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10 Surprising Dangers of Vitamins & Supplements

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PLUS Make your car last 200K miles PAGE 48

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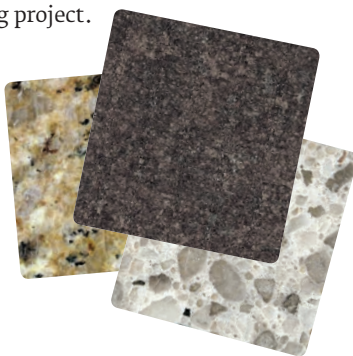
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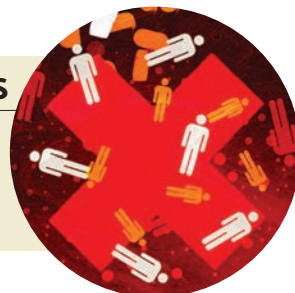
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Marble for bath counters

What you'll save

\$7,990

Buy an Acura RDX **sporty SUV** instead of a BMW X3 to get comparable performance and save this amount.

\$390

Purchase a Ninja Master Prep Professional **blender** instead of a Vita-Mix 5200 to get performance at a great price.

\$3

Buy Trader Joe's California Estate **extra-virgin olive oil** instead of Archer Farms to save this much on a 17-ounce bottle.

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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.

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• 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.

ON YOUR MIND

Where to shop

I'm confused about the Ratings of appliance stores in the July issue. HHGregg is rated number 7 with a score of 86, while Lowe's is number 3 at 87. But HHGregg has higher ratings in price, selection, and service. Why doesn't that elevate it above Lowe's?

—Robert Mercer Port St. Lucie, FL

The reader score reflects readers' evaluation of their overall buying experience; it's not a compilation of the categories we list under "survey results." Moreover, the survey-results columns reflect some key attributes but not all attributes or how important those things were to the reader. Also note that HHGregg



and Lowe's had the same reader score statistically; differences of fewer than 4 points aren't meaningful.

About free TV

A suggestion in "Cut Your Telecom Bill" (June 2012) is to go back to free TV from an

antenna. The new digital broadcasting makes that almost impossible. We bought converters and antennae when the system went digital, but the picture freezes or breaks up often and the sound is garbled. I can't believe there hasn't been more outcry. It makes us hostage to the cable company.

—Brooke Condon Bridgewater, MA

Corrections In a Ratings of advanced cameras in the August issue, the Sony NEX-7K, \$1,100, which is model B7 in the chart, is listed among the best small SLR-like cameras. In referring to it, we mistakenly called it B8.

In a June report on gas grills, we noted in error that the Brinkmann Elite 810-3660-SB has uncoated cast-iron grates. The grates are lightly coated.

And in a July report on refrigerators, we should have said that the Commerce Department ruled that some manufacturers were selling bottom-freezers at below-market prices, though no fines were imposed.

SEND YOUR LETTERS TO

ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor.

Ask our experts

Q I'm searching for information about a manual typewriter my father used in college, the Remington Noiseless Standard. Did you test typewriters back then, and how can I find the Ratings?

—J.D. Mason Asheville, NC

We tested the Remington De Luxe Noiseless model in 1941. Though it was one of seven acceptable models we rated, we called it "very much overpriced" at \$74.50 (\$1,164.71 in today's dollars). The top machine in that test was the Corona Zephyr De Luxe, \$39.75 (\$621.44 today).

Q Many of the newer automobiles have interior and exterior parts made from carbon fiber. What is it? Is it crashworthy? Strong as steel? And should I opt for it?

—Harry Jaffe Germantown, TN

The interior parts are just for style, not for strength or function. Most are probably plastic that is colored black to look like carbon fiber.

Some race cars and expensive sports cars use carbon fiber for their structure because it's light, very strong, and crashworthy. But it's also expensive, labor intensive, and hard to repair, so its use is limited to specialty cars and is not for mass-market vehicles.

Q What is the best way to protect an iPad or smart phone when I am accessing my office's computer remotely?

—Jack Mendelsohn Washington

Using remote desktop-type programs to control another computer on which you have an authorized login is quite a secure process. Those programs use encrypted protocols to protect information.

But as with any Internet-connected computer, unseen malware could still operate in the background, unrelated to the remote session. So only download and install apps from trusted sources, and keep your tablet or smart phone's operating system updated.



OLD-SCHOOL

The Corona Zephyr De Luxe typewriter was top-rated in 1941. It cost \$39.75.

Q Would it be better to replace a refrigerator whose door hinge is failing or just the door? The fridge is 8 years old but otherwise works fine. The door costs \$600.

—Mary Ann Tucker Milford, OH

Consider replacing the fridge. The usual rule of thumb is if the repair will cost more than half the cost of a comparable new model, replace the unit. In this case, you'd also be gaining a more energy-efficient fridge that's likely to have more features for the price.

Q With a revocable living trust, when one spouse passes away, what legal action does the surviving spouse need to take or complete?

—Yvonne Warhola Newnan, GA

It depends on the terms of the trust and state law. Generally, the trust provides that trust assets are to be retained in the trust for the surviving spouse, then the survivor should contact the institutions holding trust assets and make sure that the survivor's Social Security number (not that of the deceased spouse) is listed as the trust's tax identification number.

If non-income earning assets were already transferred to the trust, it's likely that nothing special needs to be done regarding them. You should consult an estate planning lawyer to make sure the terms of the trust and law are followed, and to update the estate.

SEND YOUR QUESTIONS TO

ConsumerReports.org/askourexperts.

This page highlights efforts of Consumers Union, the policy and action arm of Consumer Reports, to improve the marketplace.

FROM OUR PRESIDENT

A daily dose of risk

Perfection can be found in a pill. So say ads and infomercials for dietary supplements. They're touted as the path to health, wellness, and long life, so much so that more than half of U.S. consumers take them, to the tune of billions of dollars in 2011.



But as you'll read in our article on page 18, all of those promises come at a price. Most supplements aren't tested for safety before they're put on the market. More than 6,300 reports of serious adverse events associated with them have been reported over the past five years. Although the reports themselves don't prove the supplements caused the problems, they do raise concern. And more than 400 dietary supplements have been found to be spiked with prescription drugs or other compounds in the past four years.

Pushback from pill makers

So why is the government so hands-off? Whenever the Food and Drug Administration or Congress moves toward more oversight of supplements, manufacturers accuse the government of trying to interfere with consumers' freedom of choice.

We wonder how it is that consumers' freedom of choice means the industry gets a pass on meeting basic safety standards and providing accurate information. We believe Congress and the FDA should make supplements safer by taking these steps:

- Supplement manufacturers should be required to register their products with the FDA annually.
- The FDA should have the authority to order a recall of unsafe products.
- Requirements for supplement labeling should be strengthened to ensure that consistent, reliable safety information exists for all products.
- The FDA should post summaries of the serious adverse-event reports it receives from manufacturers and consumers on its website.
- The FDA should impose stiffer fines and penalties on companies that sell products that are illegally spiked with prescription drugs.

For a free guide to more than 100 commonly used supplements, go to ConsumerReports.org/health and click on Natural Health.

Jim Guest
JIM GUEST
President

Update on health-care reform

Even after the Supreme Court's decision in June to uphold core insurance provisions of the Affordable Care Act as constitutional, there has been no letup in the debate. Disagreement can be heard pretty much everywhere—on Capitol Hill, around the dinner table, across the blogosphere, and in the constant cycle of chatter on TV and radio.

This fiery debate has produced a tremendous amount of heat but not much light. There's still strong disagreement about what the law does—and what it doesn't do.

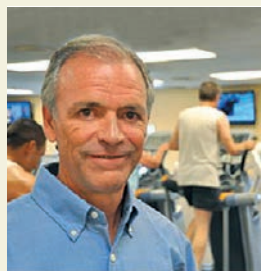
As a consumer organization, we've long believed that all people in the U.S. deserve better, more reliable, more affordable health care. On balance, we believe that the law delivers some real benefits for consumers. Young adults can now stay on their parents' insurance, and seniors can better afford the prescription drugs they need. As the law is phased in, Americans with pre-existing medical conditions will no longer be denied health insurance.

We've heard from a lot of people who are upset that they might be forced to buy

coverage they can't afford. The fact is that people who can afford to buy insurance but fail to are the only ones who will pay a fine. There will be help to defray the cost of insurance through tax credits; the lower a person's income, the larger the credit.

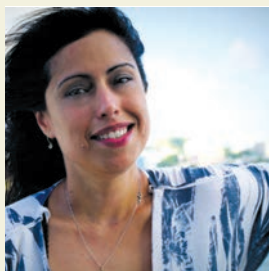
The Affordable Care Act makes the health-insurance system work for consumers, not the other way around. Since the law was passed in 2010, Consumers Union has been updating people on the changes and how to make the law work for them. We'll continue to do that. We'll also keep checking in with families with health-care challenges, including no insurance or inadequate insurance; small-business owners who wrestle with the cost of care; physicians who work in the system every day; and others, to see how they're faring.

The day the Supreme Court announced its ruling, we got in touch with a few of the people we've spoken to over the years as the health-care law was being developed. Here are their reactions as they look forward to the law being fully implemented:



'Small-business owners will have the potential to choose high-quality workers that were previously afraid to change jobs. As a small-business owner I am thrilled about the Supreme Court ruling.'

—ED MORRIS, owner of a fitness center in Franklin, N.C., whose double-digit health-insurance rate increases prevented him from getting adequate coverage for his employees.



'I can't afford to keep putting myself into debt, which I still have from getting and treating my cancer. For me, the Affordable Care Act signifies hope.'

—CINDY GOMEZ-SCHEMP, MOORHEAD, MINN., who has no insurance and has not been able to afford the tests needed to monitor her thyroid cancer.



'I believe that once the political rhetoric fades away and Americans have the opportunity to fully realize the benefits, people will recognize that the health-reform law was a huge and necessary step forward.'

—AMANDA BUCHANAN, WEISER, IDAHO, whose husband's job as a teacher does not offer an affordable group policy to cover the family. The couple buy private insurance for their two children; Amanda has been uninsured for the past three years.



Up front

Tips, trends, everyday products

Testing the claims

▶ 'Clean in a quicky with the Schticky'

The claim. Schticky and Sticky Buddy silicone rollers both claim to pick up cat and dog hair, lint, coins, and crumbs, and can be washed, dried, and reused. You can "clean your home in a quicky with the Schticky," pitched by Vince Shlomi, the inimitable ShamWow guy. Sticky Buddy offers "the power of glue without the goo!" Schticky, \$19.95 plus shipping and handling, comes with three rollers; Sticky Buddy, \$10 plus shipping and handling, comes with two, plus rubber fingers to

help lift embedded hair from carpet.

The check. We visited a friend with three long-haired dogs and one cat, and put the products to work.

Bottom line. They work, but you might want to schtick to other methods. Removing lint and hair from the rollers takes more work than the product videos indicate. We needed to rub them under a faucet and dry them on a lint-free cloth. (If you do that, take their side caps off so water doesn't flow into the tubes and leak out when you clean something else.) When faced with lots of hair, both rollers filled in one revolution and had to be cleaned before they'd pick up more.

For bigger jobs, a vacuum cleaner may be better (see our list at left); a regular lint roller works as well but fills up with lint and hair just as quickly, creating trash with its paper castoffs.

▶ CLOSE-UP

CR Best Buy vacuums great for pet hair

Kenmore Progressive 21614 bagged canister, \$300

Hoover WindTunnel Max UH30600 bagged upright, \$180

Eureka Boss Smart Vac 4870 bagged upright, \$160

Hoover WindTunnel T-Series Rewind UH70120 or **UH70110** bagless uprights, \$130

Bissell CleanView Helix Deluxe 71V9 or **71V9-2** (Lowe's) bagless uprights, \$100



WATCH HOW THEY WORKED

Use your smart phone to download the RedLaser or ShopSavvy app and scan the code for video.



Yoshiblu Skillet

▶ 'The greatest pan'

The claim. The "amazing" 10-inch Yoshiblu Skillet, made of "diamond infused nano-ceramic," is "the greatest pan you'll ever use," says its website. "You don't need oil, fat, or grease to cook with it," and it "wipes clean with ease." Yoshiblu's price? Ah, there's that old 99-cent lure: \$19.99 plus \$7.99 shipping and handling.

The check. We conducted our usual cookware tests on the Yoshiblu. We cooked eggs to see whether they slid or stuck, checked whether pancakes got evenly tan, tested for durability by rubbing the pan with steel wool, and used a lab instrument to measure the handle's sturdiness.

Bottom line. To oil or not to oil? Despite the website claim, the package instructions say, "Always apply a small amount of cooking oil before you start cooking." Eggs did slide off easily. And after 2,000 strokes with steel wool, the pan's coating survived in good shape, though by then, the eggs needed a little coaxing to slide off. Heating evenness was just so-so in our pancake test, and the handle wasn't very sturdy.

LUNCH Americans eat an average of three sandwiches a week, according to our recent survey.

Bread nutrition: Bagel or croissant?

WHEN WHITE BREAD is too boring for that turkey sandwich, what's a healthful alternative? We looked at nutrition stats for 33 bagels, croissants, flatbreads, pitas, rolls, and tortillas, and scored each based on calories, fats, sodium, sugars, iron, calcium, and fiber. We found Very Good products in most categories.

Scoring just Fair, generally because they're relatively high in fat: Udi's Gluten Free Plain Bagels, Trader Giotto's Focaccini (Trader Joe's), Nature's Promise White Flour Tortillas, and Kirkland Signature Butter Croissants (Costco). Four flatbreads our testers checked all received a score of Good. By comparison, sliced wheat bread (Pepperidge Farm Whole Grain 100% Whole Wheat) rates a Very Good; sliced white bread (Wonder), a Good.

Bottom line. Even among the Very Good breads, nutrition and weight vary, so check the numbers. Usually 100 percent whole-wheat breads or those with whole-wheat flour as their first ingredient are more healthful than others.

■ CLOSE-UP

The nutrition of a sandwich depends largely on what's between the bread:

Sliced turkey

60 calories, 1 gram of fat

Peanut butter and jelly

250 calories, 16 grams of fat

Beef bologna and cheese

280 calories, 25 grams of fat

Tuna (light, in water) and mayo

165 calories, 12 grams of fat



Ratings Sliced-bread alternatives

All scored Very Good for nutrition. From 33 tested.

Product	Per whole item					
	Weight (oz.)	Cost	Calories	Fat (g)	Sodium (mg)	Fiber (g)
BAGELS						
Thomas' Hearty Grains 100% Whole Wheat	3.4	\$0.63	240	2.0	400	7
Thomas' Plain Thins	1.6	0.31	110	1.0	210	4
Thomas' 100% Whole Wheat Thins	1.6	0.31	110	1.0	190	5
BUNS AND ROLLS						
Pepperidge Farm Deli Flats 7 Grain Thin Rolls	1.5	0.44	100	1.0	170	5
Nature's Own 100% Whole Wheat Sandwich Rounds	1.5	0.44	100	1.0	190	5
Nature's Own Healthy Multi-Grain Sandwich Rounds	1.5	0.44	100	1.0	170	4
Martin's Potato Rolls	1.9	0.44	130	1.5	200	3
Pepperidge Farm Deli Flats Soft 100% Whole Wheat Thin Rolls	1.5	0.44	100	1.5	170	5
J.J. Cassone of New York Wheat Bran Sandwich Rolls	2.5	0.50	190	2.5	380	4
Nature's Pride 100% Whole Wheat Bakery Buns	2.6	0.38	180	2.5	250	5
PITAS						
Best Pita Whole Wheat Pocket	1.3	0.33	80	0	62	3
TORTILLAS						
Mission Carb Balance Flour Medium Soft Taco	1.5	0.63	120	3.0	280	13*

*Especially high in fiber because of added food starch and powdered cellulose.



Let's talk (sliced) turkey

OUR TASTERS TRIED 18 packaged turkey slices, and although none would beat meat sliced off the bone, some are worthy alternatives if you want to save a little money or skip a deli line. The top-rated products tend to be tender, flavorful, and made from whole meat sliced from the breast rather than reformed from various pieces. And the worst? To quote our tasters, Market Pantry Ultra Thin roast turkey slices from Target are “slick” and “sour.” Land O’Frost smoked turkey slices are “rubbery, with a chewy rind.”

All earned a Good score for nutrition, based on fairly low energy density (calories per gram of food), fats, sodium, sugars, and iron. Per two-slice serving, the recommended products have 45 to 60 calories, zero to 1 gram of fat, and 360 to 620 milligrams of sodium. Two of the three Hillshire Farm products have the most sodium; Market Pantry Less Sodium and Applegate have the least.

Sodium nitrite and nitrate are often added to sliced turkey as preservatives,

but those compounds, which occur naturally in some foods, may form nitrosamines, which can cause cancer in lab animals. Three tested products—Applegate Naturals and the two from Hormel—claim “no nitrates or nitrites added.” Kirkland Signature has no label claim, but the maker told us that it also doesn’t add nitrates. The other products have added nitrites.

Bottom line. The 10 recommended turkey slices include six CR Best Buys. Among the top roasted choices, Kirkland Signature (Costco) and Oscar Mayer Carving Board are thick, flavorful whole-meat slices. Kirkland Signature comes in three 14-ounce packages, so if you choose it, plan to feed a crew. (The package recommends eating it within seven days of opening it.)

Oscar Mayer Deli Fresh slices are thin and tender, with a hint of smoke. Among the top smoked choices, Oscar Mayer Carving Board and Hormel have thick slices that taste like turkey-ham. Oscar Mayer Deli Fresh has thin turkey slices with a big smoky flavor.

Ratings

Within types, in taste order.

☒ CR Best Buy
☒ Recommended

Rec.	Product	Cost per 2-oz. serving
ROASTED		
VERY GOOD		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Kirkland Signature Sliced (Costco)	\$0.56
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Oscar Mayer Deli Fresh	0.78
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Oscar Mayer Carving Board	1.08
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Market Pantry Ultra Thin Less Sodium (Target)	0.64
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Applegate Naturals	1.54
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Bar-S Deli Shaved	0.54
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Hillshire Farm Deli Select Ultra Thin	0.82
GOOD		
	Buddig Deli Cuts	0.54
	Hillshire Farm Deli Select Ultra Thin Lower Sodium	0.92
	Hormel Natural Choice Deli	0.80
	Land O’Frost Premium	0.54
	Market Pantry Ultra Thin (Target)	0.66
SMOKED		
VERY GOOD		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Oscar Mayer Carving Board Applewood	1.18
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Oscar Mayer Deli Fresh	0.76
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Hormel Natural Choice Deli	0.68
GOOD		
	Buddig Deli Cuts Hickory	0.54
	Hillshire Farm Deli Select Mesquite Ultra Thin	0.84
	Land O’Frost Premium Hickory	0.54

Generic Plavix costs \$15 ... or \$200

The blockbuster anti-clotting drug Plavix was released in generic version (clopidogrel) in May, but variations in its price could make your blood boil. At 30 pharmacies we contacted around the U.S., prices for a month’s supply of a generic 75-milligram dose ranged from less than \$15 at one Costco pharmacy (and \$15 at the online drugstore Healthwarehouse.com) to more than \$200 at seven Walgreens stores. Walmart consistently quoted a price of less than \$50, as did several independent pharmacies.

If you want to stick with brand-name Plavix, there’s good news, at least for now. The drug’s manufacturer is running a discount co-pay program in which you pay no more than \$37 out of pocket for a 30-day supply and the maker picks up the tab after that, to a max of \$176.50 per month. (Restrictions apply, so be sure to read the fine print.) The discount program expires on Dec. 31.

Bottom line. If you’re in the market for generic Plavix, it pays to shop around.



BIG BUCKS? We found that prices for clopidogrel differ hugely.



What's that smell? Ridding a car of odors

IF YOUR CAR has ever harbored spilled coffee, a sick child, or a smoker, you know how hard it can be to remove a bad smell.

Mike Pennington, director of training and customer relations for Meguiar's automotive products, separates odors into two types: those for which the source is

obvious and the rest. First, the obvious: Toss any leftovers or trash before they can stink up the car, and wipe up or vacuum any dirt you've tracked in as soon as you can. If a spill happens while you're driving, Pennington says, pull off the road safely and soak up any liquid with paper

or cloth towels (keep some in the car) before it seeps into the car's fabric. If the mess has hit the floor, remove the floor mats and shampoo them as soon as you can at a hand car wash or at home using a solution of water and detergent. Test the cleaner in a small area first to make sure it won't stain. Household cleaners should work on most surfaces, but if necessary, buy a product designed for the surface you're working on—carpet, leather, or vinyl—at an automotive supply shop.

Room fresheners often just mask a smell, one expert told us, but industrial-strength odor eliminators purchased from a home or auto-supply store can chemically neutralize the odor and remove it. Other suggestions included leaving an open container of baking soda in a smelly car. Sprinkle it on the carpet and under the floor mats, then vacuum up what shows, and where it doesn't show, leave it. But make sure the surfaces are dry. "If the floor is wet and you throw the baking soda down," says a car wash manager, "it turns into rocks and will not kill the odor." From another car wash came another remedy: an open bag of coffee beans left in the car overnight. "It acts like a filter," a staffer explained.

A search for answers from National Public Radio's Car Talk hosts Ray and Tom

Rooming with Rover

Although many of us think of pets as family members, most hotels don't. But more and more are welcoming well-behaved dogs and cats. Some hotels offer beds, floor mats, food bowls, treats in the minibar, and for an extra fee, walking or pet-sitting services, kenneling, even in-house doggie massage.

Choice Hotels (parent of Clarion, Comfort, Quality, and Sleep inns, and Econo Lodge, among others) has more than 2,500 pet-friendly locations; Best Western, about 1,600. Even DoubleTree, Hyatt, Ritz-Carlton, and other well-heeled chains roll out the welcome mat for Fido and Fifi. But not all hotels within a chain have the same policy. Hotels may prohibit dogs above a certain size or may bar aggressive breeds. Owners usually must sign a waiver accepting responsibility for any damage.

Some hotels reserve specific rooms for pets and their owners; others use any room that's available. Marriott, which doesn't set rooms aside, claims to follow strict procedures after each checkout, including steam cleaning, vacuuming, dusting, and inspecting the premises according to

standards set by Ecolab, a company that specializes in cleaning services.

Charges vary. The Ritz-Carlton in Sarasota, Fla., charges \$125 for "maintenance and restoration"; The DoubleTree Grand in Key West, Fla., charges \$75 per stay and reserves the right to tack on \$100 for "deep cleaning." Other hotels aren't as demanding. The Quality Inn in Rock Hill, S.C., charges \$10 per

night per pet. At Motel 6, there's no fee.

Bottom line. If you're traveling with a pet, call the hotel ahead of time for information. (On hotel websites, pet policies are often hard to find and vague.) Bring vaccination records, which are required by some hotels. And try to make sure your pet behaves: You could be evicted if he or she is loud, disruptive, or left unattended.



Magliozzi to drivers of odoriferous cars yields more tips. A fishy smell? Could be antifreeze leaking into the car through the heating system. A smell that arrives when the A/C is first on? Check whether the evaporator drain is blocked. Mold from a water leak? Pull out the carpet and pad underneath, vacuum both sides, turn the carpet over, spray the back with a bleach solution or other fungicide to kill mold spores, then let it bake in the sun. (Our experts advise rinsing off the solution with water before drying the mat.)

What about spilled milk? “There is almost nothing worse than the smell of rotten milk in a car carpet,” Tom Magliozzi once told a listener. He suggested selling the car to an unsuspecting dairy farmer.

■ DID YOU KNOW?

Do it yourself and save

Your own detective work (to find the smell) and elbow grease (to clear it) can save a lot of money. A professional detailer charges up to \$1,000 for removing carpets and seats, and shampooing and steam cleaning a car’s interior. That’s enough to make any car owner cry over spilled milk.

