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	●
✓	8	Bissell CleanView Helix Deluxe 71V9 71V9-2 (Lowe's) [2]	100	64	16	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	●

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Weight (lb.)	Test results							
						Carpet	Bare floors	Tool airflow	Noise	Emissions	Handling	Ease of use	Pet hair
				0 100									
				P F G V E									

B BAGLESS continued

✓	9	Dirt Devil Featherlite Bagless M085845 (Target) [2]	\$ 50	63	13	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	●
	10	Shark Navigator Lift Away NV352 NV350, NV351 (Walmart)	200	62	14	●	●	○	○	●	●	●	●
	11	Shark Navigator Professional Lift Away NV356E	200	61	16	●	●	○	○	●	●	●	●
	12	Hoover WindTunnel Pet Rewind UH70210	160	61	19	○	●	○	○	●	○	●	○
	13	Hoover WindTunnel T-Series Purely Clean UH70202	130	61	19	○	●	○	○	●	○	●	○
	14	Bissell Momentum 82G71 [2]	100	60	18	●	●	○	○	●	○	○	○
	15	Kenmore Intuition 31040	250	60	23	●	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	16	Hoover WindTunnel Rewind Plus UH70205	150	59	19	○	○	○	○	●	○	○	○
	17	Panasonic MC-UL915	230	59	21	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	18	Hoover WindTunnel Max UH70600	220	57	20	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	19	Shark Navigator NV22L	150	57	16	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	20	Bissell Pet Hair Eraser 87B4 87B4-2 (Lowe's), 87B4-3 (Best Buy) [2]	150	57	21	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	21	Electrolux Nimble EL8602 [] EL8605 [] (Lowe's)	300	57	19	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	22	Bissell PowerClean 16N5-9	220	55	22	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	23	Bissell Healthy Home 16N5-F	200	55	22	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	24	Eureka Whirlwind+ Pet Lover 3276 [] [2]	100	55	20	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	25	Bissell POWERgroom 92L3W [2]	100	55	18	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	26	Dyson DC25 Ball Multi floor	550	54	16	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	27	LG Kompressor LuV250C	250	54	17	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	28	Hoover WindTunnel Pet Cyclonic UH70085	200	52	23	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	29	Electrolux Versatility EL8505 EL8502	270	52	24	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	30	Bissell Lift-Off Multi-Cyclonic Pet 89Q9 89Q9-4 (Kohl's), 89Q9-6 (Bed Bath & Beyond), 1826 (Target)	180	51	22	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	31	Hoover WindTunnel Air UH70400	180	50	13	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	32	Bissell ProLite Multi Cyclonic 17G5 17G5-2 (Lowe's)	150	49	17	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	33	Dyson DC24 Ball Multi floor	430	44	12	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	34	Hoover WindTunnel Pet Rewind Plus UH70086	165	40	23	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	35	Eureka Endeavor NLS 5400A (Walmart) [2]	80	33	16	○	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

Select Ratings Canister vacuums

Best choices from our tests of 33 models.

C BAGGED These tend to do better with tools than uprights and are more stable on stairs.

✓	1	Kenmore Intuition 28014	\$550	72	26	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
✓	2	Kenmore Progressive 21714	400	72	24	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
✓	3	Miele S 5281 Callisto	990	71	24	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
✓	4	Kenmore Progressive 21614	300	70	23	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
✓	5	Kenmore Progressive 21514	250	69	23	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
✓	6	Hoover WindTunnel S3670	300	68	24	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
✓	7	Panasonic MC-CG902	250	65	23	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○

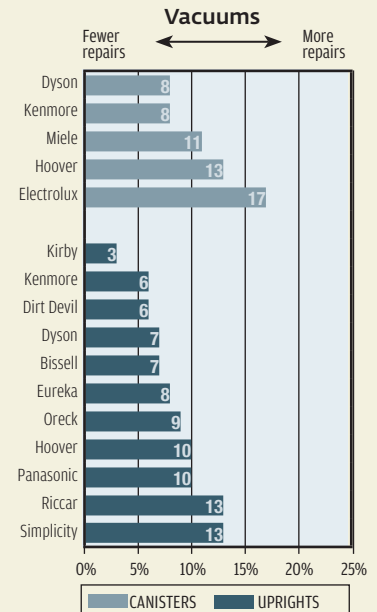
D BAGLESS These trade a bag for a bin but are messier to empty.

✓	1	LG Kompressor LcV900B	400	69	23	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
✓	2	Hoover Platinum Bagless Canister S3865	400	65	27	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	○

[1] Self-propelled. [2] Lacks brush on/off. [3] Comes with mini canister. [4] Doesn't accept tools.

Most and least reliable

Kirby was among the least repair-prone brands of upright vacuums, and Riccar and Simplicity were among the more repair-prone. In canister brands, Dyson and Kenmore were among the least repair-prone, and Electrolux was the most repair-prone. That's what we found when we asked almost 96,000 readers who bought a vacuum between 2007 and 2011 about their experiences. The graph shows the percentage of models for each brand that were repaired or had a serious problem. Differences of fewer than 4 points aren't meaningful, and we've adjusted the data to eliminate differences linked solely to age and usage. Models within a brand might vary, and design or manufacture changes might affect future reliability. Still, choosing a brand with a good repair history can improve your odds of getting a reliable model.



Source: Annual Product Reliability Survey, Consumer Reports National Research Center.

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is mainly cleaning, airflow, handling, noise, and emissions; scores for previously tested models may have changed. **Carpet** is ability to lift embedded talc and sand from medium pile. **Bare floors** is vacuuming sand without dispersing. **Tool airflow** is through hose with increasing amounts of dust-simulating wood flour. **Noise** reflects decibel-meter results; Poor scores mandate hearing protection. **Emissions** is release of small particles with motor on. **Handling** is ease of pushing, pulling, and carrying. **Pet hair** uses long cat fur on medium-pile carpet. **Weight** is vacuum and onboard tools. **Price** is approximate retail.

The New Rules of Car Buying

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The New Car Price Service breaks down the negotiating process into a few simple rules:

RULE #1: BREAK THE DEALER'S CODE.

When you walk into a car showroom, you'll see two prices:

1. The *Manufacturer's Suggested Retail Price (MSRP)*
2. The *Dealer Invoice Price*. Naturally, most people think it is wise to negotiate down from the *MSRP* to as close to the *Dealer Invoice*

Price as you can get. And that's exactly what the dealer wants you to think – but it won't get you the best deal. The reason:

Both the *MSRP* and the *Dealer Invoice Price* are "artificial" numbers created by the car manufacturer and dealer to serve their negotiating purposes.

Neither price should be used by you as a starting point in your negotiation.

What you need is the **real price** the dealer paid for the car.

If you know the real price, you'll have true negotiating power because you'll know how much



New-car buyers who use *The New Car Price Service* save an average of \$1,661.

"wiggle" room you really have. You should bargain up from this real price.

Naturally, dealers don't display this real price in the showroom. To obtain the real price for any car you're interested in buying, call *The New Car Price Service* at 1-800-279-5658.

RULE #2: FIND OUT ABOUT UNADVERTISED DEALER INCENTIVES AND HOLDBACKS.

These are tools the dealer uses to negotiate to his favor. You should know about them so you can use them to negotiate to your favor.

Take "dealer holdbacks," for example. A holdback is a percentage that is repaid to the dealer by the manufacturer. The holdback is designed to supplement the dealer's cash flow (code words for sales commissions) by artificially elevating the dealership's paper cost. If you know the dealer's holdback, you can use that information as a negotiating tool to lower your price. To learn how to use these powerful negotiating tools, call *The New Car Price Service*: 1-800-279-5658.

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The Consumer Reports New Car Price Service takes you step by step through the negotiating game with professional new-car buying advice. And when it comes to options and safety equipment, you'll know what's really worth your money versus "dealer extras" that do nothing except cost you "extra" money.

For example: The dealership's "business manager" may try to sell you undercoating, rustproofing, fabric protection, extended warranty, windshield etching, etc. But don't bite. Such add-ons are generally worthless or overpriced.

RULE #4: IF YOU HAVE A TRADE IN.

Don't even mention it until you've agreed on the price of your new car. But when it's time to talk trade-in, you should know what your trade-in is worth whether you sell it privately or to a dealership. You can get that information from us too and it costs just an additional \$12.