For cleaner indoor air, maintain appliances

A new smart-phone app from the American Lung Association will assess the air quality outside your house (download it free at lung.org/stateoftheairapp or in Android and Apple markets)—but how about the air inside? Many Americans fail to maintain household appliances that affect indoor air quality, according to a recent survey by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. Almost 40 percent of Americans rarely or never clean their humidifier or kitchen range hood, for example, though they use it daily. One-fourth have never cleaned or replaced their furnace filter, which should be checked monthly and cleaned or replaced if it’s dirty. Ignoring maintenance schedules may not only make those devices less effective; it can harm your health. Neglecting a bathroom fan or dehumidifier may cause mold to form, for example; failing to clean a humidifier rigorously can result in growth of fungi and bacteria that cause lung inflammation; and allowing creosote to build up in a wood-burning stove or fireplace can lead to a fire.



BREATHE BETTER
Humidifiers need frequent cleaning.

How often Americans clean or replace ...

Recommended cleaning	Products	% of frequent users cleaning as often as recommended
Once every few months	Bathroom exhaust fan	16
	Kitchen range hood	23
Once a month or more	Humidifier	43
	Dehumidifier	44
	Portable air filter/purifier	49
	Wood-burning stove/fireplace	65

The new way to buy savings bonds



The current 2.2 percent rate on Series I savings bonds may be tempting, but buying the bonds has become more complicated. You can no longer purchase paper Series I and EE savings bonds—those convenient envelope-stuffer gifts—at banks and credit unions; you must buy electronic bonds through the Treasury Department’s web-based system, TreasuryDirect. In buying a savings bond for her young nephew, our reporter learned that the process can be clunky. Here’s help:

First, go to treasurydirect.gov and click on “Open an Account.” Have on hand your Social Security or taxpayer identification number (and the recipient’s, if it’s a gift), the savings or checking account number from which you’ll be

making purchases, and the institution’s routing number. To open an account for a child, the parent or guardian must first set up his or her own account, then the child’s account. The accounts are linked, and the parent has control until the child turns 18.

Once you receive your account number and enter it, TreasuryDirect will send you an e-mail with a one-time “passcode”—different from the account password—to access the account. Registering your computer eliminates the need for a passcode each time you log in.

You choose security settings, then add a “registration,” or owner. Choose “sole owner” if one person—you or a gift recipient—will own the bond. Choose “primary owner” if two people will own the bond (the site lets you designate a second-named registrant). Choose “beneficiary” only to designate who gets the bond when you die. Next, TreasuryDirect takes you to a new page, where you choose the owner’s name from the “Add New Registration” drop-down menu.

If you’re buying for someone who doesn’t yet have a TreasuryDirect account, you can still buy the bond by clicking “This is a Gift” during purchase. Until you transfer the bond to the recipient, it will be stored in a virtual gift box.

Series I and EE savings bonds have a fixed rate of return. New EE bonds’ current rate is 0.6 percent. Series I bonds also have a variable, semiannual inflation rate that is adjusted in May and November. You can buy electronic bonds in any denomination between \$25 and \$10,000, down to the penny. They’re bought at face value: A \$50 bond costs \$50. Interest begins to accrue at the point of purchase.

To get a piece of paper to hand the recipient, print out a gift certificate in one of several designs offered on the TreasuryDirect site, on any printable surface you like.

For a demonstration on buying a gift savings bond, go to treasurydirect.gov/indiv/planning/plan_giftsdemo.htm.

■ DID YOU KNOW?

How to get a paper bond

There’s still one way to buy a paper Series I bond: through a tax refund. You’ll need to complete IRS Form 8888, Allocation of Refund. You must purchase paper bonds in multiples of \$50. For specifics, go to irs.gov.

5-MINUTE CONSULT

The price of being nice

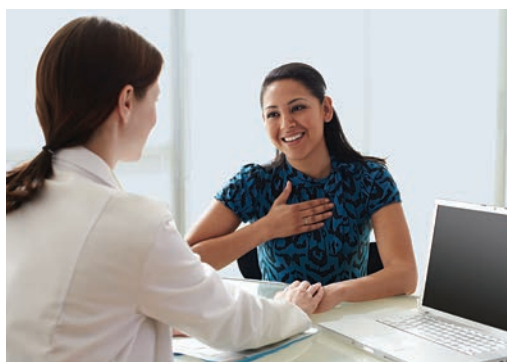


Only Avitzur, M.D., a board-certified neurologist, is a medical adviser to Consumer Reports.

In more than two decades of practice, I've not been asked even once by a patient whether I've washed my hands, even though many people know that the hands of doctors and nurses can teem with infectious diseases. We're all naturally reluctant to be impolite, and often that's a good thing. But a doctor-patient interaction is not a social occasion. Its only purpose is to protect your health—and letting your fear of offending the doctor trump all reason can have harmful consequences.

Here are six scenarios in which you could become a victim of your own politeness.

You feel pressured into signing an informed consent form. Initiated by the doctor, informed consent is intended to be a two-way discussion in which the patient learns about the risks and benefits of an intervention the doctor is suggesting and



SPEAK UP Being assertive and asking questions of your doctor is not the same as being rude.

then decides whether to agree to it. Though ethical guidelines dictate that those discussions be free of coercion, you might still feel pressure to agree to the treatment, especially if a doctor or nurse is hovering over you with a pen. If the situation isn't an emergency and you have questions, voice them, or ask whether you can have a day to think about it before making a decision.

CLAIM CHECK

Will BrainStrong boost your brain?

"What did I walk into this room for?" a woman wonders in the TV ad. "Your sunglasses," her dog answers from the couch. "Need a memory boost?" a narrator asks. "Now there's BrainStrong." It closes with the tag line "Nourish your brain."

BrainStrong (\$17 to \$30 for a 30-day supply) is a line of nutritional supplements with an algae-derived form of docosahexaenoic acid (DHA), an omega-3 fatty acid found in fish. The company says it provides "optimized DHA nourishment" for almost every life stage. A kids' version "helps support your child's brain development"; an adult formula is "clinically shown to improve adult memory." There's also a version for toddlers and one for pregnant women.

The deal with DHA

It's true that DHA is critical for adult brain function and fetal and infant eye and nervous-system development. And data show that dietary consumption of DHA is typically low in Western countries.



But the evidence is insufficient to determine whether taking supplements of DHA improves cognitive development or performance. The American Academy of Pediatrics has no position on omega-3 fatty-acid supplementation in children, saying that large clinical studies are lacking.

A spokeswoman for BrainStrong referred us to an American Heart Association recommendation that adults who don't get enough omega-3s from food should take a supplement. But that advice applies only to people with heart disease or high triglycerides, for whom there's some good evidence that omega-3 supplements can be beneficial.

Bottom line. Save your money. Most healthy people can get all the DHA they need from two servings a week of low-mercury fatty fish, such as wild salmon, mackerel, and tilapia. Vegetarians can get a different kind of omega-3 from flaxseed, walnuts, and canola oil. Ask your doctor before taking any supplement or giving one to a child. Like all supplements, BrainStrong is not FDA-reviewed for safety or efficacy.

The treatment is too costly.

Patients often hesitate to admit that they can't afford treatment because they're embarrassed. The fact is that doctors often don't know the actual costs of various medications and therapies, but if you raise your concerns, we can help you find the answer. We'd rather work on it together now than discover later that you never picked up your prescription.

You want a second opinion.

Some people—my parents among them—are so afraid of hurting their doctors' feelings with this request that they tend to avoid it entirely, even when their better instincts suggest otherwise. But most doctors welcome it, and if they don't, it should raise a red flag.

You didn't follow the doctor's orders.

It's hard to fess up when you haven't been compliant. But believe it or not, medical personnel tend to be among the worst offenders in this area, so we often understand on a gut level when you tell us you didn't stick with the regimen we prescribed. Let us know so that we can develop a plan you're more likely to follow.

Your doctor sells products. Although the American College of Physicians and the American Medical Association frown on it, some practitioners sell items such as supplements or dermatologic products in their offices or on their websites. Some of my patients have told me that they've felt compelled to buy such things, especially when a doctor pitched them aggressively. Having a financial stake in promoting a product is a conflict of interest and subverts the responsibility of physicians to put patients' interests first. This is a situation in which you should just say no.

You don't want to enroll in a study, but your doctor will get a fee if you do.

Imagine your doctor has advised you to enroll in a clinical trial after disclosing to you—as ethical guidelines state—that he or she will get a referral fee if you sign up. You don't want to do the trial, regardless of whether your doctor profits from it. But you worry that if you decline, the doctor might take it to mean you think he or she is corrupt. Decide based on what's best for you. Your doctor will get over it.

Legal DIY sites no match for a pro

FOR A FRACTION of what you'd pay a lawyer, websites such as LegalZoom, Nolo, and Rocket Lawyer can help you create your own will, power of attorney, and other important legal documents. But can they really save you a visit to a lawyer?

We recently evaluated those three services. Using their online worksheets or downloads, we created a will, a car bill of sale for a seller, a home lease for a small landlord, and a promissory note. We then asked three law professors—Gerry W. Beyer of Texas Tech University School of Law, who specializes in estates and trusts; Richard K. Neumann of Hofstra University, a contract specialist; and Norman Silber, an expert in consumer and commercial law at Hofstra and Yale—to review in a blind test the processes and resulting documents.

The verdict. Using any of the three services is generally better than drafting the documents yourself without legal training or not having them at all. But unless your needs are simple—say, you want to leave your entire estate to your spouse—none of the will-writing products is likely to entirely meet your needs. And in some cases, the other documents aren't specific enough or contain language that could lead to “an unintended result,” in Silber's words.

A test of wills

Rocket Lawyer provides online, guided interviews for all four of the drafted documents. LegalZoom similarly steers users through will and lease questionnaires, and offers static instructions for the other documents. Nolo's will-writing software, Quicken WillMaker Plus (available as a Windows-only download and CD-ROM), includes an interactive interview. Nolo's other documents are downloaded forms with static instructions.



Beyer found WillMaker Plus to be the best of the three—competent, though far from ideal, for drawing up a simple will. Rocket Lawyer also makes a good simple will. But Beyer advises consulting a lawyer for more complex situations.

In some cases, the services aren't very flexible. WillMaker Plus, for instance, won't let a child's trust go beyond age 35, though the law puts no upper age limits on when a trust must dissolve. In other instances, they are too flexible; after we finished the Rocket Lawyer interview, the program allowed us to edit the completed will. LegalZoom let us put anything we liked in the special-directives section, the part of the will where you can include issues not addressed in the interview. Both features could lead a user to add clauses that contradict other parts of the will.

Our reviewers weren't completely satisfied with the other documents, though

they preferred Rocket Lawyer's and LegalZoom's materials to Nolo's. The lack of a federal lead-paint disclosure in the Nolo fixed-term lease instructions is a black mark, Neumann says. (Nolo told us it sells other, less “bare bones” leases that include or link to the disclosure.)

Need to lawyer up?

The Rocket Lawyer and LegalZoom documents didn't always appear tailored to our jurisdiction, Westchester County, N.Y. The LegalZoom lease advises conflicting parties to “go to the presiding judge of the county,” an office that doesn't exist.

Silber calls Nolo's promissory note instructions and glossary “perfunctory.” Rocket Lawyer's promissory note and interview are “the best of a fair-to-average bunch,” he says.

Bottom line. The sites offer basic legal advice that might help save you money spent on a lawyer. If you use them for document prep, at minimum get all needed signatures to preserve your rights and prevent disputes, Silber says.

But many consumers are better off consulting a lawyer. The websites let you search for one and provide such information as education, background, and licenses. LegalZoom's subscription legal service (see box at left) includes customer reviews of lawyers, and Rocket Lawyer's details pricing. We recommend checking with your state bar association for any disciplinary actions.

Websites offer legal forms and more

► **LegalZoom** Advantage Standard plan: \$8 a month. Access to downloadable legal documents and instructions; members get a 10 percent discount on interview-based forms (such as wills). Legal Advantage Plus plan (\$15 for one month, \$40.50 for three months, and \$72 for six months) adds 30-minute consultations on separate legal topics with a lawyer licensed in your state. Wills, sold separately, start at \$69.

► **Nolo** At *nolo.com*, Quicken WillMaker

Plus 2012 costs \$43 as a download and \$52 as a CD-ROM. Other downloadable forms and instructions generally range from \$8 to \$21. Free info and lawyer database.

► **Rocket Lawyer** Basic Legal Plan: free for one week, then \$20 monthly or \$120 annually. Access to documents and instructions, and other legal information. After three months, you get 30-minute consultations with a lawyer licensed in your state for each new legal topic.

▶ Magnets still attract safety concerns

In 2009 the Consumer Product Safety Commission banned the sale of children's toys that included super-strong magnets. It had received dozens of reports of kids swallowing them, resulting in serious injuries and in one case death.

But the problem didn't go away. The magnets have been repositioned as adult toys, sold in packages of hundreds of BB-sized balls that can be formed into countless shapes, such as a striped tie featured on the cover of a recent Brookstone catalog.

And kids are still ingesting them. A group of 17 pediatric gastroenterologists recently met with the CPSC about the number of serious stomach and intestinal injuries they continue to see when kids swallow the magnets. Some doctors recommend banning their sale altogether.

The magnets, which are made of the rare-earth mineral neodymium, stick together with such force that if they're ingested, they can bore holes in the stomach or intestines, sometimes causing blood poisoning and requiring emergency surgery. After swallowing eight magnets in April, 22-month-old Braylon Jordan of Kiln, Miss., needed to have almost all of his small intestine removed, leaving him dependent on intravenous nutrition.

The marketplace for such magnetic toys has flourished. It includes brands such as Buckyballs, Magnet Balls, Zen Magnets, and NeoCube, the first to hit the market in 2008. The magnets can be marketed as adult desk toys because their labels state they're intended only for grown-ups or age 14 and older. But despite labeling changes and

prominent warnings on products such as Buckyballs, doctors worry that they're sometimes marketed inappropriately online. For example, Toys "R" Us sells Buckyballs online, promoting the set "for endless hours of play," with no warning or age restriction. A Kmart online listing for a set of 216 Buckyballs incorrectly notes it is for age "12 & older" and carries no other warning.

"Even when parents are aware of the risks of these products, keeping them out of the reach of young children is difficult," says Robert E. Kramer, M.D., associate professor of pediatrics and director of endoscopy at Children's Hospital Colorado. "With hundreds of tiny balls in one set, a few may drop on the floor or in furniture, and you wouldn't even realize they're missing." He says that at least 15 patients have been treated at his hospital since 2010 after swallowing such magnets.

Incidents despite warnings

Patients include even older children. Mariah Montoya, 12, was treated in January at the Colorado hospital after she accidentally swallowed three Buckyballs after some friends dared her to try a fake tongue piercing.

Should such novelty products be on the market if they can cause serious injuries in the wrong hands? "Provided appropriate precautions are taken to ensure that the purchaser understands how to use it

NOVELTY Super magnets are now marketed only to adults, but kids continue to be injured by them.



correctly and is warned not to use it incorrectly, we believe the answer is yes," says Craig Zucker, CEO of Buckyballs manufacturer Maxfield and Oberton. Buckyballs generate annual sales of \$25 million, according to the company.

A recent report by the nonprofit child safety group Kids In Danger analyzed reports filed with the CPSC since January 2010 and obtained under the Freedom of Information Act or posted on SaferProducts.gov. At least 38 cases involving BB-sized magnets were reported; 17 children required surgery and eight children required other medical treatment.

CPSC spokesman Scott Wolfson says the risk posed by the magnets "is a very high-priority hazard for the agency right now." He says all options including recalls and a ban are on the table for consideration. Given the severity of risk and continued injury despite warnings and sale bans to small kids, Consumers Union, the advocacy arm of Consumer Reports, believes that such products should be removed from the market. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand of New York recently called for a retail ban on the magnets.

Mark Gilger, M.D., chief of pediatric gastroenterology at Texas Children's Hospital, says you shouldn't have magnets in your home if you have children, and if you suspect a child has swallowed any, seek emergency medical care immediately.

▶ ON THE RECORD

'Doctors are seeing patients who received serious injuries to hips, knees, and lower backs while taking Zumba classes.'

—ONLY AVITZUR, M.D.

Consumer Reports medical adviser



HOW TO BEAT ZUMBA STRESS

Use your smart phone to download the RedLaser or ShopSavvy app and scan the code for video.



RECALLS

AUTOMOBILES

'11-'12 Chevrolet Cruze

Spilled or dripping oil may collect in the engine shield near a hot engine or exhaust system. The oil and engine shield may ignite.

MODELS: 413,148 '11-'12 Chevrolet Cruze vehicles manufactured from Oct. 2, 2009, through May 31, 2012.

WHAT TO DO: General Motors will notify owners, and dealers will modify the engine shield to prevent fluid from contacting it. On vehicles with a manual transmission, the dealer will apply protective tape to the electronic power steering wire harness. Call Chevrolet at 866-694-6546 for more details.



POWER TOOLS

Kawasaki cordless drill

Trigger switches can short and generate excessive heat, posing a burn hazard.

PRODUCTS: 45,000 drills sold at Costco from May 2011 through February 2012 for \$50.

WHAT TO DO: Stop using the drill. Register at alltrade2.fox-international.com to get a free replacement drill, including free shipping. Do not return the drill to the store.



HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTS

Bel Air outdoor wall-mount lantern

Electrical short can occur, posing fire and burn hazards.

PRODUCTS: 99,700 lanterns sold at Lowe's and lighting stores from June 2006 through May 2012 for \$48.

WHAT TO DO: Stop using the light. Contact Bel Air at 888-770-7018 or go to regcen.com/belairlighting for a free replacement lantern.



Thomas Lighting ceiling-mount light fixture

Socket wire insulation can degrade, exposing charged wires, which could pass electricity to the metal canopy.

PRODUCTS: 83,750 fixtures sold at electrical distributors from July 2010 through July 2011 for \$19 to \$50. Thomas has had 11 reports of defective fixtures.

WHAT TO DO: Stop using the fixture. Call Thomas at 800-764-0756 or go to thomaslighting.com for a free in-home repair of the fixture.



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0912PD1



'LEAN' IS RIGHT The photo on the box shows a chunky filling that's oozing out. In our sample, the pocket was far from full.



Picture vs. product

Some food bears little resemblance to what's on the box

WE'VE HEARD YOUR complaints. About a far-from-full carton of frozen Szechuan chicken: "I guess you need two boxes if you want the full serving." About crackers: "I found crackers ¼ the size of the one pictured on the box—a shock!" About a turkey dinner with appetizing slices on the box and brown blobs inside: "Outrageous!"

So we went shopping and bought a cart full of foods you told us look nothing like their pictures, plus others we thought might be candidates. Some products ap-

peared very much as pictured, so you may have bought a single problem package: a carton of mint-chip ice cream with "not one chocolate chip anywhere in the contents! Not one!!" Other products weren't sold any more, among them Ruffles Beer Battered Onion Rings. The bag boasted a big photo of fried onion rings, which annoyed three readers who opened it to find what unnoticed tiny type revealed: flavored potato chips.

Still, we found plenty of products whose photographs looked far more enticing than the reality inside. One staffer prepared

packages of the nominated foods, and three staffers judged them to be either as pictured, close, or not close. On these pages, the not-close contenders. The moral: Don't judge every product by its picture.

Send us your candidates

We'd love to see more examples of food that bears little resemblance to photos on the package. E-mail them to SellingIt@cro.consumer.org or mail them to Selling It, 101 Truman Ave., Yonkers, NY 10703.





❑ Holey moly

The actual crisps are smaller, have little holes that aren't pictured, and appear to be coated with less cheese.



❑ Try to twirl this

The real thing has less sauce, the meatballs are smaller and more shriveled, and the spaghetti is in pieces, not long strands.



❑ May we have seconds?

The product is shown overflowing from a bowl, but open the box and you realize that's a really little bowl. In the one sold with the product, the food comes up barely a third of the way to the top.

❑ Now you see it, now you don't

Where did those distinct red and green vegetables go? The actual soup, a New York reader noted, is "brown mush with carrots. You couldn't even identify individual lentils. Boo hiss."



❑ Size matters

Some products get away with a blown-up picture by saying "enlarged to show texture." This one doesn't have that disclaimer, yet the real cakes are about half the size shown.





Vitamins & supplements

10 dangers that may surprise you

MORE THAN HALF of American adults take vitamins, minerals, herbs, or other nutritional supplements. Some of those products aren't especially helpful, readers told us in a recent survey, but that aside, don't assume they're safe because they're "all natural." They may be neither, as a matter of fact. Here are 10 hazards that we've distilled from interviews with experts, published research, and our own analysis of reports of serious adverse

events submitted to the Food and Drug Administration, which we obtained through a Freedom of Information Act request. Read and be warned.

1 Supplements are not risk-free.

More than 6,300 reports of serious adverse events associated with dietary supplements, including vitamins and herbs, streamed into the FDA from supplement companies, consumers, health-care

providers, and others between 2007 and mid-April of 2012. The reports by themselves don't prove the supplements caused the problems, but the raw numbers are cause for some concern. Symptoms included signs of heart, kidney, or liver problems, aches, allergic reactions, fatigue, nausea, pains, and vomiting.

The reports described more than 10,300 serious outcomes (some included more than one), including 115 deaths and more than 2,100 hospitalizations, 1,000 serious injuries or illnesses, 900 emergency-room visits, and some 4,000 other important medical events.

The FDA gets far more reports about serious problems with prescription medication than about supplements. But there's a big difference between the two, notes Pieter Cohen, M.D., an internist at Cambridge Health Alliance in Massachusetts with a special interest in supplements. "These powerful medications with power-

ful side effects are actually saving lives when used appropriately,” he says of prescription drugs. “But when healthy consumers use supplements, there’s rarely, if ever, a powerful lifesaving effect.”

The FDA suspects most supplement problems never come to its attention, says Daniel Fabricant, Ph.D., director of the agency’s Division of Dietary Supplement Programs. But those that do are still useful because they can raise red flags about a developing problem. For instance, last year the agency noted seven reports of serious health problems regarding consumers who took Soladek vitamin solution, marketed by Indo Pharma of the Dominican Republic. When the FDA learned that tested samples contained vitamins A and D at concentrations many times the recommended daily allowances, it issued a consumer warning.

Why not simply order a problem product off the market? Current laws make that so difficult for the FDA that to date it has banned only one ingredient, ephedrine alkaloids. That effort dragged on for a decade, during which ephedra weight-loss products were implicated in thousands of adverse events, including deaths.

Protect yourself. Type the name of the supplement you’re interested in into the search box at www.fda.gov to see whether it has been subject to warnings, alerts, or voluntary recalls. If you suspect you’re having a bad reaction to a supplement, tell your doctor. You can also report your problem to the FDA at 800-332-1088 or www.fda.gov/medwatch.

2 Some supplements are really prescription drugs.

Fabricant has said that dietary supplements spiked with prescription drugs are “the largest threat” to consumer safety. Since 2008 there have been recalls of more than 400 such products, mostly those marketed for bodybuilding, sexual enhancement, and weight loss, according to the FDA.

We’ve seen many recalled products that have contained the same or similar active ingredients as prescription drugs, such as sildenafil (Viagra), tadalafil (Cialis), and sibutramine (Meridia, a weight-loss drug that was withdrawn from the market in 2010 because of evidence that it increased the risk of heart attacks and strokes). Others contained synthetic steroids.

Those adulterated products can cause some of the same side effects and interac-

tions that consumers may have been trying to avoid by choosing supplements over drugs. The FDA has received reports of strokes, acute liver injury, kidney failure, pulmonary embolism (blood clots in the lung), and death associated with drug-tainted supplements.

“A number of the spiked sexual enhancement products claim to work within 20 to 45 minutes,” Fabricant said on the FDA’s website. “When we see a product that makes claims above and beyond what a dietary supplement might do—above supporting health—and within a time frame of a few minutes, it tips us off that we might have a spiked product.”