THE NEW CAR PRICE SERVICE

The New Car Price Service costs \$14 and can save you thousands of dollars on a new car. The service gives you a complete report on the car you are interested in purchasing. The report is an organized plan and advice on playing the game. While the average savings is \$1,661, the potential savings is far greater, depending on the model of car. For example, the potential savings on the Jeep Liberty is \$4,908. The phone call is free: 1-800-279-5658

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Shine up your hazy headlights

AS PEOPLE KEEP their cars longer, oxidation of commonly used plastic headlight lenses is an increasing problem for drivers. Oxidation creates a haze that's not only unsightly but also can significantly reduce headlight illumination, creating a safety hazard. And because hazing occurs over time, drivers might not notice the creeping danger. Hazing can also be more prevalent on vehicles with higher levels of UV exposure.

Replacing the lenses or having them professionally cleaned are options but can cost \$200. For a fraction of that, you can use a headlight lens cleaning kit.

We recently sampled four kits, all costing \$21 or less, on several older cars. All the kits remove the cloudy surface of plastic lenses by using abrasives. Three then polish the lenses back to a smoother finish, while a fourth skips directly to the sealant stage to finish the lens. Two other kits also use a sealant. All can be purchased either online or at auto parts and department stores.

We evaluated each kit for effectiveness and ease of use. We used a light meter to measure output from the headlights before and after using each of the products. Then we retested light output from the

headlights eight weeks later to see how well the cleanings held up over time. We also noted the difficulty, number of steps, and time required to use each product. Our results varied, but we found that even the poorest performer in our group can dramatically improve light output on badly weathered lenses. You have to do a thorough job, though, for the best results.

A small percentage of lenses have a hard protective coating that must be sanded off before refinishing takes place. One kit, by Sylvania, was able to remove the hard coating with the supplied materials, but the others required us to buy 400-grit emery paper.

Most kits involve several steps for cleaning, as much as an hour for both lenses. One kit, the 3M Headlight Lens Restoration System, also requires the use of an electric drill and sanding discs, but a slip-up during that step could cause scratching of your car's paint.

Bottom line. The Sylvania Headlight Restoration Kit provided the best and longest-lasting results. The 3M kit, though trickier to use, provides similar performance at a lower price. The Turtle Wax kit costs less than half the cost of the top-performing Sylvania. But neither the Turtle Wax nor the Fast Brite, a kit marketed through infomercials, held up as well as the other two.

What we tested



BEFORE AND AFTER The Sylvania Headlight Restoration Kit did the best job.

Listed in performance order.

Product	Price	Comments
Sylvania Headlight Restoration Kit	\$21	Six steps. Most improvement with no degradation over three months.
3M Headlight Lens Restoration System 29008	15	Four steps. Great improvement with no degradation. Requires an electric drill.
Turtle Wax Headlight Lens Restorer	9	Six steps. Great improvement but sealant wore away within two months.
Fast Brite Auto Headlight Restorer Kit	17	Two steps. Easiest to use, least improvement. Sealant wore off within two months.



Sylvania Headlight Restoration Kit

▶ WATCH OUR VIDEO

Using your smart phone, download the ShopSavvy or the RedLaser app, then scan the code at right.



Toyota Prius V

A mix of economy and utility that works

THE NEW PRIUS V wagon might look similar to the familiar Prius hatchback, but it has been stretched in all dimensions to provide notably more cargo space and a roomier rear seat. And despite its larger size, the efficient gas-electric hybrid powertrain gets an excellent 41 mpg overall, only 3 mpg less than the hatchback. That combination gives the Prius V a blend of versatility and fuel economy that no other vehicle can match.

But the engine sometimes feels overworked, and the steering offers little feedback. Still, the V's overall road-test score of 80 places it among our top-scoring wagons. Based on the hatchback's record, the V is likely to have above-average reliability.

Ride, handling, and drivetrain

Overall, the Prius V delivers the best fuel economy in its class. We measured 33 mpg in city conditions and 47 on the highway. Acceleration from the 134-hp, 1.8-liter four-cylinder engine, however, is leisurely and loud. The continuously variable transmission is smooth but holds the engine revs high when accelerating and climbing

hills, which increases engine noise. Also, the electronic shifter and separate Park button, same as in the Prius hatchback, take getting used to.

The powertrain is almost seamless when transitioning between gas and electric power, and the car can be driven in electric mode at low speeds. To alert pedestrians when the car is running silently on electric power, a Vehicle Proximity Notification System emits an exterior sound when the V is traveling below 15 mph.

The Prius V's ride is compliant and composed, but uneven pavement can cause side-to-side rocking. There's distinct wind and road noise on the highway, and there's a whine during regenerative braking at low speeds.

Handling is sound but not agile, steering is responsive but gives scant feedback, and the tall body leans a bit in corners. Still, the Prius V managed an impressive speed though our avoidance maneuver, aided by a well-calibrated stability-control system.

Inside the cabin

The interior is put together well but is basic. There are padded tops on the front

✓ Recommended



FAMILY-FRIENDLY A roomier interior provides more cargo and rear-seat space.

doors and a nicely finished dash. A cheap-looking headliner and thin carpet are the main interior weaknesses.

A chairlike seating position, big windows, and low sills make the Prius V feel

Tested vehicle

Highs Fuel economy, cargo room, access, transmission, rear seat, ride, crash-test results

Lows Acceleration, steering feel, engine noise, complicated radio

Trim line Three

Drivetrain 134-hp, 1.8-liter four-cylinder engine with electric

assist; continuously variable transmission; front-wheel drive

Major options None

Tested price \$28,217



Scan for video.



STEALTH MODE The Prius V can be driven on electric-only power at low speeds.

MORE TEST FINDINGS

Braking Stops were quite short. Regenerative brake pedal feel is smoother than in many hybrids.

Headlights Very good overall. Low beams have a sharp cutoff.

Visibility Big windows all around, but rear pillars are large. A standard backup camera is helpful.

Head restraints The center-rear restraint is too low for an adult, even when it's raised.

Child seats Taller forward-facing child seats might not sit fully back against the seatback unless head restraints are removed. Top-tether anchors are awkwardly located below the cargo floor level.



Recommended



Toyota Prius V

VERSION	
TRIM LINE	Three
PRICE: BASE/TESTED ^①	\$27,165/\$28,217
DRIVETRAIN	
Engine	1.8-liter 4-cyl. (134 hp) hybrid
Transmission	CVT
Drive wheels	Front
TIRES TESTED	Bridgestone Turanza EL400 02,
Model & size	size P205/60R16 91V

RATINGS	
PERFORMANCE	
Acceleration	○
0 to 60 mph, sec.	10.7
45 to 65 mph, sec.	6.7
Quarter-mile, sec.	18.1
Transmission	●
Routine handling	○
Emergency handling	○
Avoid. maneuver, max. spd., mph	55.0
Braking	●
From 60 mph, dry/wet, ft.	138/151
Headlights	●

COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE	
Ride	●
Noise	○
Driving position	●
Front-seat comfort	●
Rear-seat comfort	●
Access	●
Controls and displays	●
Interior fit and finish	●
Cargo	○
PREDICTED RELIABILITY	●

FUEL	
Overall mpg	41
City/highway mpg	33/47
Type	regular
Capacity, gal./Cruising range, mi.	11.9/520
Annual cost, 12K mi. at \$3.60/gal.	\$1,050

SAFETY	
CRASH TESTS	
IIHS frontal offset	Good
IIHS side	Good
IIHS rear	Good
IIHS roof strength	Good
NHTSA front, driver/pass.	NA/NA
NHTSA side, driver/rear	NA/NA
NHTSA rollover 2WD/4WD	NA/NA

AIR BAGS	
Side, front/rear	std./no
Head protection	standard

ACTIVE SAFETY	
Antilock brakes	standard
Traction control	standard
Stability control	standard

SPECIFICATIONS	
DIMENSIONS AND WEIGHT	
Length/width/height, in.	182/70/62
Wheelbase, in.	109
Turning circle, ft.	39
Ground clearance, in.	5.0
Curb weight, lb. (% front/rear)	3,280 (59/41)
Maximum load, lb.	915
Cargo volume, cu. ft.	32.0
Towing capacity, lb.	NR

INTERIOR ROOM	
Front shoulder room, in.	56.0
Front leg room, in.	42.0
Front head room, in. ^②	5.5
Rear shoulder room, in.	54.0
Rear leg room, in.	30.0
Rear head room, in. ^②	3.5

^① Based on sticker price at time of purchase. ^② Above a person 5'9" tall.

open and airy. There's plenty of space for the driver, but most of our testers wanted the tilt-and-telescopic steering wheel to pull out farther and taller testers wanted more seat travel. The single, large rear window is an improvement over the Prius hatchback's split-rear window, and the standard backup camera is welcome.

Access is very easy, thanks in part to large rear doors.

The front seats are supportive and well shaped, although some of our testers wished for more lumbar support and wanted to be able to adjust the thigh support and cushion height separately. The spacious rear seat has room for three adults, with good thigh support, generous leg room, and a reclining seatback.

The digital speedometer, fuel, and trip-computer displays are offset toward the center of the dash. Other than the shifter, controls are mostly simple. But the touch-screen audio preset buttons are tiny and are crammed close together, requiring a deft touch, and other functions make you move through multiple onscreen pages. When the car is in reverse, the cabin is permeated by an interior beeping, which can become annoying.

Our Prius V has Toyota's Entune infotainment system. By linking to a smart phone, it allows you to search the Internet for destinations and to access apps that provide fuel prices, traffic, and weather information. While some functionality is

The V gets the best gas mileage of any wagon.

deactivated when the car is in motion, there's still plenty that can be done that can distract drivers. Some voice control of phones and music players is available. Entune can also use text-to-speech capability to read text messages aloud and let you respond from a customizable menu of canned replies.

With the 60/40-split rear seatback folded, the V can swallow a generous 32 cubic feet of cargo, considerably more than the already-versatile Prius hatchback. Plus the seat can slide forward up to 7 inches to increase cargo space, though it does so at the cost of rear leg room.



NO MATCH It looks flashy, but Land Rover's Range Rover Evoque doesn't keep pace with the well-rounded BMW X3.

Compact luxury SUVs

The redesigned BMW X3 drubs a new, stylish Land Rover

THE **BMW X3**, which launched the compact luxury SUV segment in 2004, handily outdueled a new rival, Land Rover's Range Rover Evoque. Scoring an 80 in our tests, the redesigned X3 places second in its class, behind only the Audi Q5.

Though the X3 has retained its sporty character, its ride comfort has been improved. The interior quality was upgraded, and a new eight-speed automatic transmission helps boost fuel economy.

The Evoque's styling turns heads, but the SUV falls short in ride and emergency handling. When pushed to its cornering limits on our track, it easily slid its tail and momentarily—but repeatedly—lifted a wheel in our avoidance maneuver. That is disconcerting and reduces driver confidence during emergency maneuvers. With an overall road-test score of only 58, the Evoque is near the bottom of its class and is too low for us to recommend it.

For this issue, we also tested the Volkswagen Tiguan (see page 59), which received an updated transmission and better fuel economy for 2012. Its score of 76 places it among the top models in this category.

With average or better reliability, the X3 and Tiguan are recommended. The Evoque is too new for us to have reliability data.

Overview

Compact luxury SUVs provide many of the same amenities of similarly priced sedans, as well as added cargo utility and all-wheel drive. Some emphasize sporty handling.

For agile handling:

- 2 **BMW X3**
- 3 **Infiniti EX**
- 4 **Volkswagen Tiguan**

Ratings

☒ Recommended
☒ Excellent ☐ Very good ☐ Good ☐ Fair ☐ Poor

Rec.	Rank	Make & model	Price as tested	In this issue	Overall road-test score	Predicted reliability	Overall mpg
					0 100		
					P F G V E		

COMPACT LUXURY SUVs

	1	Audi Q5 3.2 Premium Plus	\$42,800		83		19
✓	2	BMW X3 xDrive28i	43,375	•	80	⊖	22
✓	3	Infiniti EX Journey*	39,425		78	⊖	18
✓	4	Volkswagen Tiguan SEL	37,020	•	76	○	21
✓	5	Acura RDX	37,165		72	⊕	18
	6	Cadillac SRX Luxury	43,085		72	⊖	18
✓	7	Volvo XC60 T6	42,245		70	○	17
✓	8	Mercedes-Benz GLK350	41,760		66	○	18
	9	Land Rover Range Rover Evoque Pure	45,745	•	58	new	21
	10	Land Rover LR2 SE	36,450		52	NA	18

*Powertrain has changed since last test.

Why some vehicles are not recommended

The Audi Q5 3.2 and Cadillac SRX have below-average predicted-reliability ratings. The Land Rover Range Rover Evoque is too new for us to have reliability data, and it scores too low in our tests. We do not have reliability data for the Land Rover LR2, and it scores too low in our tests.

✓ Recommended



THE X3 LINE **Body style** 4-door SUV **Drive wheels** AWD **Trim lines** xDrive28i, xDrive35i **Engines & transmission** 3.0-liter 6 (240 hp), 3.0-liter 6 turbo (300 hp); 8-speed automatic **Base price range** \$37,100–\$42,700

BMW X3

The BMW X3 is one of those rare exceptions: an SUV that's sporty to drive. Thanks to its 2011 redesign, the choppy ride of the previous X3 is gone; the new model has a more compliant suspension that provides a supple and controlled ride. A new eight-speed automatic transmission improves fuel economy. And the cabin is solid, impeccably crafted, fairly roomy, and well equipped with amenities.

Ride, handling, and drivetrain

With limited body lean and quick, responsive steering, the X3 is fun to drive through corners. When pushed to its handling limits on our test track, it remained stable and provided plenty of grip. The X3 threaded our avoidance maneuver at a quick 53.5 mph, the same as the BMW 328i sedan.

Though the X3 has a firm ride, it provides decent isolation from bumps and road imperfections. The highway ride is smooth and unruffled. Noise levels in the cabin are hushed overall.

The 240-hp, 3.0-liter six-cylinder engine delivers strong, smooth acceleration. It returns a respectable 22 mpg overall but requires premium gasoline. Several test drivers experienced a short lag in acceleration when taking off, which sometimes caused them to overcompensate and accelerate too abruptly. The eight-speed automatic transmission provides quick, smooth

shifts and the all-wheel-drive system operates unobtrusively.

Inside the cabin

The interior is well finished, but we found a few wide panel gaps on the center console and some dashboard-panel misalignments. Impressive touches include a tightly woven, low-nap carpet; large wood-trim panels; nicely flocced storage compartments; and padded panels.

Drivers sit high and upright behind the steering wheel, which has a large range of tilt and telescopic adjustments. But some tall drivers found the driving position to be too narrow, with the console intruding on their right knee. Our test car lacked a backup camera; at this price it should be standard.

Although the front seats are support-

Tested vehicle



▲ Highs Agility, powertrain, fit and finish, fuel economy, crash-test results

▼ Lows Controls, low rear seat

Trim line xDrive28i

Drivetrain 240-hp, 3.0-liter six-cylinder engine; eight-speed automatic trans.; all-wheel drive

Major options
Power driver's seat, auto-dimming mirror

Tested price \$43,375



Scan for video.

ive, some drivers found them to be too firm. A power lumbar adjustment provides good lower-back support. Three adults can fit comfortably in the rear, but the seat is too low to provide optimum thigh support, and the center cushions are hard.

The X3's gauges are straightforward, although many controls are awkward to use. The shifter is not intuitive; you push the shifter forward from Park for Reverse. And you have to press a separate button for Park. The iDrive multi-controller system remains confusing. There are well-located hard keys for some radio and climate functions, but there's still no dedicated radio-tuning knob.

The roomy cargo area offers several storage cubbies. And the rear seat folds in three sections, 40/20/40, to maximize cargo-carrying flexibility.

MORE TEST FINDINGS



GEARED UP An eight-speed automatic contributes to the X3's impressive 22 mpg overall.

Braking Very good stops overall.

Headlights Halogen low beams generate adequate light, but there's a sharp top cutoff.

Access Easy overall.

Visibility Windshield pillars are thin, but a small rear window is limiting when reversing.

Cabin storage Moderate.

Head restraints The center-rear restraint is too low for an adult and is not adjustable.

Driving with kids It might be hard to keep a rear-facing infant seat tightly secured in the center-rear position. Some rear-facing infant seat bases might also be too loose in the outboard seats when installed with belts. It's hard to reach the lower LATCH anchors.



THE EVOQUE LINE **Body styles** 2-door SUV, 4-door SUV **Drive wheels** AWD **Trim lines** Pure, Prestige, Dynamic **Engine & transmission** 2.0-liter 4 turbo (240 hp); 6-speed automatic **Base price range** \$41,145-\$52,045

Range Rover Evoque

Land Rover's eye-catching Range Rover Evoque has quick acceleration, decent fuel economy, and a nicely finished cabin. But those high points don't make up for its many weaknesses. The Evoque's ride is choppy, its cabin is cramped and noisy, and its rear view is poor. A potentially bigger concern is its emergency handling. When pushed to its handling limits at our track, the tail slid out and the vehicle repeatedly lifted a wheel during our avoidance maneuver.