Protect yourself. Slim down with 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. If you suspect you’ve purchased a product that is tainted with undeclared prescription drugs or steroids, send an e-mail about it to the FDA, at taintedproducts@fda.hhs.gov.

3 You can overdose on vitamins and minerals.

Unless your health-care provider tells you that you need more than 100 percent of the recommended daily intake of a

particular nutrient, you probably don’t.

“It doesn’t make sense to me to take huge doses of vitamins and minerals unless there’s a diagnosed problem, because there is so little evidence that they do good and sometimes a possibility that they might do harm,” says Marion Nestle, M.P.H., Ph.D., a professor of nutrition, food studies, and public health at New York University.

Megadoses of the fat-soluble vitamins A, D, E, and K can cause problems, and even some standard doses may interfere with certain prescription medicine. Some people may experience adverse effects from too much calcium or iron.

The table on page 21 shows the maximum daily intake of key nutrients that the Institute of Medicine has determined is unlikely to pose a risk of adverse health effects. (The numbers apply to the general population, not to those who may need supplementation because of a medical condition.)

It’s surprisingly easy to overdo it. For instance, a 50-something woman who’s worried about her bones might eat a breakfast of Whole Grain Total cereal, which contains around 1,000 milligrams of calcium per serving, with a half-cup of skim milk (150 milligrams of calcium), and take

Warnings we like to see

Makers of nutritional supplements have no legal obligation to put warnings about possible drug interactions on their products, but nothing’s stopping them if they want to. St. John’s wort is especially prone to drug interactions, and most of the 17 St. John’s wort product labels we reviewed did contain a general warning or named specific drugs or drug classes. One of the most complete set of warnings we saw was on this Vitamin Shoppe bottle. It does a good job of alerting users to the herb’s important interactions with anti-HIV medications, blood thinners, oral contraceptives, prescription antidepressants, and transplant drugs.

WARNING: Do not use St. John’s Wort if you are pregnant, nursing or taking anti-depressants, HIV protease inhibitors (such as Indinavir) or drugs to prevent organ transplant rejection (such as Cyclosporine). Consult your physician before use if you are taking oral contraceptives, anticoagulant medication (such as Warfarin), selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors, or any other medication. Limit exposure to sun and other sources of ultraviolet light. Stop use and ask a doctor if you develop a rash.



a calcium supplement (500 milligrams) on top of her One-A-Day Menopause Formula multivitamin, which includes 300 milligrams of calcium. She'd already be coming close to the upper tolerable daily calcium limit of 2,000 milligrams.

Protect yourself. Using information from the labels on the supplements and food you routinely consume, add up your total daily exposure to everything, and then check our table on page 21 to see whether you're overdoing it. If your doctor says you need more of a specific nutrient than you can get from food (or sun exposure, in the case of vitamin D), a single-ingredient pill may be sufficient.

4 You can't depend on warning labels.

For one thing, the FDA doesn't require them on supplements. There is an exception: Supplements that contain iron must warn about accidental overdosing and fatal poisoning in children.

But supplement makers can provide warning labels if they want to. We went shopping to see what warnings, if any, we would find on labels from 14 varieties of supplements. After looking at 233 products, all purchased online or in stores in the New York City metropolitan area in the spring of 2012, we can report that the only thing consistent about the labels is

their lack of consistency.

Good news first: 100 percent of the 15 brands we bought that contained iron had the required warning.

Of the 233 labels we examined, most included only general warnings, such as those about not using the product during pregnancy or nursing, or about possible unspecified drug interactions. But specific warnings were rarer. Forty percent of labels warned people against taking the supplement if they had a medical condition, but only some cited an ailment, such as a bleeding disorder; 36 percent warned of possible adverse reactions; but only 13 percent warned of possible interactions with a specific drug or type of drug.

Five of our 20 samples of 5-HTP, a mood and sleep supplement, carried warnings about a possible interaction with drugs for Parkinson's disease.

While it's known that St. John's wort can reduce the effectiveness of certain prescription drugs, including birth-control pills and blood thinners such as warfarin (Coumadin), only two of the 17 samples of it we purchased warned explicitly about those hazards. Ginkgo biloba can also interfere with blood thinners, but we saw a warning about that possible interaction on just one bottle of ginkgo.

"Some companies go with an overabundance of caution, and that's certainly their



It's surprisingly easy to overdose on some vitamins and minerals.

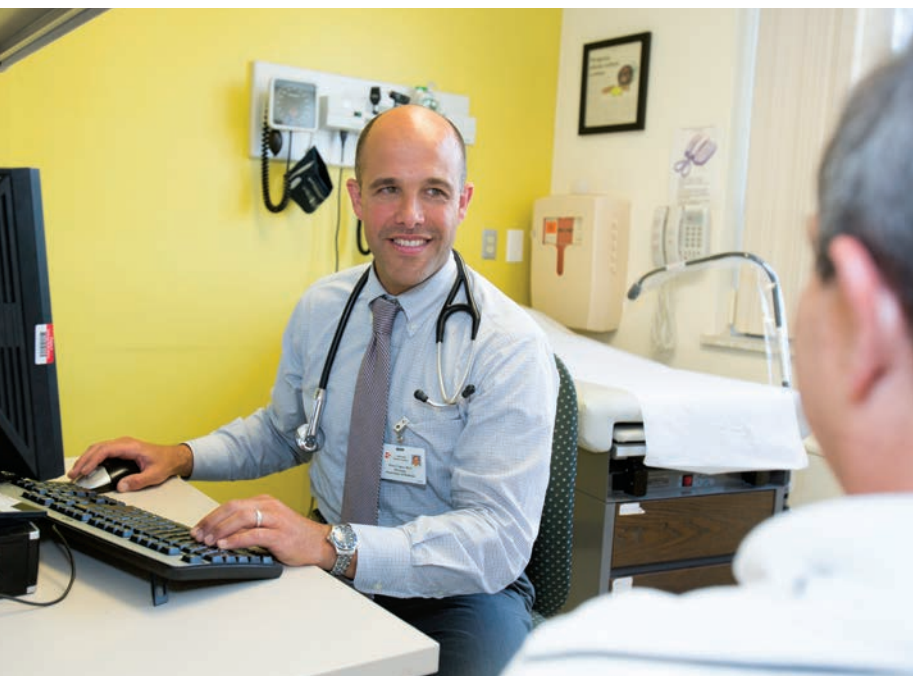
right to do that," says Steve Mister, president and CEO of the Council for Responsible Nutrition, a leading industry trade group. "Other companies say, you know what, I'm not going to warn for possible things that I don't believe are a serious concern to my consumers."

Protect yourself. Make sure that your doctor or pharmacist knows what supplements and prescription drugs you are taking or thinking of taking. You can also learn about interactions in our free "Guide: 100+ Commonly Used Supplements," in the "Natural Health" section at ConsumerReports.org/health (funded by a grant from the Airborne Cy Pres Fund).

5 None are proven to cure major diseases.

If you're surfing the Internet for dietary supplements and find a site that claims its products can diagnose, cure, mitigate, treat, or prevent a disease, surf right off to another site. Such claims are off-limits to supplements, according to the FDA. "We'd like to see those things go away," Fabricant says. "Those are a direct threat to public health." Since 2007, the agency has sent dozens of warning letters to companies telling them to stop making those types of claims about their supplement products.

Earlier this year, for instance, the FDA sent a warning letter to BioAnue Laborato-



COMPLICATIONS? Pieter Cohen with a patient who had a heart attack while on supplements.

ries of Rochelle, Ga., when these statements and others were spotted on websites: “Formula CX will reverse wasting disease,” and “Bovine cartilage stops tumor growth.” (The FDA said it’s still reviewing the company’s response. The president of BioAnue Laboratories told us it “complies with all U.S. laws.”)

Over the past decade, the FDA’s regulatory partner, the Federal Trade Commission, which monitors dietary-supplement advertising, has brought more than 100 legal challenges to claims about the effectiveness of supplements.

Protect yourself. Research supplements at reliable government sites such as www.fda.gov, ods.od.nih.gov (the National Institutes of Health’s Office of Dietary Supplements), and nccam.nih.gov (the National Center for Complementary and Alternative Medicine).

6 Buy with caution from botanicas.

These stores, which sell traditional medicinal plants and other artifacts for physical and spiritual healing—are a valued presence in Hispanic neighborhoods in many American cities. But when CONSUMER REPORTS sent a Spanish-speaking reporter on a shopping trip to several New York-area botanicas in 2011, he came away with incomplete information and bags of mystery herbs.

Our reporter asked for advice on how to treat type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, and impotence, conditions that have effective conventional drug treatments. Healers offered a variety of instructions and herbs, but none volunteered relevant facts about possible side effects or the risky interactions that can occur when an herb is taken with a medication. And when we brought the herbs back to the office and checked the scientific evidence, we found that conclusive research on efficacy and safety was lacking for all of them.

Our investigation left us concerned about product quality and identity at the shops. And experts we consulted suggested that the supply chain used by some of the stores might not follow the best industry standards.

“These markets should not be singled out, but they also should not be exempt from meeting the same standards required by other purveyors of herbal and dietary supplements,” says Tieraona Low Dog, M.D., a clinical associate professor of medicine at the University of Arizona

College of Medicine and fellowship director of the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine.

Protect yourself. Check with your doctor before taking traditional herbs, and make sure you know what they are and where they come from. If your culture’s health practices are important to you, consider seeking out an integrative physician, such as Low Dog, who combines conventional medical care with holistic and traditional methods.

7 Heart and cancer protection: not proven.

Omega-3 pills and antioxidants are widely thought to reduce the risk of heart disease and cancer, respectively, and millions of women take calcium to protect their bones. But recent evidence casts doubt on whether those supplements are as safe or effective as assumed.

Calcium. The latest blow against calcium supplements was a report by German and Swiss researchers who followed

almost 24,000 adults for an average of 11 years. They found that regular users of calcium supplements had an 86 percent increased heart-attack risk compared with those who didn’t use supplements, as reported in the June 2012 issue of the journal *Heart*. On the other hand, there was a statistically significant 30 percent reduction of heart-attack risk among adults with a moderately high intake of calcium from food itself.

Why the disparity? The researchers theorized that the supplements may cause quick spikes in blood calcium levels that have been linked to risky lipid levels, whereas calcium in food is likely to be absorbed more slowly. Get calcium from dairy products, green leafy vegetables, and fish with edible bones, such as sardines.

Omega-3 fish oil. The widely held view that fish-oil pills help prevent cardiovascular disease hit a snag when a study of 12,500 people with diabetes or prediabetes and a high risk of heart attack or stroke found no difference in the death rate from

How much is too much?

What it takes to overdo it on vitamins and minerals.

Nutrient	Recommended daily intake		Safe upper limit (all sources)
	MEN	WOMEN	
Vitamin A	3,000 IU	2,300 IU	10,000 IU
Niacin (B3)	16 mg	14 mg	35 mg
Folate (folic acid)	400 mcg	400 mcg	1,000 mcg
Vitamin C	90 mg	75 mg	2,000 mg
Vitamin D	600 IU ages 19-70; 800 IU ages 71 and up	600 IU ages 19-70; 800 IU ages 71 and up	4,000 IU
Vitamin E	22 IU (natural) 33 IU (synthetic)	22 IU (natural) 33 IU (synthetic)	1,500 IU (natural) 1,100 IU (synthetic)
Vitamin K	120 mcg	90 mcg	Not established
MINERALS			
Calcium	1,000 mg ages 19-70; 1,200 mg ages 71 and up	1,000 mg ages 19-50; 1,200 mg ages 51 and up	2,500 mg through age 50; 2,000 mg ages 51 and up
Magnesium	400 mg ages 19-30; 420 mg ages 31 and up	310 mg ages 19-30; 320 mg ages 31 and up	350 mg (from supplements only)
Potassium	4,700 mg	4,700 mg	Not established
Selenium	55 mcg	55 mcg	400 mcg
Zinc	11 mg	8 mg	40 mg

Source: Institute of Medicine and the Office of Dietary Supplements, National Institutes of Health.

cardiovascular disease or other outcomes between those given a 1-gram fish-oil pill every day and those given a placebo, according to a June 11, 2012, New England Journal of Medicine online report. But the results may be clouded by the fact that participants were already taking other heart medication.

Most people can get enough omega-3s by eating fatty fish at least twice a week. The American Heart Association says that people who have coronary artery disease may want to talk to their doctor about omega-3 supplementation.

Antioxidants. Far from reducing cancer risk, as a lot of people believe, high doses of some antioxidant supplements may actually increase it, evidence suggests.

The discouraging news appeared in the May 16, 2012, issue of the Journal of the National Cancer Institute. Based on current evidence, vitamins C and E haven't been found to shield people from cancer; vitamin E, beta-carotene, and vitamin C don't seem to protect against getting or dying from cancer; selenium doesn't prevent prostate cancer; and there's no convincing evidence that beta-carotene or vitamin A, C, or E supplements prevent gastrointestinal cancers. Still worse, the researchers wrote, "Some clinical trials show that some of these antioxidant nutrients may increase cancer risk."

And there's more bad news, from a study of 35,000 men reported in the Oct. 12, 2011, issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association: Daily vitamin E supplementation may increase the risk of prostate cancer among healthy men.

The investigators warned that the implications of their findings were worrisome given that more than half of people 60 or older take supplements containing vitamin E. Moreover, 23 percent of them take at least 400 IU per day despite a recommended daily dietary allowance of



To stay safe, get antioxidants from food, not a pill bottle.

only 22 IU for adult men.

Lay off the antioxidant supplements and reduce your cancer risk safely by quitting smoking, avoiding excessive drinking, and eating a healthy diet that includes plenty of fruit, vegetables, nuts, legumes, and whole grains.

8 Betcha can't guess this commonly reported problem.

Choking as a serious symptom showed up surprisingly often in the database we analyzed of problem reports to the FDA in the last five years, with more than 900 mentions. But true cases of choking, in which a pill actually goes down the windpipe instead of the esophagus, probably happen infrequently, says Joel Blumin, M.D., incoming chairman of the Airway and Swallowing Committee of the American Academy of Otolaryngology—Head and Neck Surgery. That's a medical emergency that requires immediate intervention, such as the Heimlich maneuver.

More typically, Blumin says, pills irritate the esophagus, causing a muscle spasm, or get physically stuck or slowed. "That sensation feels like choking," he says, but it isn't. Sometimes all you need is a second swallow or extra water to get the pill down.

Protect yourself. To get a pill down

easily, first take a swig of water to moisten your mouth and throat. Place the pill on the front of your tongue, take a sip of water, tilt your head back slightly, and swallow. Then drink the rest of the water to help propel the pill down your esophagus. People with persistent swallowing problems can switch to liquid or chewable formulations and should probably also seek evaluation by an otolaryngologist.

9 Some 'natural' products are anything but.

Vitamin pills can be synthetically, and legally, produced in the lab. Synthetic ingredients are even allowed in multi-vitamins that bear the Department of Agriculture's "Organic" seal. But the FDA has said that synthetic copies of botanicals don't qualify as dietary-supplement ingredients at all.

"Vitamins can be synthetic because, by definition, a vitamin doesn't have to come from nature," says Fabricant at the FDA. They just have to perform the biological activity of vitamins, he added, whereas a "botanical" means that it was alive at some point. In other words, botanicals and their extracts must come from actual living plants, not a test tube.

In April 2012, the agency sent warning letters to 10 manufacturers and distributors of products containing dimethylamylamine (DMAA), often touted as a natural stimulant. It said the ingredient lacked safety evidence and warned that synthetically produced DMAA is not a dietary ingredient at all. (The FDA said it has received and is studying the companies' responses.)

Protect yourself. The FDA doesn't require supplements to go through rigorous testing for safety and efficacy the way that drugs are tested. If you choose to take vitamins, botanicals, or other supplements, look for those with the "USP Verified" mark, which means they meet standards of quality, purity, and potency set by the nonprofit U.S. Pharmacopeia. (To learn more, go to USPVerified.org.)

10 You may not need supplements at all.

If you are already getting the recommended amount of nutrients by eating a variety of fruits, vegetables, cereals, dairy, and protein, there's little if any additional benefit from ingesting nutritional supplements. Here's our take on five top-selling vitamins, plus multis.

DID YOU KNOW?

8,160

That's the average annual number of reported serious adverse events associated with dietary supplements that the FDA expects companies to file in the next three years.

Vitamin A. Few people in the U.S. are outright deficient in vitamin A. The retinol form—which comes from animal sources such as eggs, liver, and whole milk—is more readily absorbed than beta-carotene, but even strict vegetarians can usually meet their needs by eating five servings a day of produce, including dark green leafy vegetables and orange and yellow fruit. Too much retinol can cause birth defects and liver abnormalities, and might also harm the bones.

B vitamins. Most people get plenty through their diet. Exceptions include vegetarians, who might need extra B12, which is found in animal-derived foods; the estimated 10 to 30 percent of people over 50 who don't have enough stomach acid to extract B12 from food; and women who are pregnant or trying to get pregnant, who should take 400 micrograms a day of extra folic acid to help prevent birth defects.

Vitamin C. There's some evidence that 200 milligrams or more of vitamin C a day might improve cold symptoms in smokers and seniors, though it won't prevent colds. Vitamin C can enhance iron absorption, so avoid high doses if you have hemochromatosis, a condition in which the body absorbs and stores too much iron.

Vitamin D. If you get some midday sun exposure during the warmer months and regularly consume vitamin D-rich foods, such as fatty fish, eggs, and fortified dairy products, you probably don't need to take a supplement. People who are middle-aged or older, are overweight, or have darker skin might need supplements. If you're unsure about your vitamin D status, ask your doctor about having a blood test.

Vitamin E. Two analyses have linked as little as 400 IU a day to a small but statistically significant increase in mortality. Moreover, the vitamin may inhibit blood clotting, so it shouldn't be taken with blood thinners.

Multivitamins. Large clinical trials have repeatedly found that multivitamins don't improve the health of the average person. Groups who might need a multivitamin include women who are pregnant, breast-feeding, or trying to conceive; dieters consuming fewer than 1,200 calories a day or cutting out an entire food group (carbs, for example); and people with medical conditions that affect digestion and food absorption.

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73	5.5
81	7.0
90	9.0

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83 / 80	6.0

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Protect your home

These days, homeowners insurance covers less and costs more

HOMEOWNERS BUY insurance to protect against disaster. But when disaster strikes, your insurer might not live up to your expectations, especially if you have a large claim, according to our survey of 11,250 subscribers who filed claims in the past few years.

The greater the damages, the greater the likelihood that home insurers paid less than expected, our survey found. Overall, almost 10 percent of respondents reported disagreements with their insurer over the amount of a claim payment. But when damage was \$25,000 or more, 19 percent disagreed with their insurer's assessment of what was due. That was more than three times the disagreement rate

for claims worth less than \$2,500. Among those in the higher-damage group who disputed estimates, insurers paid a median of \$7,000 (or 20 percent) less than the claimed loss, leaving the policyholders less satisfied.

In the past decade, "insurers have sharply hollowed out the catastrophe coverage offered to consumers," says Robert Hunter, director of insurance for the Consumer Federation of America.

They've done that by transferring the risk of damage from severe weather events to policyholders through higher deductibles on claims stemming from hurricanes, wind, and hail. Instead of the typical \$250 to \$1,000 deductible under standard coverage, you may have to pay

1 to 5 percent of your home's insured value (up to 10 percent in Florida). So if your home is insured for \$200,000 and your policy has a 3 percent deductible for hurricanes, you'll have to pay \$6,000 out-of-pocket on a storm-related claim.

Many insurers have abandoned hurricane-prone areas. Brenda Smith of Miami says she was dropped by her insurer after Hurricane Andrew caused \$23,000 in damages to her home in 1992. She was dropped by Liberty Mutual after Hurricane Katrina caused \$16,000 in damages to a different home in 2005.

Insurers are also using contract language to avoid paying claims. For example, got hail coverage? Great. But if your roof is more than 10 or 15 years old, hail

damage might be excluded. And even if you have a standard homeowners policy that covers an overflowing bathtub or burst or frozen water pipe plus flood insurance, you're still out of luck if your sump pump can't handle a monster downpour or if the sewer backs up—unless you pay \$40 to \$50 a year more for a specific endorsement covering that.

At the same time premiums have increased by 5 to 10 percent annually in recent years, depending on the region, and hikes of up to 12 percent are coming this year, industry sources say.

You might not even be aware of the erosion in coverage until you file a claim. The average homeowner files a claim only once every 6 years, and many policyholders don't read the disclosures, renewal contracts, and updates that insurers send them, according to Jeff Dixon, vice president of property insurance for USAA Property & Casualty.

Outdated assumptions about your coverage can cost you a bundle. Here are five guidelines for getting the right coverage to protect your home and budget:

Choose the best insurer

The test of an insurer's responsiveness to its customers is how well it handles claims. That's why we base our Ratings on our periodic surveys of thousands of homeowners who have filed claims, most recently from 2008 through early 2011. Overall, 79 percent were highly satisfied, up from 73 percent in 2008.

But some major insurers provided significantly better satisfaction than others, and that can translate into savings because the primary reason for satisfaction was the company's damage estimates. Amica, USAA, and Auto-Owners earned the highest scores on that measure (see the Ratings on page 27). At the other extreme, some of the biggest names in the business scored significantly lower, including Allstate and Farmers. Lower-rated insurers tended to have a greater percentage of customers who disagreed with their damage estimates and felt their final settlement was too small.

Amica is especially notable for consistently landing at the top of our Ratings for as long as we've evaluated this service, across six surveys of more than 131,000 subscribers dating back to 1988. USAA tied Amica for the top spot in three of those studies, including the most recent one.

An important factor in Amica's appeal

seems to be its mutual corporate structure: The company is owned by its policyholders and exists solely to serve their needs, unlike a publicly held insurance company, which must also serve shareholders. Claims employees at Amica are trained to make fast, accurate, and hassle-free payments, according to Michael Gillerlone, senior assistant vice president of claims.

But will you pay more for an Amica policy? Amica says its coverage is neither the lowest-priced nor the most expensive, something we confirmed when we looked at standardized premium compar-

Amica and USAA have consistently rated highly in our surveys.

isons from several states. New customers no longer need a referral from an existing Amica member to be eligible for coverage, a practice that was discontinued several years ago.

USAA focuses on the unique needs of its membership, primarily active-duty, retired, and honorably discharged U.S. military personnel and their families. Unlike many private insurers, USAA hasn't abandoned existing policyholders in coastal areas prone to hurricanes. "Military people tend to cluster around East Coast, Gulf, and Pacific naval bases, so we remain in all the areas where all the bad things can happen," says Dixon of USAA. That loyalty goes both ways; USAA's 97 percent customer-retention rate is significantly higher than the 87 percent industry average.

Fight for your claim

In most cases respondents had no argument with their claims. But in 9 percent of cases, customers and insurers failed to see eye to eye on damage amounts. Disputes are also more common after major

hurricanes (see box on page 26).

In such cases it can pay for you to try to negotiate with your insurer. Our survey found that among readers who were unhappy with a claim, those who challenged it got a payout that was about \$6,000 more, on average, than those who didn't.

If the adjuster says your policy doesn't cover certain damage, ask to see the specific contract language. "Most times, that gets taken care of there," says Jeff Reinig, a Farmers executive. "If not, go up the chain of command in the company."

If the dispute is over the damage amount, request a sit-down with the contractor and adjuster to go over the estimate line by line, which is standard practice at Amica. "We adjust when we get new information," says Lisa St. Onge, assistant vice president of claims.

Still disagree? Get a second opinion from an independent contractor. Patience, persistence, and legwork getting multiple estimates are important, says Joe Kolenda, a homeowner in Spring, Texas. That's what caused State Farm to bring its original \$4,000 payment up to the \$27,000 necessary to repair Kolenda's hurricane-damaged house.