Ride, handling, and drivetrain

The Evoque feels nimble in routine driving, tackling corners well. The steering has good heft and quick response, but it feels artificial, with a resistance that can cause drivers to use too much steering input when turning off-center. A tight turning circle makes parking maneuvers easy.

At the track, the Evoque swung its tail when drivers lifted off the throttle during hard cornering. And in our avoidance maneuver, it momentarily but repeatedly raised a rear wheel slightly, which is disconcerting in an SUV. Its stability-control system ultimately kept the vehicle in line, but the Evoque managed only a low maximum speed through the course.

The suspension provides some isolation, but pavement flaws can make the ride choppy. The highway ride is steady,

but some jitteriness persists. Too much road and engine noise enters the cabin.

Although there's no low-range gearing, the Evoque is capable in the dirt and mud and has electronic settings that help maximize traction. It struggled while scaling our rock-hill course but made it to the top.

The 240-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine delivers strong acceleration. We averaged 21 mpg overall, but it requires premium fuel. The six-speed automatic transmission is well mated to the engine. The electronic shifter is a rotary dial that periscopes from the center console when the car starts.

Inside the cabin

The interior is nicely finished, and most trim pieces fit well. A flimsy-feeling glove-box door is a notable blemish.



FIXED CEILING The oversized glass roof spans the length of the roof but can't be opened.

Tested vehicle



Highs Fit and finish, acceleration, transmission, fuel economy

Lows Emergency handling, steering feel, ride, noise, visibility, driving position, cargo space

Trim line Pure

Drivetrain 240-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged 4-cylinder; six-speed automatic trans.;

all-wheel drive

Major options

Leather, power seats, panoramic roof, heated seats/steering wheel, satellite radio

Tested price \$45,745



Scan for video.

Though the cockpit is narrow, head and leg room are OK, and a large, glass roof panel keeps occupants from feeling claustrophobic. The windshield has embedded defroster grid lines that clear frost quickly but can create glare at night.

The narrow front seats are comfortable only if you fit their confines. Many drivers found the seat bolstering to be too restrictive, and tall testers wanted more thigh support. The rear seats are fine for two adults but are cramped for three.

Gauges are legible, but the steering wheel can block their view. The touchscreen radio lacks a tuning knob and buries some functions in its menu structure. Some of the onscreen lettering is a bit small, making it hard to read at a glance.

The small-sized cargo area has a noisy powered liftgate.

MORE TEST FINDINGS

Braking Short stopping distances.

Headlights Low-beam visibility is just adequate. High beams are better but are still subpar.

Access Easy in front, but it takes some effort to slide in or out of the rear.

Visibility The slitlike rear window impedes the view, but a

standard rear-view camera helps somewhat.

Head restraints The center-rear head restraint must be raised to protect an adult in a rear crash.

Cabin storage Modest.

Driving with kids It might be tough to cinch up child seats using the belts alone. LATCH installation is easy and secure.

Compare

✓ Recommended



VERSION	BMW X3	Land Rover Range Rover Evoque
TRIM LINE	xDrive28i	Pure
PRICE: BASE/TESTED ^①	\$36,750/\$43,375	\$41,145/\$45,745
DRIVETRAIN		
Engine	3.0-liter 6-cyl. (240 hp)	2.0-liter 4-cyl. (240 hp) turbo
Transmission	8-speed automatic	6-speed automatic
Drive wheels	AWD	AWD
TIRES TESTED		
Model & size	Bridgestone Dueler H/L 400RFT, size 245/55R17 102H	Continental Cross Contact UHPE, size 235/55R19 105V
RATINGS		
PERFORMANCE		
Acceleration	●	●
0 to 60 mph, sec.	7.2	7.2
45 to 65 mph, sec.	4.6	4.4
Quarter-mile, sec.	15.6	15.7
Transmission	●	●
Routine handling	●	●
Emergency handling	●	●
Avoid. maneuver, max. spd., mph	53.5	50.0
Braking	●	●
From 60 mph, dry/wet, ft.	134/145	132/145
Headlights	○	●
COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE		
Ride	●	○
Noise	●	○
Driving position	●	○
Front-seat comfort	●	●
Rear-seat comfort	○	○
Access	●	●
Controls and displays	○	●
Interior fit and finish	●	●
Cargo	○	●
PREDICTED RELIABILITY	●	New
FUEL		
Overall mpg	22	21
City/highway mpg	15/30	14/29
Type	premium	premium
Capacity, gal./Cruising range, mi.	17.7/445	18.1/455
Annual cost, 12K mi. at \$3.8/gal.	\$2,075	\$2,155

SAFETY

CRASH TESTS

IIHS frontal offset	Good	NA
IIHS side	Good	NA
IIHS rear	Good	NA
IIHS roof strength	Good	NA
NHTSA front, driver/pass.	NA/NA	NA/NA
NHTSA side, driver/rear	NA/NA	NA/NA
NHTSA rollover 2WD/4WD	NA/NA	NA/NA

AIR BAGS

Side, front/rear	std./opt.	std./no
Head protection	standard	standard

ACTIVE SAFETY

Antilock brakes	standard	standard
Traction control	standard	standard
Stability control	standard	standard

SPECIFICATIONS

DIMENSIONS AND WEIGHT

Length/width/height, in.	183/74/65	172/77/64
Wheelbase, in.	111	105
Turning circle, ft.	40	38
Ground clearance, in.	7.5	7.5
Curb weight, lb. (% front/rear)	4,125 (50/50)	3,940 (59/41)
Maximum load, lb.	905	1,025
Cargo volume, cu. ft.	33.0	25.5
Towing capacity, lb.	3,000	3,500

INTERIOR ROOM

Front shoulder room, in.	57.0	56.5
Front leg room, in.	43.0	42.0
Front head room, in. ^②	4.5	5.0
Rear shoulder room, in.	55.5	55.5
Rear leg room, in.	28.5	25.5
Rear head room, in. ^②	4.0	4.5

^① Based on sticker price at time of purchase. ^② Above a person 5'9" tall.

Volkswagen Tiguan

✓ Recommended



The Tiguan is a sophisticated, fun-to-drive small SUV that has a nice, relatively roomy interior. For 2012, it got a mild freshening that improved fuel economy. But for a model without a luxury nameplate, it comes with a bit of a sticker shock. Our well-equipped SEL version cost \$37,000; other versions ring in at around \$31,000 when they're typically equipped. Here we've included a summary review:

The driving experience

A 200-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine powers the Tiguan. It delivers punchy performance and relatively good fuel economy of 21 mpg overall, but on premium fuel. A smooth six-speed automatic is the only transmission available on all-wheel-drive versions. A six-speed manual is available on base, front-wheel-drive models.

The SEL trim level we bought has large low-profile tires, which results in prevalent road noise and a stiff ride. An SE model we drove, with smaller wheels and less-aggressive tires, was quieter, with a significantly better ride.

Handling agility is a high point. The Tiguan has little body lean and feels composed and surefooted even at higher speeds. Steering is quick, with good feedback. We recorded a commendable 53.5-mph speed through the avoidance maneuver, aided by well-calibrated stability control.

The Tiguan's stops were short on dry pavement and slightly longer in the wet.



VERSATILE SEATING The center of the rear seat folds separately, helping cargo flexibility.

Inside the cabin

The interior is well finished, with quality materials and padded surfaces. Drivers have generous seat-adjustment range and plenty of room behind the tilt-and-telescopic steering wheel. A full range of power-seat adjustments is available only in the SEL trim. Visibility is good, except for the thick rear pillars and the head restraints. A backup camera is not available.

The leather seats are firm and supportive, although some testers felt they were too firm and the bottom cushions were too short. The rear seat is comfortable for two adults, but three is a crowd.

Gauges are mostly easy to read. Though most controls were straightforward, some audio functions are controlled through a complicated touch screen.

There's generous interior storage but modest cargo space. Rear seats can be folded in either a 60/40 or 40/20/40 configuration, and the front-passenger seatback folds flat for carrying long items.



Scan for video.

Jeep Wrangler



The Wrangler is an iconic off-roader that's designed to excel in rugged conditions. But it's based on an old architecture, and its performance, refinement, and interior design don't measure up to modern vehicles. For 2012, the Wrangler received an updated powertrain. But with a road-test score of only 20, it remains the lowest ranked vehicle in our Ratings. The Wrangler suffers from an unsettled ride, pervasive wind noise, clumsy handling, very long braking distances, difficult access, impaired visibility, and unsupportive seats. Reliability is average, but the Wrangler scores too low to be recommended.

Ride, handling, and drivetrain

A new 285-hp, 3.6-liter V6 provides decent acceleration for the heavy Jeep. But the five-speed automatic transmission can be slow to downshift, making it feel as though there's a lack of oomph. We recorded a mediocre 17 mpg overall. A six-speed manual is standard.

On the road, the Wrangler jiggles constantly and snaps over bumps. Wind noise is prominent even with the hard top attached, but road noise is surprisingly low.

The body leans even in low-speed cornering, and the slow steering lacks feedback. The Wrangler posted an unusually slow speed in our avoidance maneuver, but its stability-control system kept it secure. The Wrangler's high ground clearance and great axle articulation helped it during off-road driving, but our Sahara version struggled for traction on our rock-hill course.

Inside the cabin

The Wrangler's interior can seem unfinished by modern standards. Hard plastics and exposed painted metal surfaces abound.

Drivers sit upright and close to the tilt-only steering wheel. Shorter drivers found the pedals to be a reach, and there isn't a lot of fore-and-aft seat adjustment range. The footwell is narrow, but at least there's plenty of head room. The spare tire, rear wiper motor,

and rear brake light limit rear visibility.

The front seats are flat and lack support. The rear has room for three, but the seat is unsupportive. Access is difficult because of high sills and small doors that don't stay open.

Removing or installing the hard or soft top takes two people. Panels easily lift from the hard top for open-air driving. Loading luggage requires swinging open the lower gate and then flipping open the rear glass, a nuisance.

Tested vehicle



Highs Off-road capability, improved drivetrain

Lows Ride, handling, braking, wind noise, access, driving position, seat comfort, fit and finish, visibility, fuel economy

Trim line Unlimited Sahara

Drivetrain 285 hp, 3.6-liter V6; five-speed automatic trans.; four-wheel drive

Major options Hard and soft tops, trailer tow group, side air bags, limited slip differential, automatic climate control, heated seats

Tested price \$36,340



Scan for video.



Jeep Wrangler	
VERSION	Unlimited Sahara
TRIM LINE	Unlimited Sahara
PRICE: BASE/TESTED ^①	\$30,745/\$36,340
DRIVETRAIN	
Engine	3.6-liter V6 (285 hp)
Transmission	5-speed automatic
Drive wheels	4WD
TIRES TESTED	Bridgestone Dueler A/T, size P255/70R18 112S
RATINGS	
PERFORMANCE	
Acceleration	●
0 to 60 mph, sec.	8.9
45 to 65 mph, sec.	5.9
Quarter-mile, sec.	16.8
Transmission	●
Routine handling	●
Emergency handling	●
Avoid. maneuver, max. spd., mph	45.0
Braking	○
From 60 mph, dry/wet, ft.	151/181
Headlights	●
COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE	
Ride	●
Noise	●
Driving position	●
Front-seat comfort	○
Rear-seat comfort	○
Access	○
Controls and displays	●
Interior fit and finish	●
Cargo	●
PREDICTED RELIABILITY	○
FUEL	
Overall mpg	17
City/highway mpg	12/22
Type	regular
Capacity, gal./Cruising range, mi.	22.5/420
Annual cost, 12K mi. at \$3.60/gal.	\$2,600
SAFETY	
CRASH TESTS	
IIHS frontal offset	Good
IIHS side w/o side air bags	NA/Marginal
IIHS rear	Marginal
IIHS roof strength	NA
NHTSA front, driver/pass.	NA/NA
NHTSA side, driver/rear	NA/NA
NHTSA rollover 2WD/4WD	NA/○
AIR BAGS	
Side, front/rear	opt./no
Head protection	no
ACTIVE SAFETY	
Antilock brakes	standard
Traction control	standard
Stability control	standard
SPECIFICATIONS	
DIMENSIONS AND WEIGHT	
Length/width/height, in.	173/74/71
Wheelbase, in.	116
Turning circle, ft.	43
Ground clearance, in.	9.5
Curb weight, lb. (% front/rear)	4,570 (50/50)
Maximum load, lb.	850
Cargo volume, cu. ft.	34.5
Towing capacity, lb.	3,500
INTERIOR ROOM	
Front shoulder room, in.	56.0
Front leg room, in.	41.0
Front head room, in. ^②	6.5
Rear shoulder room, in.	58.0
Rear leg room, in.	28.0
Rear head room, in. ^②	6.0

^① Based on sticker price at time of purchase. ^② Above a person 5'9" tall.

CR 'Labs on Tour'

Neal Myerberg, one of America's foremost authorities on tax- and financial-planning strategies using charitable techniques, will present "Protecting Yourself in a Difficult Economy: Securing Adequate Income when Interest Rates are Low." A senior CR engineer will follow with "Labs on Tour," a look at Consumer Reports' testing program. Presentations are tentatively scheduled for March 14 in Philadelphia. For information and to reserve a place, contact Judy Frank, at jfrank@consumer.org or at 914-378-2273.

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This page lists all full reports and selected shorter reports. **Bold** type indicates Ratings reports or brand-name discussions; *italic* type, corrections, follow-ups, or updates. A search of the most recent Ratings of products is

Acne treatments	Jan 12, 9
Activists, Yu, Yinling	Sept 11, 6
Advertisements, television	Sept 11, 13
Advice, consumer	Aug 11, 16
Air travel, saving money on	Feb 12, 7
Airlines	Jun 11, 17
safety	Jun 11, 6
American-made products	Mar 12, 8
Appliances	
fire risks	Mar 12, 22
shopping for	Jul 11, 24
Arsenic, in juice and water	Jan 12, 22
Asthma inhalers, Primatene Mist discontinued	Jul 11, 13

AUTOMOBILE RATINGS:

Acura TL	Nov 11, 64
Audi A4	Jul 11, 56
Audi A6	Jan 12, 52
BMW X3	Mar 12, 56
Buick Regal	Jul 11, 56
Chevrolet Cruze	May 11, 56
Chevrolet Volt	Oct 11, 52; Dec 11, 5
Chrysler 200	Aug 11, 50
Chrysler 300	Nov 11, 64
Chrysler Town & Country	Aug 11, 50
Dodge Avenger	Aug 11, 50
Dodge Charger	Aug 11, 50
Dodge Durango	Aug 11, 50
Dodge Journey	Aug 11, 50
Fiat 500	Oct 11, 52
Ford Explorer	Jun 11, 52
Ford F-150	Sept 11, 52
Ford Focus	Sept 11, 52
Honda Accord	Jun 11, 52
Honda Civic	Sept 11, 52
Honda Civic Hybrid	Oct 11, 52
Honda Civic Si	Feb 12, 54
Hyundai Elantra	May 11, 56
Hyundai Genesis	Nov 11, 64
Hyundai Sonata	Jul 11, 56
Hyundai Sonata Hybrid	Nov 11, 64
Infiniti G25	Jul 11, 56
Infiniti M35h	Jan 12, 52
Jeep Compass	Aug 11, 50
Jeep Patriot	Aug 11, 50
Jeep Wrangler	Mar 12, 56
Kia Forte 5-Door	Sept 11, 52
Kia Optima	Jun 11, 52; Jul 11, 56
Lexus CT 200h	Oct 11, 52
Mazda3	Dec 11, 68
Mercedes-Benz E350 BlueTec	Jan 12, 52
Mini Cooper Countryman	Jan 12, 52
Nissan Leaf	Nov 11, 64
Nissan Quest	Dec 11, 68
Range Rover Evoque	Mar 12, 56
Saab 9-5	Jan 12, 52
Scion tC	May 11, 56
Toyota Avalon	Nov 11, 64
Toyota Camry	Feb 12, 54
Toyota Highlander Hybrid	Jun 11, 52
Toyota Prius V	Mar 12, 54
Volkswagen Jetta	May 11, 56
Volkswagen Jetta GLI	Feb 12, 54
Volkswagen Jetta TDI	Oct 11, 52
Volkswagen Passat	Feb 12, 54
Volkswagen Tiguan	Mar 12, 56
Volkswagen Touareg TDI	Jun 11, 52
Volvo S60	Jul 11, 56