If you reach an impasse, consider a public adjuster, who will negotiate for you for a fee, usually 10 percent of the payout. A Florida study of 76,000 claims suggests that it's money well spent: Policyholders who used a public adjuster settled with their insurance company for 19 to 747 percent more on hurricane-related losses than those who didn't. But such cases take longer to close.

To find a public adjuster, go to napia.com, the website of the National Association of Public Insurance Adjusters, and click on "Find an adjuster." Look for good references, several years' experience, and a state license, if required.

If you've been misled by an insurance salesperson about policy wording, contact a lawyer who specializes in insurance law. The Consumer Federation of America notes that courts have consistently ruled in fa-

■ SURVEY SAYS

Dumped by an insurer?
Seven percent of the respondents who changed insurers since 2008 did so because they were dropped by their carrier.
The leading reasons:

44%

Filed too many claims

21%

Lived in high-risk area

vor of policyholders on such ambiguities. Arbitration is another option.

Look for a better deal

Home insurance is not as hotly price-competitive as auto insurance, but you can still save from hundreds to more than \$1,000 a year in premiums by shopping around. About 9 percent of our survey respondents had switched insurers in the previous three years, mostly because they got a better price from their new carrier. And those who switched for a better price were just as satisfied with their later claim payments as those who stayed put.

Residents of California, Florida, New Jersey, New York, Texas, and other states whose insurance departments publish rate comparisons for standardized coverage can zero in on the lowest-priced insurers, then contact them for custom quotes. If your state doesn't offer such guidance, contact an independent agent who sells insurance from multiple carriers. To find one, go to iibaa.net, the website of the Independent Insurance Agents & Brokers of America. You can also use online shopping sites such as Insure.com, Insweb.com, and NetQuote.com.

While shopping for a cheaper insurer, consider buying your homeowners and auto coverage from the same company for as much as a 30 percent savings. And be aware that most insurers use credit-based insurance scores to set premiums and eli-



Shopping around might save you hundreds of dollars a year.

gibility for coverage. So you'll probably pay a lower premium if you pay your debts on time and avoid maxing out your credit lines, among other behavior.

Don't underinsure

You can also save by avoiding out-of-pocket costs arising from coverage that's inadequate to begin with. Almost one in 10 of our subscribers who filed claims found

themselves underinsured. That problem is much bigger when a hurricane, tornado, wildfire, or earthquake makes a home a total loss. "After every disaster we've worked, we've found that at least two-thirds of the victims were underinsured," says Amy Bach, executive director of United Policyholders, a San Francisco nonprofit that helps consumers throughout the country with their claims.

Don't make the mistake of assuming that because home prices have collapsed in recent years you can cut your coverage. Fact is, replacement value, or the cost of labor and materials required to rebuild, is what you need to consider. That's often significantly higher than the market price your home can fetch, and it rises annually, 5 percent last year alone. Consequently, 61 percent of homes in the U.S.—80 million—are underinsured, according to Marshall & Swift/Boeckh, a Los Angeles company that tracks rebuilding costs for insurers. The average shortfall: 18 percent.

Ask your insurer for a customized estimate of your home's replacement cost, which should take into account its unique features, construction details, and age as well as any costs of meeting new local building-code requirements. Or run a check on your own, for about \$8, at accucoverage.com. You should review your coverage needs every few years.

Even if your coverage level is correct, a standard homeowners policy still leaves

Ike vs. Katrina: How the insurers performed

Our survey data contain good news and bad news about how insurance companies manage claims in the aftermath of a destructive hurricane. You're more likely



DISASTER RESPONSE Homeowners' claims satisfaction has improved since Katrina.

to have trouble with a claim after a disaster, but carriers did a much better job managing claims after Hurricane Ike slammed into Texas in 2008 than they did in the debris path of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Thirty-five percent of Ike's victims had problems with their claim compared with 27 percent of non-Ike claimants. Fourteen percent of Ike claimants said their payment (the median was \$7,000) was "too little" (compared with 10 percent of the others). Twenty-nine percent complained about delays (compared with 20 percent of the others).

Such problems stem from tens of thousands of homeowners calling for help from a limited pool of claims adjusters all at the same time. When insurers don't have enough people in-house they may call in independent adjusters, and there are only so many of them to go around.

But performance was significantly worse after Katrina raked through Florida,

Louisiana, and Mississippi: 50 percent of claim filers said they had problems, twice the rate of other claimants surveyed at the same time. One in four Katrina claimants said their insurer's payment (the median was \$12,000) was "too little" (compared with 11 percent of the others), and 55 percent said their claims were delayed (compared with 19 percent of the nonhurricane norm). Overall, 73 percent of Ike claimants ended up highly satisfied with their insurance company, a significant improvement over the 51 percent of Katrina claimants who said the same thing.

But those results were probably influenced by Ike's relative weakness. Katrina was a Category 3 storm, which packs winds of 111 to 130 mph. It remains the worst hurricane of the last 110 years in terms of its \$106 billion in inflation-adjusted total damages. Ike was a much less destructive Category 2, which carries lesser winds of 96 to 110 mph. It caused \$28 billion in damages.

you insufficiently protected. If you want to protect against the surge in material and labor prices that often follows a natural disaster, you'll have to buy an "extended coverage" rider, which adds up to another 30 percent to your replacement-value limit. Most insurers no longer offer the "guaranteed unlimited replacement cost" coverage that we have recommended in the past.

You'll also pay extra for an ordinance or law endorsement rider to pay any extra cost of rebuilding your house in compliance with local building codes. Coverage for a sewer backup is also not included in a standard policy, but you can pay extra for it. You'll need hurricane/wind, hail, flood, and earthquake insurance if you're exposed to those risks.

Coverage for your furniture, electronics, clothing, and other belongings is standard, but if you have expensive furs, jewelry, silverware, or artwork, they're subject to coverage limits. You'll need to purchase a special endorsement or floater to cover their full value.

Liability protection for visitors injured in your home or for damage that you, your children, or your pets cause to others is also standard. Coverage usually starts low, at \$100,000; increase it to at least \$300,000. The more assets you own, the more advisable it is for you to buy an umbrella or excess-liability policy with coverage of \$1 million or more.

Of course, all those add-ons increase your total premium, but you can offset part of the cost by raising your deductible to \$500 or \$1,000, which reduces the premium. You should have sufficient savings to cover the deductible if your luck runs out—and that includes the higher deductibles for hail, wind, and hurricanes.

Reduce risks

Losses beget out-of-pocket expenses and often higher premiums. So nip them in the bud by reducing your risks:

▶ DID YOU KNOW?

Homeowners policies might include coverage for some unexpected losses, such as unauthorized use of your credit or debit card, forged checks, or even if you're sued for libel. But beware: Liability related to a home business might not be covered. Read your policy to see what it covers and whether limits or deductibles apply.

- Start by doing what insurers explicitly give discounts for. Smoke detectors, burglar alarms, and dead-bolt locks can be worth a 5 percent premium discount. A sophisticated sprinkler system with alarms that alert first responders could get you 15 to 20 percent off.
- Impact- and fire-resistant roofing materials made of asphalt, rubber, cement, and metal can get you further discounts because they stand up better against hail, debris, and embers—the primary cause of damage from wildfires. Noncombustible siding provides increased protection.
- In hurricane-prone areas, storm shutters for doors and windows, hurricane-resistant siding, and a code-standard roof that can withstand winds up to 130 mph will help your home withstand a storm. Fortified homes can sustain a Category 4 hurricane.

- Fire, lightning, and debris removal lead to the highest claims of all insured perils—\$27,700 per claim on average. Cooking equipment is the leading cause of home fires, so never leave a stove unattended and keep a fire extinguisher in the kitchen.
- In earthquake-prone areas, make sure your home's building frame is properly bolted to its foundation. For more information on reducing risks from earthquakes, freezing weather, lightning, wildfires, and more, go to the website of the Insurance Institute for Business & Home Safety, at disastersafety.org.
- Insurers recommend a simple fix to help prevent a minor disaster that causes an average of \$5,300 in water damage if it happens when no one is home: Replace the standard rubber hoses that come with your washing machine with steel-braided reinforced hoses. The cost is about \$20.

Ratings Homeowners insurance

In performance order.



Order	Insurance group	Reader score	Survey results		
			Damage amount	Agent availability	Timely payment
		0100			
1	Amica Insurance <i>amica.com</i>	92	+	+	+
2	USAA Property & Casualty <i>usaa.com</i>	92	+	+	+
3	Auto-Owners Insurance <i>auto-owners.com</i>	90	+	+	+
4	Farm Bureau Property & Casualty Insurance <i>fbfs.com</i>	86	-	-	-
5	Erie Insurance <i>erieinsurance.com</i>	84	-	-	-
6	State Farm <i>statefarm.com</i>	83	-	-	-
7	American Family Insurance <i>amfam.com</i>	83	-	-	-
8	Tower Hill <i>thig.com</i>	83	○	-	-
9	Nationwide <i>nationwide.com</i>	82	○	-	-
10	Liberty Mutual Insurance Companies <i>libertymutual.com</i>	80	○	-	-
11	Hartford Financial Services <i>thehartford.com</i>	78	○	○	-
12	Travelers <i>travelers.com</i>	78	○	○	-
13	Metlife Auto & Home <i>metlife.com</i>	78	○	○	-
14	Farmers Insurance <i>farmers.com</i>	77	○	○	-
15	Allstate Insurance <i>allstate.com</i>	77	○	○	-

Guide to the Ratings

Based on 11,256 responses to the 2011 Homeowners Insurance Survey by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. Findings reflect readers' experiences, not necessarily those of the general population. **Reader score** reflects overall satisfaction and isn't limited to factors listed under survey results. A score of 100 would mean all readers were completely satisfied; 80, very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly well satisfied. Differences of fewer than 6 points aren't meaningful. Ratings for companies within a group might vary. **Damage amount** is based on the percentage of readers who were satisfied with the company's estimate of dollar damages. **Agent availability** is based on the percentage of readers who were satisfied with the agent's availability to discuss their claim. **Timely payment** is based on the percentage of readers who were satisfied with the timeliness of payments from their companies.

Beautiful bathrooms

IF YOUR BATHROOM is more of a sore spot than a sanctuary, you're not alone. Bathrooms have replaced kitchens as the most remodeled room in the home—their smaller footprint and lack of pricey appliances make for a less expensive project. But baths are still a challenge, given their tricky layouts and abundant water. Plus mistakes are hard and pricey to undo.

Our experts spent months testing the latest countertops, flooring, sinks, toilets, and more so that you can get a luxurious bath that can handle harried Monday mornings and soothing Sunday soaks alike. We also spoke with designers and remodeling professionals for their ideas. You'll see our findings on this and the next five pages, starting with five tips for a masterful bath redo, including where to save and splurge.

Streamline the vanity

While the double-sink configuration has been popular in the past, it often makes sense to have a single sink and more counter space to put things on. Besides maximizing the counter space, opting for a single sink vanity saves you the expense of the second sink and faucet. And eliminating a set of plumbing expands the available storage space inside the vanity.

❏ **Save** Our tests have found that low-cost faucets now often come with better valves, durable finishes, and lifetime warranties against leaks and stains.

❏ **Splurge** Framed mirrors over the vanity are replacing mirrored walls. Match the finish on the frame to that of the faucet and towel bars for a coordinated look, or choose something very different to create a focal point.

DON'T RUSH IN Depending on the size and scope of your bathroom project, you should spend several weeks to a few months on the planning process. Poor planning is the leading cause of cost overruns.





Choose soothing colors

Palettes that create a calm, spa-like atmosphere are favored, especially in the master bath. Instead of outdated pink and coral, consider a soft shade of blue. "It offers a refreshing feeling evocative of water, which naturally works well in a bath," says Sonu Mathew, senior interior designer at Benjamin Moore. Yellow is also getting more use in bathrooms, according to Debbie Zimmer, color expert at the Paint Quality

Institute. Steer clear of dark greens, though; they can give skin a sickly hue. You can be more adventurous in secondary bathrooms, especially powder rooms. Deep, dark hues such as burgundy and eggplant work particularly well in those small spaces.

Proper prep work is essential before painting any bathroom. Scrub surfaces with a sponge and a mild household detergent solution. Tackle mildew spots with a mixture of 16 parts water to one part bleach, being sure to ventilate the space.

❏ **Save** Updating the accessories, such as towels and the shower curtain, and repainting the walls is an inexpensive way to bring color into the bath. Behr's Premium Plus Ultra, \$31 to \$34 per gallon, excelled in our tests, including resisting mildew.

❏ **Splurge** Glass tile adds a splash of iridescent brightness but can cost as much as \$40 per square foot installed. So you might want to focus on a single accent wall, say, above the vanity, or use it only in the shower area. Or you can use a band of glass tile in a field of less expensive tile.



Layer the light

A single ceiling light just doesn't cut it. Not only will your bathroom be dim, but the overhead fixture will cast shadows on your face when grooming. Instead, create layers of light, including wall-mounted sconces or other vertical fixtures on either side of the vanity, which will cast diffused light for shaving and putting on makeup.

The shower and toilet should each have a dedicated task light, such as a recessed canister light. Consider fixtures that use LED bulbs. Many provided bright, even illumination in our lightbulb tests with the promise of 50,000 hours, though they do cost more. Place the fixtures on dimmer switches so that light levels can be adjusted depending on the mood and task at hand.

❏ **Save** Choosing a bathroom fan with an integrated light takes care of two needs—ventilation and general illumination—with a single fixture.

❏ **Splurge** For bathrooms located deep within a home, adding windows might not be an option. A skylight will flood the space with natural light, assuming the room is on the top floor.

Take a shower

The enthusiasm for gargantuan whirlpool tubs with massaging jets has cooled considerably. "People started to realize that they could count on one hand how many times they actually used the tub," says John Petrie, a designer certified by the National Kitchen and Bath Association. "We're now using that space to create larger showers, often with his and her showerheads, body sprays, and even steam generators." A shower stall that measures at least 4 by 6 feet can provide easy access and universal use no matter your age and ability, especially if you include a bench.

❏ **Save** With their large heads and expansive spray patterns, rain showerheads deliver a soft, soothing flow. Moen's Velocity 6320, \$190, was a top performer in our past tests. It also has a more forceful spray setting.

❏ **Splurge** If you can take the stall up to 5 by 7 feet, that can eliminate the expense of the door, since the showerheads can be positioned so that the spray doesn't reach beyond the shower area.

Conceal the toilet



Every bathroom needs one, but the latest trend is to make the commode as unobtrusive as possible. If space permits, try placing the toilet behind a half-wall or in its own room-within-

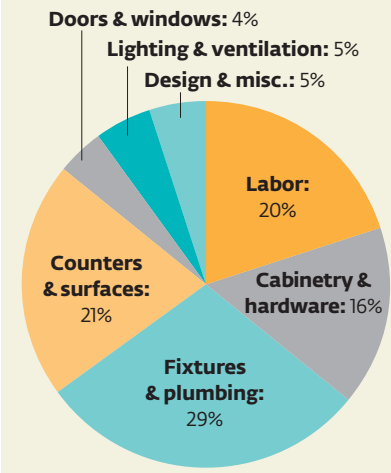
the-room, complete with separate lighting and ventilation. A piece of furniture, such as an armoire, can create a barrier without the expense of a framed wall. It will also provide additional storage for towels and toiletries.

❏ **Save** Several WaterSense-qualified toilets, which use just 1.28 gallons per flush, make our recommended list. That could save you at least 4,000 gallons and some \$90 per year in water bills if you're replacing an old toilet.

❏ **Splurge** If you can't hide the toilet, consider a one-piece model, with a sleeker design that also eliminates the dirt-trapping seam between the tank and bowl.

How much should it cost?

The rule of thumb is that the total project, including materials and installation, should cost no more than 5 to 10 percent of your home's value. Here's how the NKBA breaks down the budget:



Smart apps for your bathroom makeover

Got a smart phone? These apps will help inspire and inform your bathroom remodel.



Houzz Interior Design Ideas, free

Lets you create a virtual idea book from more than a half-million high-resolution images, including countless pictures of beautiful master baths.



iHandy Carpenter, \$1.99

Includes a level and plumb bob for hanging mirrors, towel bars, and more, plus a steel protractor for measuring angles.



Photo Measures, \$4.99

Takes down the precise dimensions of uploaded images, such as the distance between your toilet and vanity, or sink and shower.

Surfaces

The best counters, floors, and sinks from our tests

WET TOWELS ON THE FLOOR, a puddle of nail polish remover on the vanity counter, scissors landing point-side down in the sink: Those are some of the scenarios we had in mind when we developed our tough bathroom tests. Several of the 60 or so products we evaluated came through unscathed, though it's easy to choose the wrong materials and spend too much.

Different products are right for different bathrooms. Porous or overly precious materials, such as solid wood flooring, marble countertops, and glass sinks, aren't suited to busy baths, but they're fine for powder rooms or gently used guest baths. Here's what else you need to know about the bath's three key surfaces.



Countertops

Solid surfacing has been a go-to bath material for years, in part because it allows the vanity top and sink to be integrated into one piece. It remains popular, though our heat tests found it to be susceptible to slight melting, say, from a curling iron. Laminate fared best in our tests, especially against stains and heat, and faux finishes are looking more and more like the real thing. Formica's IdealEdge laminate, for example, comes in convincing faux-stone patterns, and its seamless installation means no leaks or unsightly black line along its edge. Stone countertops are following stainless-steel sinks from the kitchen to the bath. Reserve stain-prone marble and limestone for seldom-used baths.

Shopping tip Since vanity countertops are typically small in size, you can often cut costs by scouring your local stone yard for less expensive stone or quartz remnants.

Ratings Countertops

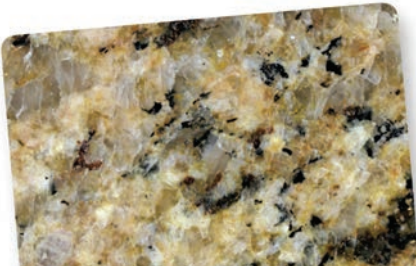
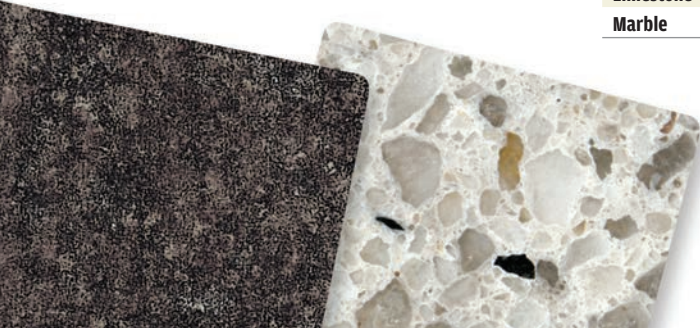
All tested materials In performance order.

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

Material	Price per sq. ft.	Overall score	Test results			
			Stains	Abrasion	Heat	Impact
Laminate	\$10-\$40	78	●	○	●	●
Quartz (engineered stone)	40-100	74	●	●	●	●
Granite	40-100	72	●	●	●	●
Solid surfacing	35-100	61	●	●	●	●
Recycled glass (penetrating sealer)	60-120	54	●	●	●	●
Concrete (topical sealer)	60-120	50	●	○	●	●
Soapstone (mineral oil finish)	50-100	48	○	●	●	●
Tile (ceramic and porcelain)	5-30	47	●	●	●	○
Stainless steel	50-150	44	○	●	●	●
Concrete (penetrating sealer)	60-120	31	●	●	●	●
Limestone	50-100	25	●	●	●	●
Marble	45-150	17	○	●	●	●

TOUGH STUFF

From left: Laminate, quartz, and granite are great options for busy bathrooms.





Ratings Sinks

All tested materials

In performance order.

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

Material	Price	Overall score	Test results			
			Stains	Abrasion	Sharp impact	Heat
		0 100 P F G V E				
Stainless steel	\$100-600	86	●	●	●	●
Enameled steel	100-350	85	●	●	●	●
Solid surfacing	200-600	79	●	●	○	●
Fireclay	150-250	78	●	●	●	●
Vitreous china (porcelain)	100-400	75	●	●	●	●
Acrylic	75-200	74	●	●	●	●
Glass	150-300	66	●	●	●	●
Enameled cast iron	150-450	66	○	●	●	●

Sinks

Porcelain, also known as vitreous china, and acrylic command a large share of the sink market, in part because they're so affordable. But each material has its vulnerability—sharp impact for porcelain and heat for acrylic. If your bathroom sees a lot of wear and tear, consider stainless steel, which is migrating steadily from kitchens into the bath. It aced our tests to earn the highest overall score, and even thinner-gauge, inexpensive sinks

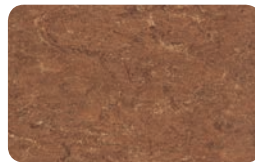
with matte finishes fared well. Enameled steel was also excellent overall. Enameled cast iron, however, stained and chipped easily, sinking it to the bottom of our Ratings alongside glass, which resists heat but not chips. **Shopping tip** To ensure a tight fit and proper placement of cutouts for the sink and faucet, let the fabricator or installer create the countertop template. That way you won't be on the hook for any mistakes.



A1 Congoleum



B1 Armstrong



C1 Armstrong

Ratings Flooring

Recommended products only From 42 tested.

- ✓ CR Best Buy
- ✓ Recommended

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & product	Price (sq. ft.)	Sq. ft. (box)	Overall score	Test results				
						Moisture	Foot traffic	Scratches	Stains	Dents
		All engineered-wood, plastic-laminate, and linoleum products can be floated unless otherwise indicated.			0 100 P F G V E					

A VINYL Can usually be glued anywhere in the house.

✓	1	Congoleum DuraCeramic Sierra Slate SI-74 Golden Greige	\$5.00	17	92	●	●	●	●	●
✓	2	Armstrong Alterna Mesa Stone Canyon Sun D4112	5.50	25	90	●	●	●	●	●
✓	3	Armstrong LUXE Plank Timber Bay Barnyard Gray A6861	5.50	24	80	●	●	○	●	●

B PLASTIC LAMINATE Can usually be floated anywhere in the house.

✓	1	Armstrong Coastal Living L3051 White Wash Walnut	3.50	14	87	●	●	●	●	●
✓	2	Quick-Step Perspectives Ansel Oak UF1259	4.00	16	75	●	○	●	●	●
✓	3	Surface Source Winchester Oak 2765 (Lowe's)	1.00	24	74	●	●	●	●	●

C LINOLEUM Can usually be glued or floated anywhere in the house.

✓	1	Armstrong Marmorette Oak Brown LP066 ¹	4.50	3	62	●	○	●	○	●
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D ENGINEERED WOOD Can usually be nailed or stapled anywhere in the house. Some can float.

✓	1	Teragren Synergy Strand with Xcora Java ²	6.00	23	73	●	○	●	●	●
✓	2	Armstrong Century Farm Hickory Natural GCH452NALG	6.00	28	61	●	○	●	●	●

E PREFINISHED SOLID WOOD Usually nailed to a subfloor at grade or above.

✓	1	EcoTimber Woven Honey WBH061 ²	5.90	23	78	●	●	●	●	○
✓	2	Mullican St. Andrews Solid Oak Strip 10930	6.30	24	69	●	○	●	●	○
✓	3	Bruce Dundee Plank CB1210	5.70	22	62	●	●	○	●	●

¹ Cannot be floated. ² Bamboo product. ³ Not applicable; comes in sheets.



Congoleum
DuraCeramic
Sierra Slate

Flooring

Tile, whether ceramic or porcelain, is popular in baths because it wears well and can be used on floors and walls alike. Many versions resemble natural stone for a fraction of the cost. Larger tiles, such as 18-by-18-inch tile on the floors and 12-by-12-inch on some or all of the walls, minimize grout lines, easing upkeep. Also consider stain-resistant grout, which costs more than traditional grout but cuts down on tedious cleaning. Plastic laminate and vinyl offer maximum durability, and as with laminate countertops, the designs continue to improve. Armstrong's Alterna Mesa Stone Canyon Sun vinyl floor, \$5.50 per square foot, is a dead ringer for real stone and it's one of our top-rated floorings.

Shopping tip See materials in person, since they don't always appear the same in real life as they do in catalogues and online. And even if you visit a showroom or home center, take home samples to evaluate the materials in your room's lighting—even if you have to pay for them.



MONEY-MISER Aquasource's AT1203-00, \$100, a CR Best Buy, saves at the store and in your home.

Toilets

11 top picks include water-saving models

YOU DON'T have to choose between saving water and getting the job done. More than half of the top toilets we tested now meet the federal Environmental Protection Agency's WaterSense requirements, which limit toilets to 1.28 gallons per flush. That can save you about 650 gal-

lons of water per year over 1.6-gallon models and 4,000 gallons compared with toilets installed before 1996. Some of the best we tested also cost the least.

Aquasource's AT1203-00, a CR Best Buy at \$100, costs hundreds less than most others. But this WaterSense model vanquished the sponges we weighted with screws,

balls, and other tough stuff in our simulated-waste tests. We also found some big differences among types and even within the same brand. Here are the details:

Start with gravity-feed models. Pressure-assisted toilets are known for their wall-shaking whoosh. But gravity-feed models did better overall. Only one pressure-assisted toilet, the Kohler Highline Classic, \$425, joined our top picks. Like other pressure-assisted models, the Kohler tells everyone when it's flushed.

Don't buy solely by brand. Four Kohlers made our recommended list. But dismal solid-waste performance helped put Kohler's Devonshire, \$550, at the bottom of our Ratings. And though American Standard's Champion and Clean toilets are among our top five, three of the brand's Cadet models lagged behind.

Think twice about dual-flush. These include a separate setting that uses roughly 1 gallon per flush for liquid waste. But of those, only the Glacier Bay N2316, \$100, made our cut. And even in their liquid-waste mode, dual-flush toilets save little water over a capable, single-flush WaterSense toilet and can use far more of it if they require a second flush.

Avoid clogs down the line. Some toilets can reduce the likelihood of clogs on the way to your sewer or septic tank. Our new drain-line test measures how far flushed water and simulated waste move in one, two, and three flushes. Except for the Glacier Bay, toilets that made our picks pushed waste far down a clear, 75-foot pipe in just one flush. Other models fell short, even after multiple flushes. The farther the waste flows, the likelier it is to reach a typical sewer system without creating buildup in the pipe.

Exploding toilets spur huge recall

Bursting toilets have been the stuff of urban legend for decades. This story's real: More than 2.3 million pressure-assisted flushing systems were recalled this summer after 304 reports of flying lids and shattered tanks, and at least 14 injuries.

The recall, announced by the Consumer Product Safety Commission and Health Canada, affects Series 503 Flushmate III Pressure Assist systems made from October 1997 to February 2008 and used in a variety of pressure-assisted toilets. (None of the models in our Ratings is affected.) The system can burst at or near the large plastic

vessel inside the tank, releasing stored pressure that can shatter the porcelain.

Toilets with the faulty system include models from American Standard, Crane, Eljer, Gerber, Kohler, Mansfield, and St. Thomas. They were sold at Home Depot, Lowe's, and other retailers.

To see whether yours is one of them, remove the lid from the tank and check the label on top of the vessel. If the series number is 503 and the first six digits of the serial

number are within the range of 101497 to 022909, it's one of the affected models.

What to do: Turn off water to the toilet, flush it once to relieve pressure, and contact

Flushmate for a free repair kit with installation instructions geared toward homeowners. Call 800-303-5123 between 8 a.m. and 4:30 p.m. Eastern time on weekdays or go to flushmate.com/recall. In the meantime, you can flush by pouring 2 or 3 gallons of water into the bowl.



WHERE TO LOOK Check the vessel label to see whether your toilet has been recalled.



All tested products In performance order, within types.

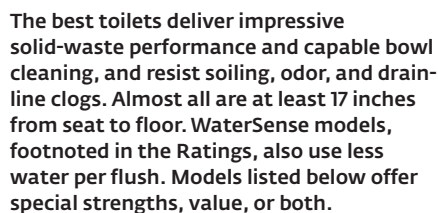
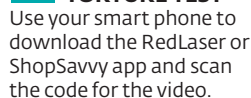
- Excellent
 ◐ Very good
 ○ Good
 ◑ Fair
 ● Poor

A SINGLE-FLUSH These use the same amount of water with each flush.

B DUAL-FLUSH These let you use less water for liquid waste.

¹ Regular height (seat less than 17 inches high); most others are comfort height (ADA-compliant). ² Model is WaterSense-certified (1.28 gallons per flush or less, on average). ³ One-piece model; most are two-piece.

Overall score is based on solid-waste and liquid-waste removal, bowl-cleaning at 35 pounds per square inch (psi) water pressure, and noise. **Models** are listed in order of precise overall score. **Solid waste** is ability to move simulated waste through bowl and trap. **Liquid waste** (not shown) is how fully each flush removed colored liquid; all models scored Excellent. **Bowl cleaning** is water height and how well flushing cleaned front and sides. **Noise** is flush quietness without seat. **Resists soil and odor** indicates a large water surface, which helps prevent soiling and odors. **Resists drain-line clogs** indicates that the model sent simulated solid waste farther, potentially reducing clogs. **Price** is approximate retail for white; many colors may cost more. **Under type**, G is gravity, P is pressure-assist.



-  **CR Best Buy** These blend top performance and value. All are recommended.
  **Recommended** These meet our performance standards and are fine choices.

A1	American Standard	\$300
A2	Gerber	\$330
A3	Toto	\$370

These gravity-flush, 1.6-gallon toilets beat pressure-assist models we tested overall. **A1** and **A2** combine superb solid-waste removal and quietness; **A3** offers better bowl cleaning with a bit more noise. Also consider the pressure-assist **A4** if saving a little water is worth the higher price and added noise.

A6 Aquasource \$100 CR Best Buy
A10 Kohler \$250
B1 Glacier Bay \$100 CR Best Buy

Both single-flush models use just 1.28 gallons per flush. **A6** blends performance and value; **A10** adds a bit more oomph. Dual-flush toilets haven't matched the best single-flush models overall. Among them, consider **B1** for its liquid-waste savings and low price.

That's how many times you're likely to flush over your lifetime. That adds up to almost 30 percent of your home's water use going down the toilet—even more if the toilet was made before 1996.



Video when you want it

Most viewers choose Netflix, but some rivals are more satisfying

TIRED OF PAYING big bucks for dozens of channels he never watched, Paul Talaga dropped his family's cable-TV service two years ago and now relies mostly on streaming video for entertainment. "We stream lots of last season's TV shows and one or two movies a week from Netflix," says Talaga, a 31-year-old computer-science professor who lives in Cincinnati. "We also get a DVD by mail maybe once a week." He connects a computer to his TV to watch news and current programs available on network websites. The entertainment mix suits him fine, he says, calling Netflix "an excellent value compared to paid TV service."

Talaga is among the millions of Americans who now watch video that's delivered to their screen over the Internet. More than half of the 15,277 ConsumerReports.org subscribers we surveyed recently had used a streaming video service within the

previous month. Most didn't drop TV service, as Talaga did, but use streaming as a supplement to regular TV rather than as a replacement for it.

Like him, though, the overwhelming majority of streaming viewers—81 percent—used the company that accounts for most of

the action in video streaming: Netflix. The rest of the services covered in the survey were used by only 2 to 14 percent of respondents.

But Netflix didn't earn especially high scores for satisfaction from the users surveyed by the Consumer Reports National Research Center. The main reason: dissat-

Pass the microwave popcorn

More readers in our survey said they streamed video at home than viewed a movie in a theater in the past 30 days. Streaming also beat out DVDs and Blu-ray discs and the free and paid video-on-demand channels from TV services.



Based on 15,277 responses from ConsumerReports.org subscribers in March 2012.

isfaction with its selection of movies, especially the latest releases. Respondents were happier with the selection of titles available on Blu-ray and DVD from Netflix's disc-by-mail service and on pay-per-view streaming services such as Amazon Instant Video, iTunes, and Vudu.

The fact that Netflix's disc business was judged better than its streaming operation is ironic because Netflix says it's focusing on streaming and putting limited resources into its "fading" disc business. In line with that strategy, it discontinued joint streaming and disc subscriptions in 2011 and started charging a separate fee for each service. That prompted many subscribers to drop one of the two plans. Among our survey respondents who had joint Netflix subscriptions, more than twice as many abandoned discs as gave up streaming.

That shift shows up in Netflix's subscription numbers. Earlier this year, it announced that it had 23.4 million streaming subscribers and 10.1 million subscribers to its disc-by-mail plan.

You should weigh a number of things when deciding which service best meets your needs. You can see what users think of 14 streaming and disc rental services in our first comprehensive Ratings of video services, on page 38. Streaming definitely has room for improvement. Satisfaction scores for streaming-video services were lower than for most other services we've rated during the past few years.

Also consider the types of equipment you can use to get streaming video to your TV. Don't overlook Internet-connected set-top boxes, which were among the most satisfying options for users. (See page 36.)

Selection matters most

Limited selection, Netflix's Achilles' heel, is a common problem with all-you-can-watch streaming services, which also include Amazon Prime and Hulu Plus. Fewer than one in five respondents said they were highly satisfied with the choice of titles from those services. (Amazon Prime is primarily a two-day shipping service that also includes unlimited access to a relatively small portion of the Amazon Instant Video library.)

Given the number of titles that most services claim to offer, you wouldn't expect any complaints. But those numbers can be misleading. Standard-definition and high-definition versions of the same movie and individual episodes of a TV series might count as distinct titles.

DID YOU KNOW?

What you need to stream Internet video

To use a streaming video service, you'll need a device that can access the Internet. You might already own one. Widely sold gaming systems Microsoft Xbox, Nintendo Wii, and Sony PlayStation have the ability to stream Internet video. So do many Blu-ray players introduced over the past year or so.

Buying a new TV? Consider one with built-in streaming capability, which is standard on many new models. You don't need to spend a lot: Relatively low-cost TVs with streaming capability that we recommend include the LG 42PM4700, \$650, a 42-inch plasma, pictured at right.

If you're keeping your current TV or buying a new one without streaming, think about adding a set-top box such as an Apple TV or a Roku, each of which costs \$100 or less. About one in four survey respondents used a set-top box, and most were highly satisfied with the device. See our sidebar on page 36.

Wi-Fi is standard with set-top boxes and gaming consoles, a plus if your TV



ALL IN ONE Some new TVs, such as this LG, have built-in streaming capability.

isn't near the modem or router. Wireless capability is less common on TVs and Blu-ray players, though more new models have it. You can count on getting Netflix with any streaming device, but other video services are hit or miss. Note that the device manufacturer can change the lineup of services at any time via a software update.

All-you-can-watch subscription services tend to get fewer titles from movie and TV studios, and at a later date, than the services that charge for each video you order. Consequently, many hotter titles and programming from premium cable networks such as HBO and Showtime never make it

Netflix streaming scored better for price than for selection of titles.

into the unlimited-streaming libraries of Amazon Prime, Hulu Plus, and Netflix, which include films you might not even be familiar with.

"The selection is really, really poor," says Mark Sears, a 59-year-old sales manager from Teaneck, N.J., who subscribes to Netflix's streaming service. "When I searched for movies featuring George Clooney recently, only a handful came up, which is ridiculous when he's been in so many." Of the Clooney movies Netflix offered for instant viewing at press time, almost all were at least 10 years old.

An all-you-can-watch subscription does

have its appeal, though. If you watch a lot of streaming video, an \$8-a-month plan from Hulu Plus or Netflix, or the videos available with an \$80-a-year Amazon Prime subscription, can be a much better deal than paying individually for each movie and TV episode you watch. Survey respondents viewed an average of three movies and six TV programs on their sets in the prior month. That could easily cost \$20 or more per month if you had to pay for each title individually.

Pay-per-view services such as Amazon Instant Video, iTunes, and Vudu charge for each title you stream—usually \$4 or \$5 for a newer movie, a little less for older movies and individual TV episodes. That business model is very similar to the disc rental business, so pay-per-view streaming titles are often available at the same time they're released on disc. More than 60 percent of readers gave high marks for selection to those three pay-per-view streaming services.

The advantages of discs were clear in our Ratings. Entertainment studios want to sell discs, so new titles make it onto Blu-ray and DVD in the first wave. In addition, older titles are often available on disc when they're no longer available for streaming. Netflix's disc-by-mail service

and independent video stores—the relatively few remaining since the mass closures of the past few years—were judged to have a more satisfying selection of titles, including current ones, than even the best streaming services. Blockbuster had a weaker showing for its video stores (about 900 of which remain after its bankruptcy filing and acquisition by Dish Network), Blockbuster Express kiosks (bought by Redbox; about 6,200 locations at press time), and Blockbuster Total Access discs by mail.

Disc rentals, from Netflix and other places, weren't just the favorite of older viewers. Respondents between 18 and 44 years old also gave higher marks to Netflix's disc service than to its streaming service. Despite that, almost 80 percent of those viewers had streamed videos within the past month, not only to a TV but also to a computer, tablet, or smart phone.

On the whole, readers found it reasonably easy to search for particular movies and TV shows. iTunes users were the most satisfied, Amazon Prime users the least. That's because Amazon's search function combs through everything available in the fee-based Instant Video catalog, so results will include titles that are not included with a Prime subscription.

One tip: Searching can be tedious on a typical TV remote because you have to "type" by clicking around an onscreen keyboard using the directional arrows. If you're using Netflix, it's often easier to use your computer to add a movie to your instant queue. When you go to Netflix on your TV, your selections will be accessible.

Some search apps and websites for services' content have more robust search functions than the services themselves. For example, at *canistream.it*, you can search content across multiple sources, showing you which, if any, offer the title and in what format (including streams, disc rentals, downloads, and disc purchases). Some will e-mail you when a title becomes available.

Cost and convenience count

A healthy selection of titles is one of the biggest factors in overall satisfaction, but cheap and easy counts with viewers, too. Redbox video kiosks—vending machines with low-priced rentals—ranked with Netflix and independents as among the most satisfying options for renting discs even though Redbox scored on the lower side for selection. A kiosk usually stocks about 70 to 200 titles, including recent releases, older hits, and games.

What pleased users most about Redbox was the price: \$1.20 per day for discs. It also had a high score for convenience, thanks to its 30,000-plus kiosks in stores and malls you're likely to visit often.

The Amazon Prime service earned kudos for price as well, suggesting that many readers consider it a "free" perk on top of unlimited two-day shipping, the main membership benefit. Though not as widely available as Netflix on Internet-capable Blu-ray players, TVs, and media boxes, Amazon's video service scored comparably for convenience. If you access it through the Kindle Fire, the company's tablet, you can start streaming video with a few screen presses via the device's Video tab.

Hulu Plus's free companion service, Hulu, which can be viewed on computers but not on TVs, was also a hit with viewers looking for free content. Unlike most network websites, which carry only their own programming, Hulu offers videos from more than 350 content companies, according to its website. Sources include

Plug 'n play: Boxes that take your TV online

Looking for an easy, cheap way to access Netflix and other streaming video services? Consider an Internet-connected set-top box. The boxes, most of which cost \$100 or less, were used by 25 percent of survey respondents who stream video, most of whom were very satisfied. The small devices work with any TV that has an HDMI input, which includes just about any LCD or plasma TV. (A few boxes also work with older sets.)

Every model we tested yielded very good full HD (1080p) images. All stream Netflix, one or two more video services, and a music station or two. All but a few models also had apps of other kinds that we don't list below, such as Facebook, Twitter, and photo-sharing services such as Picasa and Flickr. The Boxee and the Sony, the priciest models, also have full Web browsers.

All models can access your home network via Wi-Fi. Initial setup is pretty easy. You plug the box into your TV and connect to your wireless network, and you're good to go. A few models even have Wi-Fi Protected Setup (WPS), so no password is needed; you push a button on the router to connect the player.

Good choices for most

These models are well-priced and have all the features most consumers need.

Apple TV, \$100

SERVICES iTunes, Netflix, YouTube

This has Apple's usual super-friendly interface and integrates nicely with iTunes TV shows, movies and music libraries, and the iCloud storage service. If you already live in Apple's world, it's a great choice. Using AirPlay, it can stream content from an iPad, iPhone, or iPod Touch to a TV, and it supports AirPlay mirroring (which displays whatever's on your iOS device's screen on the TV). Its remote control was the smallest of the lot, with no dedicated-service buttons, yet it was easy to use. But it offers fewer services than some others.

Roku 2XS, \$100

SERVICES Amazon, Epix, HBO Go, Hulu Plus, Netflix, Pandora

Roku's flagship media player has a wide selection of streaming services and apps (it comes with Angry Birds) and has an enhanced Bluetooth game remote with motion sensing



for playing games. (The remote required pairing with the box.) The box has a USB port and a microSD card slot for additional storage. It's the only tested model that requires you to register using a computer, and it lacks YouTube. If you can live without Angry Birds and the motion-sensing remote, the \$80 Roku 2XD might be a better bet, though it also lacks the USB port and a wired Ethernet port.

ABC, A&E Networks, Comedy Central, the CW, Fox, Lionsgate, MGM, MTV Networks, National Geographic, NBC-Universal, Paramount, Sony Pictures, and Warner Bros. When we checked recently, TV shows included “Family Guy,” “Modern Family,” and “The Simpsons”; movie titles included older hits such as “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” and “Gladiator.” You can connect a laptop to your TV—using an HDMI cable, for example—to watch free content from Hulu and other websites on your big screen.

A public library is another free resource to explore. Many carry DVDs and, increasingly, Blu-ray discs. Selections tend to be smaller than in video stores, and you might have to reserve a title, especially a recent one, or request a loan from another branch. So be prepared to wait—but hey, it’s free.

Consider quality

Among streaming services, Vudu, iTunes, and Amazon Instant Video and its Prime selection had the same high scores as disc-rental services for picture quality. Netflix,

Hulu Plus, and the free Hulu service were a step lower. Our testers checked out Netflix picture quality in our labs and found it to be very good, roughly on par with the high-def video we see from cable. Blu-ray discs are still the gold standard for picture quality, but most viewers should be happy with streaming-video quality.

But the quality you’ll get depends on the speed of your Internet connection. Netflix

The slower your Internet speed, the lower the video quality.

and other services adjust picture quality in response to the speed of the Internet connection. We found that picture quality was often poor on startup but improved after a minute or so as the service adjusted to the connection speed.

Cable service is generally faster than DSL, yet our most recent survey on Internet service shows that satisfaction with speed varies greatly by cable company. If bandwidth becomes limited—say, if a lot of cable viewers in your area are online at

the same time—the service might temporarily downgrade the video quality so that the stream doesn’t freeze or break up. Generally, even relatively slow DSL Internet service should suffice for video, but the slower the connection, the lower the image quality, as a rule. Verizon FiOS, the all-fiber service, earned our highest rating for speed in a recent survey.

What’s ahead

If you aren’t yet streaming video to your TV, you might be in the future. The landscape could change dramatically if Amazon.com steps up its efforts in video streaming. Other big names are also eager to feed the demand for entertainment.

“Netflix has a lot of potential competitors,” says Dan Rayburn, a New York-based principal analyst at Frost & Sullivan, a market-research firm, and executive vice president of Streaming-Media.com. “Dish Network, which now owns Blockbuster, will offer more streaming options within and outside its Blockbuster @Home service, and Verizon and Redbox are partnering for a hybrid service that will combine disc rental with streaming.” He also sees the possibility that Apple and Google will add subscription streaming services.



Budget choices

Capable and inexpensive.

D-Link MovieNite, \$50

SERVICES Netflix, Pandora, Vudu, YouTube This is the lowest-priced player in our roundup, available only at Walmart. WPS makes initial setup very easy, and it has composite audio/video connections for use with older devices. The remote has dedicated buttons for its four

streaming services. But unlike most boxes, it has only the four services we list, and no future additions are expected.

Netgear NeoTV Pro 200S, \$70

SERVICES CinemaNow, Hulu Plus, Netflix, Pandora, Vudu, YouTube

This makes the most sense if you own a laptop with Intel’s WiDi technology, which lets you wirelessly display content from your laptop on a TV. Easy to connect via WPS support.

WD TV Live, \$100

SERVICES CinemaNow, Hulu Plus, Netflix, Pandora, Spotify, Vudu, YouTube One of the few models that supports Spotify, an increasingly popular music app. It has analog audio/video connections for older TVs.

If you want a full browser

In addition to streaming video, these devices let you go almost anywhere on the Web. So you could, for example, view a slideshow from a photo site such as Snapfish or explore Facebook on your TV.

Boxee Box by D-Link, \$180

SERVICES HBO Go, Netflix, Pandora, Spotify, Vudu, YouTube

The high price gets you a Web browser, lots of content—including access to social-media sites such as Facebook and Twitter—and the widest video-format support plus a dual-sided remote with a QWERTY keyboard. The knock: It’s bigger than others and oddly shaped.

Sony NSZ-GS7, \$200

SERVICES Amazon, HBO Go, Netflix, Pandora, Sony Entertainment, YouTube

A fine, if pricey, choice, tested as a preretail sample. Uses the revamped Google TV platform, with a full browser and access to the Android market, now called Google Play. The box can search for live TV shows as well as content from services such as Amazon, Netflix, and Sony Entertainment (services subject to change). It comes with a sophisticated dual-sided remote with a keyboard and a touchpad.

Overview

You can get video whenever you want it through streaming services (available as pay-per-view content and via all-you-can-view monthly subscriptions) and disc rentals from stores or kiosks or by mail. Cable and satellite TV providers also offer streaming video via free on-demand channels or as pay-per-view content.

BEST STREAMING SERVICES

- A1** Vudu
A2 Apple
A3 Amazon Instant

These pay-per-view options topped all the subscription services, including Netflix, for overall score and in almost every respect except price. In addition to offering the usual high-def and standard-def videos, **A1** has a third option: 1080p "HDX." Our testers found the video quality comparable to Blu-ray's, but it costs \$1 more than regular HD. **A2** and **A3** allow downloads to your device, which is handy where Wi-Fi is unavailable.

FOR EASY ACCESS, WIDEST CHOICE

- B1** Netflix

This mail-order disc-subscription service was the only one with high scores for both selection and convenience. You can watch as many videos as you want (Netflix says it will get a fresh title in your hands within two days or so of the time you pop a returned disc in the mail) for \$8 per month for one DVD at a time or \$12 for two, a few dollars more for Blu-ray discs. Compared with pay-per-view streams or renting discs in a retail store, you'll come out ahead if you rent three or more titles per month.

SELECTION AND A PERSONAL TOUCH

- B2** Independent stores

Not many neighborhood video stores are left, but those that remain pleased readers for selection, price, and service, perhaps because they can tailor choices to local or specialty tastes. These stores might be the last bastion of knowledgeable, in-person advice.

BEST VALUES

- A4** Amazon Prime
A5 Hulu
B3 Redbox

A4 is included with Amazon.com's two-day-shipping membership. But it has a small selection and is available on relatively few TVs, Blu-ray players, and boxes. For computers only, **A5** offers TV shows, free and with commercials, including some episodes available within days of broadcast. (If you want to stream to a TV or mobile device, consider **A8** Hulu Plus, \$8 per month, which offers a slightly better selection of TV shows than Netflix.) **B3** video kiosks carry a limited number of titles but are often handily located in supermarkets and malls.



Ratings Video services

In performance order, within types.