AUTOMOBILES AND AUTOMOTIVE EQUIPMENT:

batteries	May 11, 55; Nov 11, 61
best & worst for 2011	Apr 11, 10
Chrysler, redesigned & freshened models	Aug 11, 50
cost control	Feb 12, 49
electric cars, Nissan Leaf	Apr 11, 15
electronics, onboard	Oct 11, 47
fuel economy standards	Nov 11, 6
fuel savings	Jul 11, 53
GPS units, with traffic information	Jan 12, 49
headlight cleaning kits	Mar 12, 53
hybrid electric, Chevrolet Volt	Apr 11, 14
fires	Feb 12, 13
manufacturers	Apr 11, 16
mileage and utility	Sept 11, 51
owner satisfaction	Jan 12, 50
profiles, 2011	Apr 11, 40
Ratings, 2011	Apr 11, 27
recalls, Toyota	May 11, 16
redesigns	Apr 11, 5
reliability	Apr 11, 86; Dec 11, 62
rental car surprises	Jun 11, 13
repair satisfaction	Jun 11, 51
safety ratings	Apr 11, 72
tires	Nov 11, 57
recalls, Continental Contitrac TR	Mar 12, 14
ultra-high performance	Oct 11, 34
top picks for 2011	Apr 11, 66
Toyota Prius, gas mileage of 2001 model	Jun 11, 9

traction-improving features	Dec 11, 61
trade-ins, "MSRP"	Sept 11, 8
trading in gas guzzlers	Aug 11, 9
used cars	
best & worst	Apr 11, 80
reliability	Apr 11, 78
values, best	Apr 11, 19; Feb 12, 50
waxes	Nov 11, 55

B	
Bad habits	Feb 12, 42
Bakeware, glass, safety	Oct 11, 40
Banks	Feb 12, 16
Batteries, AA	Dec 11, 7
Beers	Feb 12, 10
Better Business Bureau, reliability	Aug 11, 10
Bisphenol A, ban	Jan 12, 6
Blenders	Aug 11, 37
immersion	Sept 11, 38
Blood glucose monitors	Nov 11, 52
Blood pressure monitors	Oct 11, 38
Blu-ray players	Aug 11, 36; Dec 11, 54
Breakfast habits	Nov 11, 10
Brokerages	Feb 12, 20; Mar 12, 5
Brownie mixes	Aug 11, 8
Butter substitutes	Mar 12, 8
Buyback programs	Sept 11, 10

C	
Caffeine	Oct 11, 8
Camcorders	Aug 11, 38; Dec 11, 47
Cameras, digital	Aug 11, 38; Dec 11, 47
Certificates of deposit (CDs)	Oct 11, 8
Checking accounts, free	May 11, 17
Chocolates	Feb 12, 8
Cleaners, Mistolin, bottle safety	Oct 11, 14
Cloud computing	Oct 11, 11
Coffee	Sept 11, 40
Coffeemakers	Dec 11, 57
pod	Nov 11, 53
Computers	Dec 11, 40
desktop	Jul 11, 49; Oct 11, 33
laptop	Mar 12, 43
monitors	Jan 12, 43
netbooks	Sept 11, 37
portable	Jun 11, 34
printers	Dec 11, 52
software, security	Jun 11, 29
tablet	May 11, 52; Sept 11, 43; Dec 11, 26; Jan 12, 41; Feb 12, 43

Consumer advocacy groups	
Consumers for Auto Reliability and Safety	Feb 12, 6
Economic Fairness Oregon	Jan 12, 6
Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, website	Nov 11, 6
Consumer Product Safety Commission	
Web database	Jul 11, 6; Mar 12, 6
Consumer Reports	
auto testing	Apr 11, 5
changes at	Jan 12, 6
no-commercial-use policy	Nov 11, 6
reader gadget wishlist	Dec 11, 56
Consumers International	Aug 11, 6
Consumers Union	
Consumer Product Safety Commission award for	Feb 12, 6
Excellence in Consumer Advocacy Award	Dec 11, 6; Mar 12, 6

Cookie sheets, ceramic	Dec 11, 9
Cookies, chocolate chip	Dec 11, 8
Cooktops	Jul 11, 34
Countertops	Jul 11, 27
Credit cards	
new	
credit scores and	Aug 11, 13
deals	Dec 11, 15
theft	Jun 11, 23
Credit ratings	
lesser known	Oct 11, 6
online checking	Feb 12, 6
Customer service	Jul 11, 6; Jul 11, 16
Cuts	Oct 11, 12

D	
Data mining	Oct 11, 6
Debit cards, fees	Jan 12, 6
Deficit reduction bill	Dec 11, 6
Dental care	Feb 12, 36
Diet plans	Jun 11, 14
Dietary supplements, celebrity-endorsed	Mar 12, 12
Dish detergents	Oct 11, 8
liquid	May 11, 7
Dishwashers	Jul 11, 46; Jan 12, 45
Doctors	
communicating with	Jul 11, 13
haggling with	Oct 11, 12
remote doctoring	Aug 11, 12
selling supplements	May 11, 12
Drills & drivers, cordless	Dec 11, 60
Driving while distracted	Apr 11, 22

available on our website, at www.ConsumerReports.org. Note that because reports posted on our site are periodically updated, publication dates on the Web index may not reflect when a given report appeared in the magazine.

Drugs	
labels & information sheets	Aug 11, 10
retail prices	Dec 11, 9
side effects	Nov 11, 9; Mar 12, 11
Drugstores	May 11, 24

E	
E-book readers	Dec 11, 29; Feb 12, 41
Echinacea, ragweed allergies and	Feb 12, 12
Electronics stores	Dec 11, 24
Energy alternatives	Oct 11, 30
Energy conservation	Oct 11, 24
Exercise equipment	Feb 12, 28
Fitness Anywhere TRX	Sept 11, 9
satisfaction & use	Aug 11, 8
Exercise handles, Perfect Fitness lawsuit	Nov 11, 14

F	
Fast-food restaurants	Aug 11, 18
Fat, hidden	Sept 11, 8
Fish, mislabeled	Dec 11, 18
Fish oil pills	Jan 12, 11; Feb 12, 5
Flooring	Jul 11, 30
Food processors & choppers	May 11, 50
French fries, Burger King	Mar 12, 8
Fruit cups	Oct 11, 11
Fushigi Magic Gravity Ball	Dec 11, 10

G	
Gadgets, getting the most out of	Dec 11, 55
Garlic	Dec 11, 11
Gifts	Jan 12, 16
Grocery stores, online	Sept 11, 11

H	
Hamburgers, Wendy's Dave's	
Hot 'N' Juicy Cheeseburger	Jan 12, 10
Headphones	Dec 11, 54
Health insurance	Nov 11, 39; Jan 12, 5
junk	Mar 12, 30
medical loss ratio	Dec 11, 6
rate increases	Oct 11, 6
Health questions	Sept 11, 12
Health tips	Jan 12, 13
Heart health and treatment	Sept 11, 26; Oct 11, 5
Heartburn	Nov 11, 12
Heater safety	Nov 11, 14
Heating systems, checking	Oct 11, 14
Home-theater systems	Jul 11, 50; Dec 11, 52; Dec 11, 54
Home warranties	Feb 12, 9
Hospital safety	May 11, 6
Hotels, hypoallergenic rooms	May 11, 10
Human papillomavirus (HPV)	Feb 12, 12
Hummus	Jul 11, 8

I	
Ice melting mats	Jan 12, 11
Innovations, most useful	Feb 12, 11
Insurance, association-sponsored	Jul 11, 15
Internet safety	Jun 11, 29
Irons	Jun 11, 41

K	
Kitchen gadgets	Feb 12, 10
Kitchen remodeling	Jul 11, 20
Knives, kitchen	Nov 11, 51

L	
Labeling, "simple"	Jul 11, 11
Laundry detergents	Nov 11, 8
bottle sizes	Mar 12, 7
Lawn mowers & tractors	May 11, 40
Lead, children's toy regulations	Oct 11, 14
Lightbulbs	Jan 12, 42
compact fluorescent (CFLs)	Oct 11, 27; Feb 12, 14
recall, Electra & Telstar	Aug 11, 15
Lighters, toy-like, safety ban	Feb 12, 13
Locks, door	Jun 11, 27
Lotions, moisturizing	Nov 11, 11

M	
Meals, frozen	Jan 12, 8
Meat, recalls	Mar 12, 14
Medicare, new benefits	May 11, 13
Medicine	

alternative	Sept 11, 20
future	Jun 11, 11
Memory improvement	Oct 11, 7
Memory supplements, Focus Factor	Jun 11, 12
Microwave ovens, over-the-range	Jul 11, 34
Money	
Bisphenol A in	Nov 11, 14
collectible	Jun 11, 10
Mortgages	
documents	Sept 11, 6
refinancing	Jan 12, 12
Movie-theater food	Mar 12, 10
Mustards	Jun 11, 7