Better ← → Worse
 ● ○ ○ ○ ●

Order	Service or store	Reader score	Type	Survey results				Cost
				Selection	Price	Convenience	Picture quality	
		0	100					

A STREAMING SERVICES

1	Vudu	76	pay-per-view	○	●	○	○	\$4-\$6/each
2	Apple iTunes	75	pay-per-view	○	●	○	○	\$4-\$5/each
3	Amazon Instant Video	74	pay-per-view	○	○	○	○	\$4-\$5/each
4	Amazon Prime	70	subscription	●	○	○	○	\$80/yr. ^①
5	Hulu	70	website	○	○	○	○	free
6	Netflix	69	subscription	●	○	○	○	\$8/mo.
7	Video-on-demand channels ^②	68	pay-per-view/free	○	●	○	○	\$4-\$5/each
8	Hulu Plus	66	subscription	○	○	○	○	\$8/mo.

B DISC RENTALS

1	Netflix	78	mail	○	○	○	○	\$8+/mo.
2	Independent stores	77	store	○	○	○	○	NA
3	Redbox	77	kiosk	○	○	○	○	\$1.20/day
4	Blockbuster	71	store	○	○	○	○	\$3/day
5	Blockbuster Express	69	kiosk	○	○	○	○	\$1/day
6	Blockbuster Total Access ^③	68	mail	○	○	○	○	\$10/mo.

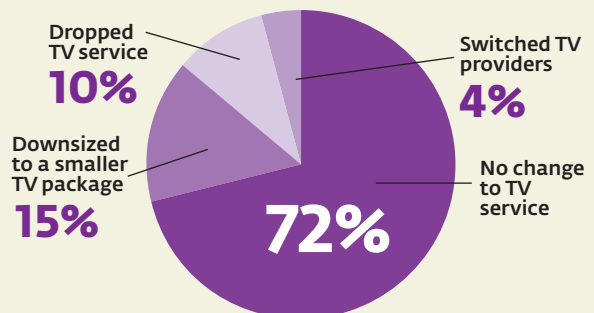
^① Cost includes other benefits, including free two-day shipping from Amazon.com. ^② From TV providers, both free and pay-per-view. ^③ Known as Blockbuster Movie Pass at the time of the survey.

Guide to the Ratings

Based on responses in March 2012 from 10,872 ConsumerReports.org subscribers who provided 9,387 responses about services to stream full-length videos; 6,483 responses about disc rentals; and 3,594 responses about video-on-demand experiences with cable, satellite, or phone-company TV service. Responses based on viewing experiences during the past month. **Reader score** reflects overall satisfaction with the content provider and isn't limited to the criteria listed in the table. A score of 100 would mean all respondents were completely satisfied; 80 means they were very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly satisfied. Differences of fewer than 4 points are not meaningful. **Selection, price, convenience, and picture quality** are relative measures, based on readers' reported satisfaction with those attributes. **Cost** is based on information from the providers, and is the least expensive option for subscription services and the approximate cost for a recent-release movie from pay-per-view services and disc-rental stores and kiosks. Results may not be representative of the U.S. population as a whole.

Most streamers don't ditch cable TV

Our survey showed that streaming video is usually an add-on, not a replacement for cable or satellite service. But one in four respondents who had used streaming video said they reduced or eliminated their TV service as a result.



Test your **Weight Loss Smarts**

True or False: (Check your answers below)

	True	False
1. Sleep deprivation may increase your waistline	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Jogging burns more calories than swimming	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Your BMI is the best indicator of whether you're overweight	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Often, it's the little-known facts like these that can make a huge difference in your life. That's why you will want to read *Consumer Reports on Health*. It brings you objective facts to help you make smart decisions about your health.

1. True. Sleep deprivation significantly **raises the appetite-boosting hormone ghrelin**, while lowering the hunger-reducing hormone, leptin.

2. False. Both swimming and jogging **burn about the same amount of calories**. Swimming is easier on the hips and knees, but jogging helps protect against osteoporosis.

3. False. Your BMI (body mass index) number is **not the best indicator of being overweight**. It has several problems, including not being able to distinguish muscle from fat.

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CONGRATULATIONS! Follow the steps on the confirmation page to begin downloading your issues.



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Ratings, reviews, recommendations

Blenders that do more

Move over, food processors: Some of the best blenders add impressive puréeing, grating, and chopping to the usual tasks of making mixed drinks, for under \$100. One can also juice; another can even shave ice for snow cones. But as our tests of 48 blenders show, several multitasking models are less than a bargain at any price. Here are the details:

Top blenders for less. Smooth, icy drinks and consistent puréeing and chopping have helped keep the pricey **1 Vita-Mix**, \$450, at the top of our Ratings. Powerful ice crushing and a generous 8-cup capacity are other perks. But the smaller **2 Ninja**, a CR Best Buy at just \$60, did nearly as well with less noise. **8 Cuisinart**, \$70, was also impressive, though it's a bit noisier and gives up some ice-crushing and chopping performance.

Beyond blending. **3 L'Equip**, \$160, **4 Hamilton Beach**, \$450, and **9 Cuisinart**, \$200, matched the Vita-Mix at puréeing and grating. The Cuisinart includes a built-in heater for cooking soup, and the **6 Breville**, \$450, has a juicer attachment. But less noise and better ice crushing help make L'Equip the value leader of this group.

If you're serving a crowd. A hefty 9-cup capacity makes the **10 Ninja**, \$100, a tempting choice for late-summer parties. It's also tops in convenience, with a locking lid, clear container markings, easy blade removal, and easy-to-clean touchpad controls.

Whichever blender you're considering, think about the food you'll prepare in it. Mostly mixed drinks? Look for a model that aced our ice-crushing and icy-drink tests. Also consider the container; plastic resists shattering, though glass is easier to keep clean and less likely to scratch, and won't absorb odors from food. And though more speeds may seem better, three well-spaced settings should serve most needs.



2 Ninja



4 Hamilton Beach



1 Vita-Mix

Ratings

Recommended models only From 48 tested.

☒ CR Best Buy ☒ Recommended

● Excellent ● Very good ○ Good ● Fair ● Poor

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results				
					Icy drinks	Purée/grate	Ice crush	Convenience	Noise
				0 100					
				P F G VG E					
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Vita-Mix 5200	\$450	76	●	●	●	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Ninja Master Prep Professional QB1004 ¹	60	73	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	L'Equip 228	160	70	●	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Hamilton Beach Commercial Tempest HBH650 ²	450	67	●	●	●	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	KitchenAid KSB565 ³	100	66	●	●	●	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	Breville Juice & Blend BJB840XL ^{3 4}	450	66	●	●	●	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	Breville Ikon BBL600XL ³	200	65	●	●	●	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8	Cuisinart SmartPower CPB-300 ^{1 2}	70	64	●	●	○	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9	Cuisinart SBC-1000 ^{3 5}	200	64	●	●	●	●	○
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	10	Ninja Professional NJ600 ²	100	61	●	●	●	●	○

¹ Food chopper. ² Touchpad. ³ Glass container. ⁴ Juicer. ⁵ Cooks soup.

Three that got iced in our tests

Nuwave touts its new Multi-Purpose Twister Blender, \$30, as a "magician in the kitchen." But its dismal ice crushing and lumpy results in our icy-drink tests proved to be less than magical. Hamilton Beach's Smoothie Start 5620S, \$40, was equally dismal at ice crushing despite its "patented Ice Sabre blades." Oster claims that ice doesn't stand a chance with its Ice Shaving

Blender BLSTET-C, \$100, which includes an ice-shaving attachment. It turned ice into slush as expected. But using it to make icy drinks, as Oster suggests, means you'll have to switch back to the regular blender container and blade for mixing the ingredients. And simply using the blender portion, as we did with all models, yielded so-so icy drinks and poor ice crushing.



More powerful desktops

Most of the 10 desktop computers we tested that had Intel's new third-generation Core processors rose to the top of our Ratings. But several that used the prior version of the processors are still competitive performers that can even save you money.

A6 Gateway, with the second-generation Core i7 processor, was an excellent performer at under \$1,000. **A9 Acer**, **A10 Gateway**, and **A13 Asus** also have second-generation processors and were very good performers. Those cost about \$800 or less. If you mainly do office tasks, send e-mail, and surf on the Web, those processors are plenty powerful for you. Of course, lots of good deals exist on desktops with the new processors. **A2 Dell** and **A8 Gateway** are CR Best Buys.

We found that desktop performance for certain tasks, such as uploading photos or converting home-video files for TV viewing, can be up to 20 percent faster with the new processors.

Look for specs that will help you take advantage of that new power. For example, if you're planning to watch movies on your computer, get an all-in-one with a Blu-ray player, such as **C1 Dell**. Many, like **C2 HP**, have generous 2-terabyte hard drives, great for storing photos and music.

Casual gamers should look for AMD's A series processor or a third-generation Intel Core processor with an HD graphics 4000 chip. Serious gamers should look at our Ratings for desktops that combine Intel second- or third-generation Core processors, 1 gigabyte of video memory or more, and at least an AMD Radeon HD 6450 or Nvidia GeForce GT 520 graphics card.



A1 Dell

B1 HP

C1 Dell

Ratings

Recommended models only From 55 tested.

☒ CR Best Buy ☒ Recommended

● Excellent ● Very good ○ Good ● Fair ● Poor

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Specifications				Price	Overall score	Test results				Features
			Processor	Memory (GB)	Hard drive (GB)	Video memory (MB)			Versatility	Performance	Ergonomics	Display size (in.)	
													Suitable for gaming Digital video out Blu-ray reader

A FULL-SIZED Fits under a desk. All require a separate monitor and speakers.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Dell XPS 8500 i7	Core i7-3770	8	1000	1024	\$900	85	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Dell XPS 8500 i5	Core i5-3450	8	1000	1024	750	84	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	HP Pavilion HPE Phoenix h9-1150	Core i5-3550	10	2000	1024	1,150	81	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Gateway FX6860 UR10P	Core i7-3770	12	2000	2048	1,200	80	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	Asus CM6870-US-3AB	Core i7-3770	16	2000		900	78	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	Gateway FX6860-UR20P	Core i7-2600	8	1500	1024	950	77	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	Acer AM3970-UR14P	Core i5-3450	8	2000	1024	810	74	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8	Gateway DX 4860-UR14P	Core i5-3450	6	1000		700	71	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9	Acer AM3970-UR11P	Core i5-2320	8	1000	1024	700	69	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	10	Gateway DX4860-UR11P	Core i7-2600	8	2000		825	68	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	11	Asus CM6870-US-2AA	Core i5-3450	12	2000	1024	800	68	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	12	HP Pavilion HPE h8-1210	FX-6100	10	1500	1024	775	67	●	○	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	13	Asus Essentio CM6850-01	Core i7-2600	8	750	2048	800	66	●	●	●	●	●

B COMPACT Space-saving desktop. All require a separate monitor and speakers.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	HP Pavilion Slimline s5-1260	Core i3-2120	4	1000	1024	650	71	●	●	●	●	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Gateway SX2370-UR10P	A8-3820	6	1000		530	65	●	○	●	●	●

C ALL-IN-ONE Sleek and space-saving. Monitor, computer, webcam, and speakers are in a single unit.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Dell Inspiron One i02321-6444MS	Core i7-2600S	8	1000	1024	1,100	76	●	●	●	23.0	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	HP Omni 220 220-1185qd	Core i7-3770S	8	2000	1024	1,000	75	●	●	●	21.5	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	HP TouchSmart 520-1165xt	Core i5-3450S	6	1000		1,000	74	●	●	●	23.0	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	HP TouchSmart 520-1070pc	Core i7-2600S	8	2000	1024	1,300	73	●	●	○	23.0	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	Apple iMac 27-inch MC813LL/A	Core i5 2.7GHz	4	1000	512	1,700	72	●	●	○	27.0	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	HP TouchSmart 610-1250xt	Core i5-2400	6	1500		1,100	70	●	●	●	23.0	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	HP TouchSmart 520-1050pc	Core i5-2400S	6	1000		1,000	68	●	●	●	23.0	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8	Samsung DP700A3B-A02US	Core i5-2390T	8	1000		1,050	67	●	●	●	23.0	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9	HP TouchSmart 520-1140t	Core i3-2100	6	1000		850	66	●	○	●	23.0	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	10	Apple iMac 21.5-inch MC309LL/A	Core i5 2.5GHz	4	500	512	1,200	66	○	●	○	21.5	●

① All but A13 include Wi-Fi 802.11n. ② Includes FireWire port. ③ Includes Thunderbolt port.

Tips for your upgrade

Any PC that came with Windows 7, and most Vista-based systems, should be upgradable to Windows 8. If you're thinking of moving to the new operating system when it comes out this fall, make sure you take a few preparatory steps. Install the latest Windows 7 updates and update any applications that need it as well. Do an antivirus check, delete unwanted files, and defragment your hard drive. Back up files (documents, photos, videos, music) and downloaded software. To ensure that your other hardware (printers, fingerprint readers, webcams) works with the new software, check the manufacturers' websites for updated drivers.

CLAIM CHECK

A friendlier self-cleaning oven?

The claim. Fast oven self-cleaning with less heat and no odor. That's the promise behind Whirlpool's new AquaLift technology, now in some Whirlpool and Maytag ranges. According to Whirlpool, the system uses water and a proprietary oven coating to loosen baked-on messes in about 40 minutes at about 200° F, instead of the usual 3 to 6 hours at temperatures around 800° F.

The check. We evaluated five of the company's Maytag ranges with the feature: the electric smooth-top MER8674AS, \$770, and MER8880AS, \$1,100; the induction MIR8890AS, \$1,650; and the gas MGR8880AS, \$1,100, and MGR8674AS, \$800. The test included slathering the oven sides, bottom, and door with a mix of eggs, cheese, pie filling, and other goo, and baking on the mix, as we do in all of our testing of self-cleaning ranges. Then

we poured distilled water onto the bottom of the oven, closed the door, and started the cycle, as Whirlpool recommends.

Bottom line. Ranges with AquaLift include a plastic scraper and scrubbing sponge for a reason. The system was odor-free and loosened much of the grime on the oven floor, but we had to work much harder to clean the window. And the oven walls were still a mess, even after multiple cleaning cycles and repeated scraping and scrubbing. (The manufacturer warns against using an oven cleaner or other chemicals.) Our advice: If you're considering a range oven with AquaLift, expect to clean it often, before soil builds up. And count on using some elbow grease.

BAKE-OFF The Maytag MER8674AS relies on a special oven coating.



Slicker clickers for TVs

ONE TIME-HONORED tradition of TV watching—combing through your sofa cushions to find the remote—may finally be nearing an end. Rather than fumbling with the buttons, couch potatoes can simply yell or gesture at the TV to control it.

Perhaps the most ambitious effort we've seen is **Samsung's Smart Interaction**, available in its **ES7500** and **ES8000** LCD TVs and **E8000-series** plasmas. They use a built-in microphone and video camera to

recognize hand gestures and voice commands; you hardly need the regular remote. The TVs also have face-recognition technology so that you can create individual user profiles.

Once the TV detects a hand motion, you can wave to navigate menus; to make a selection, just clench your fist. Basic voice commands can also be used to turn the TV on and off, open specific apps, and perform basic TV functions. Samsung also includes two remote controls—a fairly standard model and one with a touchpad and built-in microphone for voice commands if you prefer not to yell across the room.

Samsung and some LG TVs let you use your voice to do media and Internet searches. You can also do speech-to-text in any website's text box when you're using the Web browser.

LG has pioneered the use of gesture-based TV remotes with its wandlike **Magic Motion** remote controls, which work a lot like a Nintendo Wii game controller. The latest version, called the **Magic Remote**, has an integrated scroll wheel plus a built-in microphone for voice commands. You simply point the wand at the

TV to move a cursor through onscreen menus, clicking the scroll wheel to make a selection. The wheel can also be used to scroll when browsing, just like a computer mouse, or to scroll through channels.

Panasonic is packing a small, egg-shaped second remote with a large, circular touchpad in the center with all of its new **VT50** flagship plasma TVs. Using your thumb, you can control a mouselike onscreen cursor to navigate through menus, and even enter text on an onscreen virtual keyboard. To make a selection, you tap the screen or click the small left arrow key at the top of the remote. If you're just watching TV, the remote includes a few dedicated buttons.

Bottom line. We did get frustrated trying out these new controls in the test lab. It takes awhile to get used to saying, "Hi, TV" to get things started. And waving your hands at the screen can get tiring. The special remotes are helpful for Internet features but for most TV watching, regular remotes work better.



NOT SO REMOTE Old-style TV controls get a makeover.



NEW WAYS TO CONTROL TV

Use your smart phone to download the RedLaser or ShopSavvy app and scan the code for video.





LIQUID 'GOLD' To gauge color differences, our experts looked at oils poured into white porcelain spoons.

Extra-virgin olive oil

Our taste tests show that some don't make the grade

MANY "EXTRA-VIRGIN" olive oils—including big names such as Bertolli, Crisco, Filippo Berio, and Mazola—don't taste good enough to merit that description. By definition, extra-virgin olive oil is supposed to be flawless, but only the top nine of the 23 products our experts tried were free of flaws. More than half tasted fermented or stale. Two even tasted a bit like ... let's just say a barnyard. That problem can occur if oil is stored in vats containing sediment that has begun to ferment. The good news is that two products were excellent; one of those is a CR Best Buy.

You may not be able to easily spot a dud. Most people don't sip olive oil straight from a glass, as our experts did, and foods can mask imperfections. In addition, many consumers assume that olive oil should be a liquid version of the fruit they put in a salad or martini. Wrong. Superior oils are fresh and fragrant, with complex flavors of ripe and unripe fruit, grass, herbs, nuts, or butter, for starters. If you're

used to a particular product, you might not realize what you're missing until you do your own side-by-side comparison. It's like learning to appreciate and enjoy fine wine.

Look to the West

Our Ratings show that you don't need to buy oil with an Italian heritage to experience the best. California, which produces about 3 percent of the olive oil consumed in the U.S., is the source of the only two

Both oils rated Excellent come from California.

products judged Excellent: McEvoy Ranch (grown on a 550-acre property in Petaluma) and Trader Joe's California Estate oil ("crafted to our specifications from the first press of Arbequina olives grown on estate ranches in the Sierra foothills"), which costs far less than McEvoy: 35 cents

per ounce compared with \$1.73.

Three of the six Very Good oils also have a California pedigree: B.R. Cohn, 365 Everyday Value (Whole Foods), and California Olive Ranch. O-Live & Co. is pressed from Chilean olives. Only Lucini Premium Select and Kirkland Signature (Costco) Select Toscano are from olives grown in Italy. The other rated products contain olives from a mix of nations, such as Argentina, Greece, Italy, Morocco, Spain, Tunisia, and Turkey. Goya, a winner in our tests years ago, scored only a Fair this time around.

What's extra-virgin, anyway?

In Europe, the International Olive Council, chartered by the United Nations, establishes standards and works to ensure that products labeled extra-virgin, the highest grade of oil, live up to their billing; the countries do the policing. According to the IOC, extra-virgin olive oil must meet strict chemical and organoleptic (taste and smell) standards, including low levels of acidity and ultraviolet-light absorption. (High levels

suggest poor processing or deterioration.) It has been extracted from mashed fruit by mechanical means, not through the use of heat or chemicals, which can reduce flavor. It should have at least some fruitiness and be free of defects in flavor and aroma.

Lower grades include virgin, which is allowed some sensory flaws and higher acidity; pure or plain, a blend of virgin and refined olive oils (refined has been treated with heat or chemicals); and pomace olive oil, obtained by treating ground pits and leftover flesh with solvents, and generally used in soap-making, frying, and industry. Another variety, "light," refers to color, not calories or fat. It's essentially flavorless.

European companies that sell products in the U.S. aren't bound by IOC rules, and the organization doesn't inspect those imports. Oils made in America and imports can simply call themselves extra-virgin. The Food and Drug Administration usually steps in only when olive-oil mislabeling involves adulteration. (Some sellers have been known to spike extra-virgin oil with cheaper oils and palm them off on wholesalers.)

In 2010 the Department of Agriculture adopted standards similar to the IOC's, but they're voluntary. Producers, distributors, and importers can choose to participate in the agency's Quality Monitoring Program to verify the flavor, aroma, and purity of their oils. Products that pass muster receive a seal that can be displayed on packaging. To ensure that quality is maintained, the USDA says it will make surprise visits to plants to gather samples for ongoing testing.

The two Pompeian oils were the first to be certified. In our tests, conducted before certification, they were Fair at best. Nonorganic Pompeian was fusty (with a fermented-fruit character) and slightly stale; the organic version was rancid.

The North American Olive Oil Association, a trade group, has a testing and certification program of its own, based on the IOC's criteria. Approved products can display a "certified quality" seal, but the four tested oils with that seal—Bertolli, Crisco, and both Pompeians—didn't taste extra-virgin in our experts' opinion.

A healthy fat

More than half of U.S. households keep olive oil on hand, up from 30 percent just five years ago, according to the North American Olive Oil Association, an industry group. (Americans still consume far less than people of other nations: about

1 liter per person each year, compared with 13 liters for Italians and 24 for Greeks.)

Health is a main reason for its popularity. Olive oil consists mostly of monounsaturated fatty acids. A diet that emphasizes monounsaturated and polyunsaturated fats (in low-mercury fish such as salmon, pollock, and tilapia; some plants; and nut oils) rather than saturated fats and trans fats (think butter and stick margarine) may lower the risk of heart disease. For instance, monounsaturated fats may reduce total cholesterol and LDL (bad) cholesterol levels and normalize blood clotting, according to the Mayo Clinic. Some research shows that those fats may improve insulin levels and help control blood sugar, a goal for people with type 2 diabetes. Olive oil

also contains antioxidants, thought to protect the body from certain diseases. But consume it in moderation. Olive oil has 120 calories and 14 grams of fat per tablespoon, the same as in other oils.

How to choose, how to use

You can deep-fry or stir-fry in olive oil, use it in sauces, dip bread in it, or mix it into salads, entrées—even ice cream. (California Olive Ranch suggests a scoop of vanilla topped off with olive oil and a few grains of sea salt.) Consider buying two olive oils: one for cooking and the other for drizzling.

Cook in it. It's a waste to fry with an expensive olive oil. High heat can destroy subtle flavors. Any inexpensive oil rated Very Good or even Good should be fine.

TALK THE TALK

Decoding labels

Every label tells a story, but that story can be a mystery. Here's how to interpret what's on the bottle.

Country of origin. Italian-sounding brands dominate store shelves, and many people assume that the best oils come from Italy. Companies play off that assumption, so read labels carefully. Bertolli's main label, for example, says "Imported from Italy"; the back, in minuscule type, reveals that the product may contain olives from eight countries, including Italy. If heritage matters to you—and our tests show that it shouldn't—look for clear statements such as those used by Colavita: "Obtained exclusively from olives harvested and pressed in Italy."

Acidity. You may see an acidity number on the label; the lower the number, the better the flavor. To be called extra-virgin, the Department of Agriculture says, oil must have a free-fatty-acid content, expressed as oleic acid, of no more than 0.8 percent per 100 grams. Many factors affect acidity levels, including the maturity of the fruit, harvesting and pressing practices, cleanliness of the presses, and whether the olives were picked off the ground or from the tree.

First cold press. The term harks back to a time when olives were crushed under huge stone wheels, the paste was then spread across mats, and mechanical pressure was applied to squeeze out the oil. That procedure has been replaced by



more high-tech and hygienic techniques, though some producers still incorporate stones in sophisticated machinery. As for "cold," all extra-virgin olive oil comes from the first pressing of the olive paste produced through "cold" or mechanical means, without the use of heat or chemicals. The claim is meaningless.

Color. Among olive oil's many hues: pale yellow, almost honey gold, deep yellow-green, and bright green. Color isn't linked to quality, but it can hint at an oil's general character. A golden hue suggests the use of ripe olives, which tends to result in nutty, buttery, or fresh, flowery notes. Green signals fruit that's not fully mature, which may convey a sharp, bitter (in a good way) taste reminiscent of fresh-cut grass, unripe banana, tart apple, or other herbs and vegetables. To eliminate potential color bias, we had our experts sip oils from cobalt-blue glasses.

You could even consider a nonvirgin olive oil, though we found minimal price differences between that and extra-virgin.

Drizzle it. Unlike neutral vegetable oils, olive oil imparts its own character to a dish, so think of it as a seasoning. Extra-virgin oils have nuances you won't find elsewhere. Some people may be startled by a sharp, peppery bite from a robust oil such as McEvoy Ranch, which stands up to red meat, salad, and cheese. The mellower Lucini, with a citrus note, might pair better with delicate fish. But there are no rules. Try a few olive oils to find what you like.

Keep it fresh. An unopened container of a high-quality olive oil may stay fresh for up to two years after it's packed, though there will be a gradual falloff in flavor even if the bottle remains sealed. Once it's opened, you can store olive oil, tightly capped, for months in any cool, dark place. (Heat, light, and air can degrade the taste of olive oil and possibly its nutrients.) Oil can be refrigerated if you don't use it often. It will liquefy quickly at room temperature. Oil will keep better in glass than in plastic, and the darker the bottle, the better. If you transfer oil from its container into a smaller bottle or dish for serving, don't pour fresh oil on top of old, which increases the risk of rancidity.

Bottom line. Don't believe every extra-virgin claim. The Ratings point to Excellent and Very Good choices but also to a minefield of lower-quality products. Use McEvoy Ranch and Trader Joe's in ways that show off their strong, complex, fresh taste—drizzled over bread, for example. Other Very Good choices include Kirkland Signature and 365 Everyday Value, both CR Best Buys. (The Kirkland product is generally available only from late December through September.) It's fine to use some of the lower-rated products in cooking.

Our taste tests

Ratings are based on blind taste tests by two experts, who evaluated three samples of each oil. For most brands, they evaluated three separate lots (date codes), but due to availability they could taste only one lot of Pompeian Organic, 365 Everyday Value, and Kirkland Signature, and two of Trader Joe's. Cost per ounce is approximate retail, usually based on a container of about 17 ounces. B.R. Cohn came in the smallest bottle, 6.7 ounces; Kirkland Signature, Capatriti, and 365 Everyday Value, the largest, around 34 ounces. Most oils are widely available, but McEvoy Ranch (mcevoyranch.com) and B.R. Cohn (brcohn.com) are sold at specialty stores and online.

Ratings Olive oil

All tested products In order of taste.

McEvoy Ranch

Trader Joe's



✓ CR Best Buy
✓ Recommended

Product	Cost per oz.	Comments (See box below.)
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EXCELLENT Strong, complex, very fresh-tasting. Best drizzled over foods to add flavor.

✓ McEvoy Ranch	\$1.73	Intense green-grassy flavors; ripe-fruit and floral notes. Very well balanced. Bitterness and pungency add to complexity. Long finish. Great with pasta, bread, bruschetta, red meat, salads, and cheese.
✓ Trader Joe's California Estate	0.35	Pronounced green flavors; ripe fruit. Pungent, slightly bitter. Medium finish. Pairs well with bread and salad.

VERY GOOD Fresh, complex oils that complement many foods.

✓ O-Live & Co.	0.53	Strong aroma and flavors, mostly green with ripe-fruit notes. Pungent, slightly bitter. Pair with pasta, bread, white meat, and salad.
✓ B.R. Cohn California	1.79	Lots of ripe-fruit and green flavors, with an unusual anise/fennel note. Slightly pungent, hint of bitterness. Pair with pasta, bread, bruschetta, salad, and pizza.
✓ Lucini Premium	0.93	Pronounced ripe-fruit and green flavors, including an unusual citrus note. Pungent, slightly bitter. Pair with pasta, bread, fish, and salad.
✓ Kirkland Signature Select Toscano (Costco)	0.35	Distinct green flavors with ripe-fruit notes. Hint of hay and woody notes. Long finish. Pair with pasta and white beans.
✓ 365 Everyday Value 100% Californian Unfiltered (Whole Foods)	0.38	Distinct ripe-fruit and green flavors, hint of banana. Pungent, slightly bitter. Pair with bread, white meat, and salad.
✓ California Olive Ranch	0.42	Ripe-fruit and green flavors, hint of banana. Slightly pungent, hint of bitterness. Good on salads and bread, and for baking.

GOOD Except for Newman's Own, the top "Goods" had slight flaws that might not be noticed with food. The rest had more obvious problems, but most would be fine for cooking.

Newman's Own Organics	0.46	Some ripe-fruit and green flavors. Odd salty taste. Pungent, slightly bitter.
Colavita	0.56	Mostly ripe-fruit flavors, some green notes. Pungent, slightly bitter. Oxidized note.
Filippo Berio Organic	0.42	Ripe-fruit and green flavors. Bitter, pungent. Somewhat oxidized and fusty.
Star	0.34	Strong aroma but little flavor. Somewhat oxidized and fusty. Pungent.
Archer Farms 100% Italian (Target)	0.53	Some ripe-fruit and green flavors. Bitter, pungent. Some oxidized and woody (olive pit) notes.

FAIR Few positive attributes. All tasted at least somewhat stale; most had other flaws.

Pompeian	0.32	Ripe-fruit and green flavors. Somewhat pungent, hint of bitterness. Fusty and slightly oxidized.
Crisco	0.30	A little ripe-fruit flavor. Somewhat pungent, slightly bitter. Somewhat oxidized.
Great Value (Walmart)	0.28	A little ripe-fruit flavor and pungency, hint of bitterness. Oxidized, slightly fusty.
Goya	0.38	A little ripe-fruit and green flavors. Somewhat pungent, slightly bitter. Slightly fusty, slightly oxidized.
Filippo Berio	0.34	A little ripe-fruit and hint of green flavors. Somewhat pungent, slightly bitter. Slightly fusty and oxidized.
Bertolli	0.39	A little ripe-fruit flavor. Slightly bitter and a hint of pungency. Greasy mouth feel. Oxidized and fusty, slight musty aroma.
Mazola	0.28	Hardly any fruit flavor. Only a hint of bitterness and pungency. Greasy mouth feel. Fusty, notably oxidized.

POOR Old-tasting, with one or more strong flaws that aren't likely to be masked by cooking.

Botticelli	0.28	Old-tasting, oxidized; fusty, musty, barnyardlike. There's a little ripe-fruit flavor but almost no bitterness or pungency.
Pompeian Organic	0.33	Old-tasting, greasy, rancid. Hint of ripe fruit but little pungency and almost no bitterness.
Capatriti	0.22	Old-tasting, greasy. Fusty, with strong muddy/barnyardlike flaw. No fruit flavor, little pungency, and only a hint of bitterness.

Muddy, musty, fusty, and other key terms

Green describes products with characteristics of unripe olives, including the taste of fresh-cut grass, green apples, green bananas, mint, or other herbs. **Ripe-fruit** describes a nutty or buttery quality, along with the flavors of yellow bananas or other ready-to-eat fruit. **Bitterness** (think tea and dark chocolate) and **pungency** (produces a tingy or peppery sensation at the back of the throat) are pluses that give an oil bite. Oils with a **long finish** linger on the palate,

another plus. Oils called **oxidized/rancid** tasted stale; **fusty** oils had the flavor of decomposing or fermented fruit, possibly resulting from improper handling of the fruit; **mustiness** is a moldy character from olives stored under humid conditions for several days before pressing. **Muddy sediment/barnyardlike** means the oil was reminiscent of manure, possibly because it was stored in tanks harboring sediment that had begun to ferment.



Cars

Road tests, auto products, hot topics

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A CUT BELOW The Honda Civic dropped in performance after its latest redesign.

Five popular cars to avoid

JUST BECAUSE A CAR generates a lot of buzz or is a best seller doesn't mean that it's a good choice for you. The five models here may be on a lot of buyers' shopping lists, but we suggest you steer clear. They didn't perform well in our testing or they suffer from subpar reliability. Either way, there are better choices.

► **HONDA CIVIC.** For years, the Civic has been an iconic small car. But Honda took too many shortcuts in its latest redesign. The Civic is still one of the more reliable and fuel-efficient cars in its class. But the current model suffers from a choppy ride, noisy cabin, vague steering, and mediocre interior quality. The Subaru Impreza, Hyundai Elantra, and Mazda3 are better cars with similar or better fuel economy.



► **JEEP LIBERTY.** You might be drawn to this SUV's rugged looks. But that style comes with an equally rugged and unrefined driving experience. The Liberty can tackle tough off-road terrain. But on pavement its ride is unsettled and handling is clumsy. The interior is cramped and cheap-feeling. And the engine is noisy and thirsty, getting only 16 mpg overall. All of this has

earned it one of the lowest road-test scores of any vehicle we've recently tested: 27 points out of 100. You'll give up some off-road prowess, but the Toyota RAV4 and Subaru Forester are much nicer SUVs overall, with notably better gas mileage.



► TOYOTA PRIUS C.

It's all the buzz: a less expensive Prius with great gas mileage. What more can you ask for? Plenty.

Yes, this new subcompact gets a stingy 37 mpg in city driving and 43 mpg overall, 1 mpg shy of the larger Prius hatchback. But all-around quality really drops. Related to the lackluster Toyota Yaris, the Prius C suffers from a stiff ride, noisy cabin, slow acceleration, and cheap-looking interior trim. Though it can't match the C's stellar mpg, the Honda Fit scored much higher in our tests and costs thousands less.



► FORD EDGE (V6).

The stylish lines of this crossover SUV might catch your eye, but we suggest that you keep on looking. In our testing of the V6 all-wheel-drive version, we found a jittery ride,

pronounced road noise, and distracting controls, especially with the complicated and unintuitive MyFord Touch infotainment system. And in our annual survey of subscribers, it had much-worse-than-average reliability. There is also a turbo four-cylinder engine that works well and gets better fuel economy, but it can't be paired with all-wheel drive. For about the same price, better alternatives include the Toyota Highlander, Nissan Murano, and Mazda CX-9.



► DODGE GRAND CARAVAN.

This is one of the best-selling minivans on the market. It's versatile, comfortable, quiet, and well equipped. But according to our annual reliability survey, it's also the most problematic minivan, suffering from numerous reports of squeaks and rattles, loose interior trim, and power-equipment and sliding-door troubles. The Grand Caravan also didn't measure up to its competitors in our testing, delivering unimpressive gas mileage of 17 mpg overall and sloppy at-the-limit handling. We recommend the front-wheel-drive Toyota Sienna, which has had better reliability and gets 20 mpg.

Make your car last 200,000 miles

How to go the distance and save tens of thousands of dollars

KEEPING A CAR running beyond the 200,000-mile mark would have been considered an incredible feat even a decade ago because cars weren't as reliable and durable as they are today. But improvements in rust prevention, engine technology, and lubricants have been game changers, and now you can expect to keep any car rolling into six-figure territory with the proper care.

That is good news for drivers, who are keeping their cars longer than ever before; the average age of all cars on the road is

approaching 11 years, up from about eight years in 1995, according to Polk research. Still, motorists might not realize the long-term financial benefits of keeping a car for 200,000 miles. Our research shows that reaching that milestone (which would take the average motorist about 15 years) could result in savings of \$30,000 or more. Here's how you can get there:

► Buy a safe, reliable model

You can coax any vehicle to 200,000 miles with enough patience and cash, but that

doesn't make doing so a good idea. The best way to minimize visits to the shop is to start with a model that has a reliable track record. And you don't have to look far for a source; Consumer Reports compiles comprehensive reliability information from our Annual Auto Survey of subscribers. They provide us with data on 1.3 million vehicles, and we publish the findings across our print publications, in our iPad edition, and on ConsumerReports.org.

In addition to choosing a reliable model, make sure to pick a car you'll want to

Whether you have a standard or extended warranty, make sure you use it.

—Tom and Ruth Bushaw, Kennewick, Wash.
1990 Lexus LS (350,000 miles) and 2004 Toyota Sienna (200,000 miles). We wrote about the Bushaws in 2007, when their Lexus hit 332,000 miles.



keep for a long time. Don't compromise on the features you want or buy less or more vehicle than you think you'll need. If this is going to be a long relationship, it may as well be a happy one. So choose a vehicle that will fit your lifestyle and that you'll enjoy driving.

While you're out shopping, keep a sharp eye out for cars that have the latest safety features, such as electronic stability control. And consider newer safety aids such as a rear-view camera and a blind-spot-warning indicator. Remember to research how well any vehicle you're interested in

performed in government and insurance-industry safety tests.

If you're buying a used car, be on the lookout for signs of neglect or abuse. Check the car for dents, rust, and mismatched body panels. Look for paint overspray, which is often a sign of repair work. Make sure all interior components are in good condition. A mildew smell, discolored carpeting, and silt in the trunk are indicators of water damage. All components under the hood should be free of corrosion and grease. Check the fluids and watch out for damp areas in the engine



The secret to older Volvo longevity: Follow the maintenance schedule, and find a mechanic who specializes in Volvos.

—Ed and Michele Evanowski, with sons Jonathan and Peter, Bloomsbury, N.J.
1990 Volvo 240DL (300,534 miles)

Great all-around cars (and those to avoid)

The recommended models below scored well in our Ratings, had better or average reliability in our annual owner surveys, and performed well in government or insurance-industry crash tests. They should have few problems through the years. We also list models not to buy because of years of much worse than average reliability.

Best of the best

■ SMALL CARS

Honda Fit
Scion xB
Subaru Impreza (nonturbo)
Toyota Corolla
Toyota Matrix

■ SMALL SUVs

Honda CR-V
Subaru Forester (nonturbo)
Toyota RAV4

■ MEDIUM SUVs

Acura MDX
Honda Pilot
Lexus RX
Toyota Highlander

■ FAMILY CARS

Honda Accord
Nissan Altima
Toyota Camry
Toyota Prius

■ UPSCALE SEDANS

Acura TL
Infiniti G
Lexus ES
Toyota Avalon



■ MINIVANS AND WAGONS

Subaru Outback (above)
Toyota Sienna (FWD)
Toyota Venza

Models to avoid

Audi Q5 SUV (V6)
BMW X5 SUV (turbo 6-cyl.)
Chrysler Town & Country minivan
Dodge Grand Caravan minivan

Dodge Journey SUV
GMC Acadia SUV
Jaguar XF sports sedan
Mercedes-Benz GL-Class SUV
Mini Cooper S sports car

A long-term investment pays off

Keeping a car for 15 years will save you thousands compared with buying a new car every five years, possibly more than the price of a car. We compared both scenarios using a family sedan and a small SUV, and chose reliable models. Depreciation, or the vehicle's loss in value, is the largest cost factor by far, accounting for about half of ownership costs over five years. Our calculations were based on driving 15,000 miles per year.

1997 Honda CR-V



	Honda CR-V EX (4WD) \$26,455		Toyota Camry LE (4-cyl.) \$23,830	
Owner costs	Keep for 15 years	New car every 5 years	Keep for 15 years	New car every 5 years
Depreciation	\$23,624	\$47,571	\$22,005	\$42,851
Maintenance and repairs	\$6,805	\$2,594	\$5,750	\$2,620
Loan interest (5.32%, 15% down)	\$3,331	\$9,994	\$3,001	\$9,002
Sales taxes (5% average)	\$1,323	\$3,968	\$1,192	\$3,575
Insurance	\$10,716	\$13,395	\$9,348	\$11,685
Total cost	\$45,799	\$77,522	\$41,295	\$69,733
Savings	\$31,723		\$28,438	

1997 Toyota Camry



compartment and under the vehicle, which might point to leaks.

When you've found a vehicle you're interested in, take it to an independent mechanic for a diagnostic inspection, which costs about \$100 to \$150. A mechanic can help you spot signs of wear or abuse that you might not see.

▶ Stick to the schedule

Follow the maintenance schedule in your car's owner's manual. It spells out when to take care of every service for the life of your car, including routine oil and filter changes, tire rotations, and more major service such as timing-belt replacement. Even missing one oil change can contribute to premature engine wear or cause damage, and reduce the chances of your car remaining reliable for long.

If you've neglected following your vehicle's maintenance schedule, it's not too late to get with the program. Have a mechanic inspect your vehicle and take care of any apparent problems, no matter how minor. Then introduce yourself to your owner's manual and start fresh. Even if your vehicle doesn't make it to 200,000 miles, it will definitely last longer with proper ongoing care.

Following the maintenance schedule has gotten easier over the years because longer-lasting components and fluids have increased service intervals. Today, it's common to go 10,000 miles between oil changes, and some spark plugs don't



I have a touch-up pen and care for the paint as I see the spots. I never park next to cart corrals at stores.

—Steven Cook, Woodstock, Ga.
2003 Chevrolet Avalanche (252,000 miles)

need replacement for 100,000 miles.

Consider using what is often called the severe-use or extreme-use maintenance schedule in your owner's manual. Most drivers who need to follow such a schedule do a lot of city driving; live in a very hot or cold climate, in mountain regions, or near the ocean; make a lot of short trips; tow a trailer; or drive in dusty conditions. If that description sounds like it includes a lot of drivers, it does.

The difference between the regular maintenance schedule and the severe-use schedule can be significant, with severe-use oil-change intervals being much shorter, sometimes twice as often. Intervals for other services also change accordingly under severe-use guidelines.

Many new models make it even easier to stay on top of maintenance, with sensors that take into account your mileage and driving habits to determine the optimum time for maintenance. Some BMW, General Motors, Honda, and Mercedes-Benz models monitor the miles driven since the last service and record data such as how much stop-and-go driving is done, the engine temperature during each trip, and the time the engine spends operating at higher speeds. The system then calculates how quickly your oil is breaking down and alerts you when service is due, and can even adjust a car's complete service interval to compensate for the severity of use.

Don't overmaintain your car; that can be a waste of money. Watch out for dealers or repair shops that add maintenance work not called for in the owner's manual. That can add hundreds of dollars to a routine service bill.

▶ Don't skimp on parts

Trying to save a couple of bucks on cheap parts and fluids could cost you in the long run. The wrong type of oil or transmission fluid, for example, could cause damage leading to expensive repairs, void your warranty, and diminish long-term reliability. Cheap and no-name belts and hoses might not wear as well as those from a name-brand supplier. To be safe, use only parts and fluids meeting manufacturer specifications.

If your car's manual says that premium fuel is required, go for the expensive stuff. Some engines won't perform correctly without higher-octane gasoline, and using regular or even midgrade fuel might cause damage. If premium fuel is recommended (but not required), you're fine using lower-octane gasoline because the engine-control system has sensors that will compensate for it. Using premium fuel won't do a thing for a car designed to run on regular gas. You won't see any improvement in performance, fuel economy, or engine life, so save your money.

▶ Know what to watch for

Even if you adhere to the schedule, remember that problems can arise unexpectedly. The manual might say how often to inspect belts and hoses, for example, but when to replace them can vary greatly by climate and other factors. So get in the habit of opening the hood to look, listen, and smell for anything unusual. Fraying and cracks in belts are sure

Synthetic oil can be an expensive choice

Oil companies claim that synthetic oils provide better protection and last longer than conventional oil—up to 15,000 miles between changes.

Some cars specify synthetic oil, which makes the choice of whether to use it a simple one for their owners. But most cars call for conventional oil, and it costs much less than synthetic.

We haven't tested synthetic oils in many years, but some users who contribute to the forums on ConsumerReports.org swear by them for their high-mileage vehicles.

It's hard to say whether the oil itself or

just changing it regularly contributes to the cars' longevity. It's also notable that other respondents report similar results with conventional motor oil.

Whatever oil you choose, make sure to use the type and viscosity that is specified in your owner's manual, and change it according to the prescribed maintenance schedule. Regular oil changes will indisputably make your engine last longer.

SLICK ADVICE Check the owner's manual to see whether your car specifies synthetic oil.



Hybrids hang tough as the miles rack up



We've not had any problems with the battery pack or hybrid system on our car.
—Kevin and Roxanna Moores, Severn, Md.
2005 Toyota Prius (320,000 miles)

Now that some hybrid models have been on the market for 10 years or longer, and given concerns about expensive battery failures and the longevity of electric motors and controllers, you might be wondering whether a hybrid makes good economic sense for the long term. We were, too, so we thought we'd see what the owners of hybrids with 150,000 or more miles had to say.

Bottom line? Most Toyota Prius, Honda Civic Hybrid, and other hybrid owners we contacted reported no more serious problems than conventional car owners. Owners of both types of cars had the same advice: Buy a reliable model, drive reasonably, and maintain it according to the manufacturer's maintenance schedule.

Replacement battery packs can be expensive, costing up to \$3,000. But owners who said they had to replace them after 200,000 or 300,000 miles generally felt it was worth it given their fuel savings and low overall operating costs. As Prius owner Eileen Bowden of Moreno Valley, Calif., put it, "I had to replace the big battery pack, which was expensive. And there have been about maybe two or three other big bills over the years, but still not bad. All in all, the money saved on gas has pretty much covered the cost of maintenance."

signs of trouble, along with cracks and bulges in hoses. Look for evidence of leaks, and check the level and condition of coolant and brake and power-steering fluids. They can give you clues about what's going on inside components. Gritty-feeling or burnt-smelling trans-

mission fluid, for example, could indicate the start of internal damage. By catching it early, you could reduce repair costs and increase long-term reliability.

On the road, listen for odd noises from your engine, suspension, and brakes. If you have any doubts about a noise, get it

checked out right away by a mechanic. Taking care of a minor repair now could help you avoid an expensive one later.

Consider investing in a vehicle service manual, available at car dealerships and most auto-parts stores. More detailed than your owner's manual, a service manual can explain in illustrated detail what to look for, and assist with minor repairs that can extend long-term reliability.

The end of the road

No matter how well you choose and care for a car, someday it will be time to move on because it's costing too much or is no longer safe. Still, saying goodbye can be a tough decision, especially if you're attached to your car. Here are signs that it's probably time to find another vehicle:

- ▶ It needs a big repair that will cost more to fix than the car is worth.
- ▶ Rust is compromising the structural integrity.
- ▶ It remains unreliable even with frequent repairs.
- ▶ It has been in a flood or a serious accident.



▶ Keep your machine clean

Cleaning inside and out will not only keep your car looking newer but also make it a more pleasant place to be as the miles roll up. Washing and waxing can help preserve the paint and prevent rust, and vacuuming sand and dirt out of carpets and seats can minimize premature wear that leads to tears and holes. And while you clean, you might spot small problems that you wouldn't notice otherwise, such as scratches that need to be painted over, and loose or broken parts that should be repaired or replaced.

Compact sporty SUVs

New fuel-efficient engines shake up our Ratings

DRIVETRAIN CHANGES for the BMW X3 and redesigned Acura RDX have helped those vehicles earn the top spots in our Ratings of compact sporty SUVs. And they achieved that distinction by going in different directions.

The X3 has been powered by six-cylinder base engines since its inception in 2004, but BMW opted to go smaller for 2013. It replaced the previous 3.0-liter inline six with a new 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine. The new engine ekes out 1 mpg better overall fuel economy than the old one. And although the turbo four is not as refined as the six, it delivers the same 240 hp and comparable acceleration. Precision handling and a taut ride make the X3 drive like the best sporty sedans. Add a quiet and plush interior and the X3 scores an impressive 80 in our Ratings.

By contrast, Acura dumped its rough and thirsty turbocharged four-cylinder engine in favor of a more refined 273-hp, 3.5-liter

V6. The larger engine not only performs better but also contributes to a respectable fuel economy of 22 mpg overall.

The RDX had been a weak spot in the otherwise competent Acura lineup; the previous version wasn't refined and had a stiff ride. But the engine upgrade, along with a roomier, user-friendly cabin, helps it score a 79, just a hair below the X3. And the RDX is priced to move, costing much less than the competition.

Addition and subtraction

Until recently, the Audi Q5 was the top-rated vehicle in this category. We originally tested it with the 3.2-liter V6. But the base engine later became a 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder, which contributed to a lower road-test score of 77. Still, the Q5 2.0T is a good choice, with enjoyable handling and a well-trimmed interior. Optional for 2013 is a potent 3.0-liter supercharged V6, with a 3.0-liter V6 turbo-diesel and hybrid expected later.