N	
Nutrition drinks, Ensure Muscle Health	Aug 11, 12
Nuts, Planters Mixed	May 11, 10

O	
Online privacy, kids'	Mar 12, 6

P	
Packaging	
persuasive	Jun 11, 8
Sun Chips	Jan 12, 9
Paints & stains	
exterior	Jun 11, 47
interior	Mar 12, 46
Passwords	Jan 12, 19
Payment types, alternative	Sept 11, 16
mobile payments, security	Sept 11, 6
Pedometers	Feb 12, 34
Probiotics	Nov 11, 12
Prostate cancer	
"free" screenings	May 11, 12
PSA testing	Jan 12, 13

R	
Ranges	Jul 11, 34; Dec 11, 58; Mar 12, 44
Viking VGSC5304BSS	Nov 11, 53
Razors	
electric	Jun 11, 9
women's	Jun 11, 8
Receipts, paper	Oct 11, 10
Refrigerators	Jul 11, 42
inaccurate energy efficiency claims	Oct 11, 34
Retirement mistakes	Mar 12, 13
Rice, instant	Nov 11, 10

S	
Safety concerns	Mar 12, 10
Safety regulations	May 11, 6
Scams	
caller ID spoofing	Mar 12, 9
computer virus	Jun 12, 9
Security tips	Jun 11, 20
Shoes, toning	
Reebok false advertising suit	Dec 11, 6
safety concerns	Aug 11, 15
Shredders, paper	Dec 11, 56
Snow blowers	Feb 12, 46
Social Security	
benefit timing	Oct 11, 13; Dec 11, 5
mailings	Jul 11, 11
Stirrers, automatic	Nov 11, 11
Stock market drops	Nov 11, 13
Stores	Mar 12, 16
outlet	Nov 11, 16
Strollers	
recalls	
Britax B-Nimble	Sept 11, 38
Zoooper	Aug 11, 15
safety risks	May 11, 51
Britax B-Nimble: Don't Buy	Jul 11, 50

T	
Table saws, safer	Jan 12, 14
Telecommunications services	May 11, 18
Telephone services	
bill surprises	Aug 11, 6
cellular	Jan 12, 28; Jan 12, 34
cordless	Oct 11, 36
smart	Sept 11, 48; Dec 11, 32; Feb 12, 42
shopping apps	Dec 11, 10
Television sets	Mar 12, 34
3D, Vizio VT3D650SV	May 11, 50
Internet	Aug 11, 35
LCD	Dec 11, 36
picture quality	Oct 11, 35
plasma	Dec 11, 36
Sony, overheating	Jan 12, 14
Thermometers, fever	Nov 11, 7
Toasters & toaster ovens	Mar 12, 45
Top products	Nov 11, 21
Towels, paper	Jan 12, 7

V	
Vacuum cleaners	Nov 11, 35; Mar 12, 49
Volunteering, health benefits of	Dec 11, 12

W	
Wall ovens	Jul 11, 34
Water, bottled	Sept 11, 7
Water filters	Feb 12, 44
Wines	
cabernet and chardonnay	Jan 12, 10
red blends	Oct 11, 10
shiraz and zinfandel	Dec 11, 11
white	Aug 11, 7
Wrinkle creams	Sept 11, 10

Y	
Yogurt	Jul 11, 10



Your time (share) is up

This happy couple has either used a service to sell their time-share or chosen Nautilus, "the most trusted name in cremation."

goofs, glitches, gotchas **SELLING IT**

Why would you plant any other tulips?

Breck's WOW™ Perennial Tulips are bred for maximum size and bloom length!

BARGAIN BULB



BRECK'S JUMB



Years after regular tulips have died, Breck's WOW Perennial Tulips are still going strong!



Wow indeed

In their fifth year, Breck's WOW Perennial Tulips look exactly the same as in their first.



someone in your family that you love. Take care of your garden stone. Avoid stepping on it with pressure or dropping it on a hard portion of the ground.

Step away from the stones

Made by Me Stepping Stones are supposed to boost kids' "creativity, focus & attention, cooperative play, self esteem." But how will kids feel when they realize (after following two pages of directions) that they can't, um, step on them?



Cheap trick

Turn a pile of gold—jewelry, a watch, and dozens of coins—into a handful of singles? No, thanks.



Truth in advertising?

Seen in a Home Depot lot in Connecticut.



Do-it-yourself nose job

Who knew that a nose clip could "make your little nose ... full of happiness"? The package suggests wearing the clip while driving, watching TV, and sleeping.

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- Unpublished Dealer Incentives And Holdbacks
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- Current Safety Ratings
- Negotiating Tips And Traps

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our newest feature
"Build & Buy"

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Request a *Consumer Reports* New Car Price Report and you'll have the dealer invoice price for **all factory-installed options and packages available** for the make and model you're purchasing.

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Dealers receive all kinds of cash rebates and unadvertised incentives from car manufacturers. Your New Car Price Report exposes these hidden bonuses so you can lower your offer.

STEP 3: Find out your Consumer Reports Bottom Line Price

Here's the key to your deal. Your New Car Price Report goes beyond the invoice price to show you what the dealer actually paid for the exact car you're buying. We call it the "CR Bottom Line Price," and once you know it, you'll never overpay.

When it's time to talk trade-in, you should know what your trade-in is worth whether you sell it privately or to a dealership. You can get that information from us too and it costs just an additional \$12.

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Canada Extra

Information from CONSUMER REPORTS® for Canadian readers

In this special section

Canister vacuums	32A
Upright vacuums	32B
Plasma TVs	32B
LCD TVs	32C
Autos	32D
Contact info	32D

How to use the Canada Extra section

Every month, Canada Extra provides Canadian pricing and availability information about products tested for that issue. The Ratings in this section are based on this month's reports, but they narrow your choices to the products that are sold in Canada.

You can use this section in either of two ways: Start with the main report, read about the products that interest you, and turn to this section to find whether they're sold—and for what price—in Canada. Or start here, find products sold in Canada whose price and overall score appear promising, and read more about them in the main report and full Ratings chart; page numbers appear with each Canadian report. (For some products, the Canadian model designation differs slightly from the one used in the U.S.)

In most cases, the prices we list here

are the approximate retail in Canadian dollars; manufacturers' list prices are indicated by an asterisk (*). Check marks identify CR Best Buys or Recommended products in the U.S. Ratings. "NA" in a chart means that information wasn't available from the manufacturer. We include, in the Contact Info list on page 32D, the manufacturer's phone number and Web address in Canada, so that you can call or go online to get information on a model you can't find in the stores. (Many products that aren't available in Canadian stores can be bought online.)

We appreciate your support but we don't take it for granted. Please write to CanadaExtra@cu.consumer.org and tell us what you think. We can't reply to every e-mail message or implement every suggestion, but with your help we'll try to keep growing to serve your needs.

Paul Reynolds, *Canada Extra editor*

- ☒ **CR Best Buy** Products with this icon offer the best combination of performance and price. All are recommended.
- ☒ **Recommended** Models with this designation perform well and stand out for reasons we note.

Canister vacuums (Select Ratings)

Report, page 49; Ratings, page 51

Best choices from our tests of 33 models.

	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Recommended			0 100 P F G VG E

C BAGGED These tend to do better with tools than uprights and are more stable on stairs.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Kenmore Intuition 23110	\$650	72
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Kenmore Progressive 23206	400	70

	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Recommended			0 100 P F G VG E

C BAGGED continued

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	Kenmore Progressive 23204	\$350	69
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	Panasonic MC-CG902	250	65

Upright vacuums

Report, page 49; Ratings, pages 50-51

Twenty-three of the 67 tested upright vacuums are available, including 9 of the recommended models.

	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Recommended			
Rank			
			0 100
			P F G VG E

A BAGGED These tend to be best for cleaning carpets.

✓	2	Miele S 7580 Marin	\$475	72
✓	4	Kenmore Intuition 30612	300	72
✓	6	Hoover Tempo Widepath U5140-900 [1]	130	71
✓	8	Hoover Platinum Bagged UH30010COM [1] [2]	400	70
✓	12	Eureka Boss Smart Vac 4870MZ	230	67
	16	Panasonic MC-UG471 [1]	150	63
	18	Riccar Supralite RSL4 [1] [3]	570	59
	19	Riccar Supralite RSL3 [1] [3]	400	59
	20	Riccar Brilliance Premium	950	59
	23	Kenmore Progressive Glide 30608 [3]	200	51

	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Recommended			
Rank			
			0 100
			P F G VG E

B BAGLESS These trade a bag for a bin but are messier to empty.

✓	3	Dyson DC28 Animal	\$700	67
✓	4	Eureka AirSpeed AS1000AE [1]	130	65
✓	6	Hoover Platinum Bagless UH70015	400	65
✓	8	Bissell CleanView Helix Deluxe 71V9-C [1]	150	64
	10	Shark Navigator Lift Away NV352	180	62
	21	Electrolux Nimble EL8602 [1]	330	57
	23	Bissell Healthy Home 16N5C	300	55
	24	Eureka Whirlwind+ Pet Lover 3276BVZ [1]	150	55
	25	Bissell POWERClean 92L3C [1]	90	55
	28	Hoover WindTunnel Pet Cyclonic UH70085	250	52
	29	Electrolux Versatility EL8505 EL8502	350	52
	30	Bissell Lift-Off Multi-Cyclonic Pet 89Q9C	250	51
	33	Dyson DC24 Ball Multi floor	500	44

[1] Lacks brush on/off. [2] Comes with mini canister. [3] Doesn't accept tools.

Plasma TVs

Report, page 34; Ratings, page 42

Twenty-two of the 31 tested plasma TVs are available, including 20 of the recommended models.

	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Recommended			
Rank			
			0 100
			P F G VG E

A 60-INCH AND LARGER Has 1080p resolution.

✓	1	Panasonic Viera TC-P60S30	\$1,700*	71
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B PLASMA: 50- AND 51-INCH B1, B2, and B7 have 1080p resolution. The rest have 720p.

✓	1	Panasonic Viera TC-P50S30	1,000*	81
✓	2	LG 50PV450	1,000*	77
✓	3	Samsung PN51D450	720*	72
✓	4	LG 50PT350	850*	68
	7	Samsung PN51D530	900*	59

C PLASMA: 42- AND 46-INCH All have 720p resolution except C1, which has 1080p.

✓	1	Panasonic Viera TC-P42S30	800*	78
✓	2	Panasonic Viera TC-P42X3	650*	73
✓	3	Panasonic Viera TC-P46X3	750*	70
✓	4	LG 42PT350	650*	69
	5	Samsung PN43D450	600*	66

	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Recommended			
Rank			
			0 100
			P F G VG E

D 3D MODELS, 42- TO 60-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

✓	2	Panasonic Viera TC-P55VT30 [1]	\$3,000*	82
✓	3	LG 50PZ550	1,200*	82
✓	4	Panasonic Viera TC-P50ST30	1,200*	81
✓	6	Samsung PN51D8000	2,200*	79
✓	7	Samsung PN51D6500	1,500*	78
✓	8	Panasonic Viera TC-P60GT30	2,500*	77
✓	10	Samsung PN59D8000	3,000*	75
✓	11	Panasonic Viera TC-P55GT30	2,000*	75
✓	12	Panasonic Viera TC-P60ST30	2,000*	73
✓	13	Samsung PN51D550	1,100*	70
✓	14	Panasonic Viera TC-P42ST30	1,000*	69

[1] Includes one pair of 3D glasses.

LCD TVs

Report, page 34; Ratings, pages 37, 39-41

Forty-seven of the 99 tested LCD TVs are available, including 18 of the recommended models.

	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Recommended			
Rank			
			0 100
			P F G VG E

B 52- TO 55-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

2	LG 55LK520	\$1,400*	66
3	Vizio E550VL-CA	1,150*	65
6	Toshiba 55G310U	1,300*	52
9	Dynex DX-55L150A11	850*	41

C 46- TO 47-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

✓ 2	Samsung UN46D6300	1,500*	72
✓ 3	Samsung UN46D6000	1,300*	70
✓ 4	Bose VideoWave Entertainment System	5,500*	67
5	Sony Bravia KDL-46EX620	1,300	66
8	Toshiba 46G310U	900*	62

D 40- TO 42-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

✓ 1	Samsung LN40D630	730*	76
✓ 2	Panasonic Viera TC-L42D30	1,000*	75
✓ 3	LG 42LK520	800*	72
✓ 7	Samsung LN40D550	680*	69
8	Sony Bravia KDL-40BX420	630	65
9	Panasonic Viera TC-L42U30	850*	64
10	Samsung UN40D5500	780*	64
16	Toshiba 40SL412U	750*	41
19	Toshiba 40E210U	630*	34
20	ViewSonic VT4210LED	800	32

E 37-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

✓ 1	Panasonic Viera TC-L37E3	700*	71
✓ 4	LG 37LV3500	700*	67

	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Recommended			
Rank			
			0 100
			P F G VG E

F 32-INCH F1, F4, and F5 have 1080p resolution. The rest have 720p.

✓ 1	LG 32LK450	\$ 480*	73
✓ 3	Sony Bravia KDL-32BX320	430	70
4	Panasonic Viera TC-L32U3	500*	65
5	Vizio M320NV-CA	400	61
8	ViewSonic VT3205LED	575	49
12	Samsung UN32D4000	530*	37
13	Toshiba 32C110U	400*	33

G 22- TO 27-INCH Both have 1080p resolution.

✓ 3	Dynex DX-24LD230A12	250*	50
6	ViewSonic VT2730	430	43

H 3D MODELS, 32- TO 65-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

✓ 1	Sony Bravia XBR-55HX929	3,600	77
✓ 3	LG 55LW6500	2,300*	76
✓ 4	LG 55LW9800	3,800*	75
✓ 5	Sony Bravia KDL-55HX729	2,400	73
✓ 7	Samsung UN55D7000	2,750*	70
✓ 8	Samsung UN55D7900	2,950*	70
10	Sony Bravia KDL-46HX820	2,200*	69
11	Samsung UN46D6900	1,800*	67
14	Sony Bravia KDL-60EX720	2,900	65
15	Sony Bravia KDL-60NX720	3,200	65
16	Sony Bravia KDL-55EX720	1,900	65
19	Samsung UN55D6500	1,900*	62
23	Sharp Aquos LC-46LE835U	2,000	57
24	Samsung UN55D8000	3,150*	57
25	Toshiba 32TL515U	950*	55
26	Sharp Aquos LC-52LE835U	2,400	52
27	Toshiba 47TL515U	1,300*	36

Includes four pairs of 3D glasses.

Autos

Report, page 54; Ratings, page 56

All of the tested vehicles are available in Canada.

Make & model	Price range	Acceleration (sec.)				Fuel economy (liters per 100 km)		
		0-50 km/h	0-100 km/h	80-100 km/h	500 meters	City driving	Highway driving	Overall
WAGON								
Toyota Prius v	\$27,200–\$36,875	3.9	11.5	4.5	20.8	7.1	5.0	5.7
COMPACT LUXURY SUVs								
BMW X3	41,900–46,900	2.9	7.6	3.4	17.9	15.4	7.9	10.7
Volkswagen Tiguan	27,875–38,375	3.3	9.0	4.0	19.2	14.9	8.9	11.0
Land Rover Range Rover Evoque	46,995–61,195	3.0	7.7	3.1	18.0	16.5	8.1	11.1
MIDSIZED SUV								
Jeep Wrangler	22,195–31,595	3.6	9.5	4.3	19.3	20.1	10.6	14.2

Contact info

How to reach manufacturers in Canada.

Bissell

800-263-2535
www.bissell.ca

Bose

800-869-2114
www.bose.ca

Dynex

800-305-2204
www.bestbuy.ca

Dyson

877-397-6622
www.dyson.com

Electrolux

800-282-2886
www.eurekava.ca

Eureka

800-282-2886
www.eurekava.ca

Hoover

888-898-6055
www.hoovercanada.com

Insignia

877-467-4289
www.bestbuy.ca

Kenmore

Call local Sears
www.sears.ca

LG

888-542-2623
www.lg.com/ca

Miele

800-565-6432
www.miele.ca

Panasonic

866-330-0014
www.panasonic.ca

Riccar

800-661-1467
www.riccar.com

Samsung

800-726-7864
www.samsung.ca

Shark

800-798-7398

Sharp

905-568-7140
www.sharp.ca

Sony

877-899-7669
www.sonymstyle.ca

Toshiba

800-268-3404
www.toshiba.ca

ViewSonic

800-688-6688
www.viewsonic.com

Vizio

888-849-4623
www.vizio.com/ca