Rounding out our foursome is the Cadillac SRX, which dropped its old 3.0-liter V6 and optional 2.8-liter turbo V6 for a larger 3.6-liter V6 that gets 18 mpg overall. Despite a power increase, the heavy SRX feels sluggish. It scored a respectable 72 in our Ratings, dropping a point because revised suspension tuning hurt its emergency handling performance.

The RDX and the Q5 are recommended because reliability is predicted to be average or above. The X3 four-cylinder is too new for us to predict reliability, and the SRX has shown below-average reliability. Prices range from \$36,605 for the RDX to \$44,595 for the BMW X3 xDrive28i.

Buyers interested in smaller, sporty SUVs might also consider some moderately priced options. We recently bought a Ford Escape, redesigned for 2013. We haven't finished testing it, but we're finding that at higher trim levels, the Escape provides unique features, a quiet cabin, sporty handling, and a solid feel. The



Thinking smaller for better mpg

In the past, four-cylinder engines have been mostly reserved for basic economy cars and lower-cost family sedans. More upscale, higher-priced vehicles usually came with a larger six-cylinder engine that wasn't as fuel efficient but delivered more power and refinement. But that's changing.

To squeeze out better gas mileage, even luxury automakers have begun putting four-cylinder engines in their larger sedans and SUVs. By using turbochargers, they are able to build "four-bangers" that produce power similar to a larger engine, but with the fuel economy of a small engine.

Several of this issue's SUVs fit into that group, including the Audi Q5 and BMW X3. Four-cylinder engines are now more refined, and modern turbos are more reliable and

responsive, with much less "turbo lag" after you step on the throttle.

The four-cylinder engine in the front-wheel-drive Ford Edge, for example, is smoother than the V6, does not lack power, and gets 21 mpg overall, 3 mpg better than a V6 Edge with all-wheel drive. The Mercedes-Benz C250 sedan we tested last month uses a 1.8-liter turbo four that is the smoothest four-cylinder engine we've ever tested.

On the other hand, the four-cylinder X3 and Q5 aren't quite as smooth as they were with six-cylinder engines. They can sound a little buzzy, and the direct injection they use causes them to emit a muted diesel-like clatter at idle.

With the push for better fuel economy, we'll probably see more of that trend.



The BMW X3's new turbo four-cylinder engine ...



... has replaced the larger inline six.

nimble Volkswagen Tiguan shares the Audi Q5's turbocharged four-cylinder engine, but it costs thousands less. Other alternatives are uplevel versions of the Subaru Forester and Toyota RAV4.

More SUVs with turbos

We also tested two other turbocharged four-cylinder SUVs for this issue: the Kia Sportage SX and the Ford Edge SEL. The Sportage gained a turbocharger to boost power; the Edge is another SUV that downsized from a V6 to a turbo four to save fuel. See the reviews on page 59.



BIG MOVES

Engine changes helped improve the ranking of two vehicles in our test group.

Overview

Compact sporty SUVs have all the features, refinement, and performance of midsize SUV models but in a smaller package. They're popular with buyers who want the amenities and handling of a sports sedan, along with a versatile interior.

Recommended These models did well in our road tests, had average or better reliability in our subscriber survey, and performed at least adequately if they were included in government or insurance-industry safety tests.

Ratings

Tested models In performance order.

● Excellent
 ● Very good
 ○ Good
 ○ Fair
 ● Poor

Recommended

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

A COMPACT SPORTY SUVs

	1	BMW X3 xDrive28i (2.0T)	\$44,595	●	80	new	23
✓	2	Acura RDX (V6)	36,605	●	79	○	22
✓	3	Infiniti EX Journey*	39,425		78	○	18
✓	4	Audi Q5 Premium Plus (2.0T)	41,075	●	77	○	21
	5	Cadillac SRX Luxury	43,085	●	72	○	18
✓	6	Volvo XC60 T6	42,245		70	○	17
✓	7	Mercedes-Benz GLK350	41,760		66	○	18
	8	Land Rover Range Rover Evoque Pure	45,745		58	new	21
	9	Land Rover LR2 SE	36,450		52	NA	18

B LOWER-PRICED ALTERNATIVES

✓	1	Subaru Forester 2.5XT Premium	\$28,860		87	○	20
✓	2	Toyota RAV4 Limited (V6)	30,328		83	●	22
✓	3	Volkswagen Tiguan SEL	37,020		76	○	21
	4	Kia Sportage SX (2.0T)	31,440	●	72	new	21
	5	Ford Edge SEL (FWD, 2.0 EcoBoost)	36,910	●	69	new	21

*Powertrain changed since last test.

Why some vehicles are not recommended The X3, Kia Sportage SX, and Ford Edge (EcoBoost) are too new to have reliability data. Both Land Rovers scored too low. We have insufficient reliability data for the LR2, and the Evoque is too new to have data. The SRX has below-average reliability.



BMW X3

ROAD-TEST
SCORE
80

The X3 combines a sporty driving experience with a beautifully finished, quiet, and comfortable cabin. Agile handling and spirited performance make it fun to drive. A new turbocharged four-cylinder engine replaces the inline six-cylinder that we tested in 2011, and it gets a very good 23 mpg overall, but it's not as refined as the old base engine. Controls tend to be somewhat complicated.

New engine performs well

The new 2.0-liter, turbocharged four-cylinder engine produces the same 240-hp output found in the old six-cylinder. Fuel economy increased slightly to 23 mpg overall on premium gasoline, and performance was impressive. But some refinement and sound quality was lost compared with the six-cylinder. The higher-end X3 35i, which costs about \$5,000 more, comes with a 300-hp, 3.0-liter turbocharged six-cylinder.

All X3s use a super-smooth eight-speed automatic transmission. Programmable driving modes alter shift points and throttle input. There's also an engine stop/start system that shuts down the engine while you're stopped, such as at a traffic light. But it sends a shudder through the car when it restarts. The system can be turned off.

The X3 drives almost as crisply as a good sports sedan. Body lean is well tamed, and the quick steering provides decent feedback. The AWD system works transparently. At its limits the X3 remains stable and forgiving, and it threaded through our avoidance maneuver at a relatively high speed.

Despite an underlying tautness, the X3's ride

is compliant and controlled, but uneven pavement provokes quick side-to-side motions. The highway ride feels solid and unruffled. The drum-tight cabin remains very quiet overall, but when the four-cylinder engine is idling it emits a noticeable diesel-like clatter from its direct fuel injection.

Luxurious cabin

The interior is well finished. Impressive touches include nicely flocked storage areas and padded dash and door panels. But some misaligned panels and wide gaps are evident.

Drivers sit high and upright behind the tilt and telescopic steering wheel. But the driving position can be a bit narrow, and the console pushes against the right knee. The firm front seats are supportive. A power lumbar adjustment provides good lower-back support. Two or even three adults can fit comfortably in the rear seat.

Some controls are frustrating. The shifter requires the driver to press one button to shift into gear and another to park. You must also push the shifter forward from park to engage reverse. Although the iDrive multicontroller system remains complicated, BMW has simplified it and added hard keys for some radio functions, which are conveniently located. But there is no dedicated radio-tuning knob. A rear-view camera should be standard but isn't.

The roomy, well-finished cargo area has a standard powered liftgate, and options include a rear seat that folds in three sections, expanding cargo space. A low floor and flush sill make for easy loading. The X3 has run-flat tires, so it has no jack or spare tire.



TRIFOLD The optional 40/20/40 rear seat splits into three sections for cargo-carrying versatility.

Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Agility, powertrain, fuel economy, fit and finish, braking
LOWS	Controls, low rear seat
TRIM LINE	xDrive28i
DRIVETRAIN	240-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine; eight-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	Heated seats and steering wheel, leather, moonroof, satellite radio
TESTED PRICE	\$44,595

The X3 line

OTHER TRIM LINE	xDrive35i
OTHER DRIVETRAIN	300-hp, 3.0-liter turbocharged six-cylinder engine
BASE PRICES	\$38,500-\$43,600

More test findings

BRAKING	Excellent, with short stops on wet or dry pavement.
HEADLIGHTS	Good reach and brightness.
ACCESS	Easy in front and rear.
VISIBILITY	Thin windshield pillars and big front windows, but small rear window and blind spot to right rear quarter. A back-up camera is optional.
CABIN STORAGE	Moderate.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	Front pair is active; center rear is too low and not adjustable.
CHILD SEATS	Tough to secure seats with belts. LATCH anchors work well but are difficult to access.



Scan for video.

Acura RDX

 Recommended

ROAD-TEST
SCORE
79

The redesigned Acura RDX is a major improvement over its stiff-riding, unrefined, and thirsty predecessor. We found the new model to be roomy, quick, and better overall. One high point is the smooth, powerful V6 engine, which gets a respectable 22 mpg overall. But handling lacks agility, and the ride remains stiff. Controls are unusually simple, but interior detailing is less than what you'd expect from a premium vehicle. Nevertheless, the RDX proved competent, and it comes nicely equipped at a price much lower than the competition. Reliability is expected to be very good based on other Acuras.

Economical, powerful V6

The sweet-sounding 273-hp, 3.5-liter V6 feels smooth and responsive, delivering effortless acceleration. But the front wheels can spin rather easily on slick pavement before power transfers to the rear wheels. Fuel economy was an impressive 22 mpg overall on premium gas, better than some four-cylinder rivals.

Although the six-speed automatic transmission shifts smoothly, some of its downshifts are a bit slow. The RDX's 1,500-pound towing limit seems rather unambitious and trails many rival SUVs that typically tow 3,500 pounds or more.

Road bumps tend to punch through with stiff, rubbery impacts, and frequent small body motions make the ride busy. Even the highway ride remains stiff. The cabin stays fairly quiet, but tire and road noise are noticeable.

Handling is sound but unexceptional. In routine driving the steering responds promptly but is short on feedback. Body lean is well suppressed. But if you up the ante even a little, it becomes clear that the RDX isn't made for spirited driving.

At the track, the RDX reached its cornering



CLEAR DASH The RDX's instruments and controls are straightforward.

limits quickly, with lots of body lean. Despite ultimately managing a decent speed through our avoidance maneuver, driver confidence was low because of limited grip and rocking motions from the body, which gave the sensation of the rear jacking up.

Nice but not luxurious

The cabin is neatly trimmed but not exactly upscale. Although the door panels and dash top are padded and there are attractive stitching details, the carpeting is thin, the front roof pillars are covered in hard plastic, and none of the storage cubbies are lined.

Drivers will find generous space all around, with a wide range of adjustment available from the driver's seat and the tilting and telescoping steering wheel. The front seats are very comfortable, well shaped, and firmly padded. Unobtrusive seatback bolsters provide good lateral support. Three adults can fit in the rear without much crowding. Foot room in back benefits from a flat floor.

Gauges and controls are straightforward, but navigating through the onboard computer menus can be too much of a fuss.

Cargo volume is moderate. The rear seatbacks fold down easily with the pull of a lever to make more cargo space.

Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Acceleration, fuel economy, access, controls, front-seat comfort
LOWS	Ride, steering feel, at-the-limit handling, rear visibility
TRIM LINE	—
DRIVETRAIN	273-hp, 3.5-liter V6 engine; six-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	None
TESTED PRICE	\$36,605

The RDX line

OTHER DRIVETRAIN	Front-wheel drive
BASE PRICES	\$34,320-\$35,720

More test findings

BRAKING	Very good overall, but stops were a little long on wet pavement.
HEADLIGHTS	Low beams shine a good distance. Low and high beams have very good intensity. A distinct top cutoff reduces visibility over bumps and dips.
ACCESS	Easy overall.
VISIBILITY	Thick rear pillar creates blind spots in corners. A backup camera is standard.
CABIN STORAGE	Generous, with deep bins.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	The second-row center restraint must be raised to protect adults.
CHILD SEATS	It might be tough to secure rear-facing infant-seats using safety belts. You might need more bolstering in the rear-center seat to get the proper recline angle.



Scan for video.





Audi Q5

ROAD-TEST
SCORE
77

Stylish and sporty, the Q5 is one of the more fun-to-drive SUVs. It delivers agile handling, and the base turbocharged four-cylinder

and eight-speed automatic transmission provide commendable fuel economy and decent performance. The cabin is plush and quiet. But rear-seat and cargo space are fairly modest, and some controls are needlessly complicated. This Q5 version has had average reliability, but the soon-to-be-discontinued 3.2-liter V6 has been below average.

Light and lively

The base 211-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine feels lively enough, with decent performance when revs are in the optimal range. We averaged a good 21 mpg overall on premium fuel. Shifting is very smooth from the responsive eight-speed automatic transmission. 2013 will bring an impressive 3.0-liter supercharged V6, a 3.0-liter V6 TDI turbodiesel, and a hybrid.

At low speeds the ride has an underlying firmness, but passengers are well isolated from most road bumps and the highway ride is impressively steady. The four-cylinder has some pronounced whirring and a trace of direct injection clatter, detracting from the otherwise quiet interior.

Able to tackle corners with gusto, the Q5 is one of the most agile SUVs you'll find. The steering feels direct, communicative, and well weighted, with little body lean in turns. The permanent all-wheel-drive system works unobtrusively.

Pushed to its limits at our test track, the Q5

handles almost like a sports sedan, remaining stable and balanced. It posted a good speed negotiating our avoidance maneuver, and drivers felt confident.

Opulent and comfortable

The well-finished and luxurious interior is decorated with attractive wood and chrome detailing, lined storage compartments, and padded surfaces. Even the carpet is soft, and the cargo area is better trimmed than the cabin of most cars.

Drivers of any height sit up high and will find plenty of head and leg room. The tilt-and-telescopic steering wheel helps out, too. Tall drivers appreciated the generous seat travel. The wide center console slightly intrudes on right knee room.

Firm front seats are comfortable and supportive on long trips, but their backrest might be too narrow for those with broader physiques. The reclining rear seats are very comfortable and spacious for two adults. The center position has a hard cushion and a large center tunnel that consumes foot room.

The speedometer goes to 180 mph, cramping the numerals and making it difficult to tell your exact speed at a glance. Many controls are complicated, requiring several steps to execute some functions, such as manual radio tuning or adjusting the seat's heat. The lack of a standard rear-view camera is disappointing.

Cargo volume is modest at 32 cubic feet. Maximum towing capacity is an impressive 4,400 pounds. The power tailgate's opening height can be adjusted.

Recommended



BIG PULLER
The Q5 can tow up to 4,400 pounds despite its small turbo, four-cylinder engine.

Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Handling, braking, fuel economy, transmission, fit and finish
LOWS	Controls
TRIM LINE	2.0T Premium Plus
DRIVETRAIN	211-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine; eight-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	HID headlights, heated front seats with memory, panoramic sunroof, power tailgate
TESTED PRICE	\$41,075

The Q5 line

OTHER TRIM LINES	Premium, Prestige
OTHER DRIVETRAIN	272-hp, 3.0-liter supercharged V6 engine (for 2013)
BASE PRICES	\$35,600-\$50,100

More test findings

BRAKING	Very short stopping distances, but pedal travel is a little long.
HEADLIGHTS	Bi-xenon headlights provide excellent intensity. Low-beam distance is good, and high beams shine farther.
ACCESS	Easy front and rear.
VISIBILITY	Good to the front and sides, but wide rear pillars, tall head restraints, and a small rear window impede the view aft. No standard backup camera.
CABIN STORAGE	Modest. The small glove box can be chilled.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	Rear restraints must be raised to be effective.
CHILD SEATS	It's tough to secure a rear-facing infant-seat base using belts in the center rear. There are three top-tether anchors.



Scan for video.

Cadillac SRX

ROAD-TEST
SCORE
72

Stylish, agile, and quiet, the SRX is a competitive choice in the class. The interior is richly appointed and nicely detailed. A more powerful V6, added for 2012, delivers slightly improved acceleration and fuel economy. Despite the added power, the SRX still feels somewhat listless in everyday driving. The stylish exterior design contributes to modest rear-seat and cargo space, along with severely restricted driver visibility. Below-average reliability prevents us from recommending the SRX.

Bigger, better engine

The 308-hp, 3.6-liter V6 engine provides quicker acceleration and better fuel economy than the old 3.0-liter V6. But the SRX still feels sluggish in ordinary driving. Shifts from the six-speed automatic are generally smooth, but downshifts from higher, fuel-saving gears are sometimes slow to come. The 3.6-liter returned 18 mpg overall on regular fuel.

On the road, the SRX feels taut yet supple with subdued ride motions; suspension tweaks improved the ride, but an underlying firmness at low speeds remains. On the highway, it feels steady and compliant. Road noise is hushed, but wind noise creeps in. And the engine develops a snarl when pushed.

Quick, well-weighted steering helps make the SRX fairly agile, but the suspension tweaks adversely affected its capability. At the track, it turned in a decent speed through our avoidance maneuver, with good tire grip. But pronounced body lean did not leave our drivers feeling confident in emergency maneuvers.

Delightful cabin

The interior is well trimmed and nicely detailed, with stitched edges, many soft-touch panels, wood accents, and good fits overall.



DASHING The handsome interior is well trimmed and controls are mostly clear.

Drivers will find plenty of head and leg room, and the manual tilt and telescope steering wheel and power adjustable pedals offer enough adjustment to accommodate a variety of sizes. The footrest is awkwardly placed.

Front seats are wide and well padded, and remain supportive even on longer trips. An adjustable thigh-support bolster extends the lower cushion, but some shorter drivers felt the cushion was too long even with it retracted. Rear-seat leg room is adequate, but the seat cushion is somewhat low and head room is tight for 6-footers.

Most controls are straightforward, but many buttons on the center stack are small and clustered together with small, difficult-to-read labels. Welcome changes from the SRX we tested in 2010 include hard keys for radio presets and power lock buttons on the doors. The 2013 update brings Cadillac's Cue control system that adds extensive voice controls. But this system has touch-sensitive buttons that are flush to the control panel. We find traditional controls easier to use.

Cargo space is modest for the class. The rear seats fold 60/40 for more room. The power liftgate can be adjusted to open to different heights, a clever feature.

Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Agility, fit and finish, front-seat comfort
LOWS	Visibility, engine needs revs to deliver, reliability
TRIM LINE	Luxury
DRIVETRAIN	308-hp, 3.6-liter V6 engine; six-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	None
TESTED PRICE	\$43,085

The SRX line

OTHER TRIM LINES	Base, Performance, Premium
OTHER DRIVETRAIN	Front-wheel drive
BASE PRICES	\$35,985-\$49,585

More test findings

BRAKING	Fairly short stops overall, with a firm and responsive pedal.
HEADLIGHTS	Low beams provide good illumination, and high beams improve on that.
ACCESS	Easy overall, with low sills, large doors, and assist grips.
VISIBILITY	Thick pillars, a low seating position, high windows, and a small rear window all limit view. Camera in mirror.
CABIN STORAGE	Moderate.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	The rear-center restraint is too low to protect taller passengers even when it's raised.
CHILD SEATS	Securing seats with belts alone might be difficult. LATCH is secure, but anchors in outboard seats are difficult to access. The manual restricts use of center-rear position if a child seat is installed with LATCH on the driver's side.



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SERVICE NOT AVAILABLE IN CANADA

ZAG0912A



Kia Sportage

ROAD-TEST
SCORE
72

The Sportage's stylish design stands out from the crowd of typical boxy SUVs.

But if you want even more fun, you can buy the top-level Sportage SX with a 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine. With 84 more horses than the standard four-cylinder, acceleration is much quicker.

Power comes on smooth and strong, and at 21 mpg overall you lose just 1 mpg, a small price for a large boost in acceleration.

Although the SX has a firmer

suspension and larger wheels, it's not sportier to drive. Steering is heavy and doesn't give much feedback. In corners, body lean is kept in check. The SX is secure at its handling limits.

The ride, which was already stiff in the base Sportage, becomes worse with the SX version. In this trim level, there is also quite a bit of wind noise and pronounced road noise.

Driver visibility from the Sportage is obscured, with small windows and thick rear pillars being culprits. But the optional

rear-view camera helps out when you're reversing.

Controls are mostly straightforward. The audio system has Microsoft's UVO voice controls for smart phones and music players, but the touch screen shows only three presets at a time. That's not enough.

The SX's powered seats, which are nicely trimmed in leather, are more supportive than the cloth seats found on lower trim levels, but the cushions are firm and the bottom ones feel short.

The back seat is comfortable for three people, with generous leg and foot room, partly thanks to a flat floor. Cargo space is modest for this class.

Unique available features include a panoramic sunroof and a cooled driver's seat.

Springing for a loaded Sportage SX gets you more features and better performance, but those extras come at a cost in ride comfort and noise.

We don't have reliability data yet on the SX's turbo engine.



Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Handling, controls, fuel economy, transmission, acceleration
LOWS	Visibility, noise, ride, complicated radio controls
TRIM LINE	SX
DRIVETRAIN	260-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine; six-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	Heated front seats, cooled driver's seat, panoramic sunroof, cargo mat and net
TESTED PRICE	\$31,440



Scan for video.



Ford Edge

ROAD-TEST
SCORE
69

From the outside, this Edge looks like any other Edge. But under the hood it's missing two engine cylinders.

That's because this SEL has Ford's EcoBoost 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine instead of the base 3.5-liter V6. The EcoBoost is designed to provide V6-like power with four-cylinder-like fuel economy. And the \$995 option delivers in the Edge. The little engine moves this not-so-little SUV around with plenty of power.

There's less engine noise, too: The four-cylinder turbo actually sounds more refined than the V6. But the six-speed transmission lacks refinement.

Unfortunately, the EcoBoost isn't available with all-wheel drive. That might affect winter traction if you live in northern climes, but the loss in weight by not having AWD boosts performance and helps with fuel economy. Our front-wheel-drive Edge EcoBoost got 21 mpg overall, which is 3 mpg better than our previously tested Edge

V6 with all-wheel-drive.

We skipped buying the complicated MyFord Touch infotainment system that is a common Edge option. But you'll still have plenty of high-tech features, including a backup camera and the ability to sync up to your electronic devices. Without MyFord Touch, you also get useful buttons for the climate and radio presets. But some controls and menus can still be complicated.

This Edge shares many of the downsides that we found in the 2011 Edge V6. Wind noise is noticeable, and handling is secure but not agile. The rear seat is roomy but too low for good thigh support. And a small rear window and thick pillars limit visibility. Overall, it falls short of the competition.

This Edge scores high enough to be recommended, but we don't yet have reliability data on the new engine.



Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Fuel economy, access
LOWS	No AWD with EcoBoost engine, noise, rear visibility
TRIM LINE	SEL
DRIVETRAIN	240-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine; six-speed automatic transmission; front-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	Leather, vista roof, rear camera, 20-inch wheels
TESTED PRICE	\$36,910



Scan for video.

Compare



VERSION	BMW X3	Acura RDX	Audi Q5	Cadillac SRX	Kia Sportage	Ford Edge
TRIM LINE	xDrive28i	—	Premium Plus	Luxury	SX	SEL
PRICE: BASE/TESTED ^①	\$38,500/\$44,595	\$35,720/\$36,605	\$35,600/\$41,075	\$42,210/\$43,085	\$28,400/\$31,440	\$30,945/\$36,910
DRIVETRAIN						
Engine	2.0-liter 4-cyl. (240 hp) turbo	3.5-liter V6 (273 hp)	2.0-liter 4-cyl. (211 hp) turbo	3.6-liter V6 (308 hp)	2.0-liter 4-cyl. (260 hp) turbo	2.0-liter 4-cyl. (247 hp) turbo
Transmission	8-speed automatic	6-speed automatic	8-speed automatic	6-speed automatic	6-speed automatic	6-speed automatic
Drive wheels	AWD	AWD	AWD	AWD	AWD	Front
TIRES TESTED						
Model & size	Goodyear Eagle LS2 Run Flat, 245/50R18 100V	Michelin Primacy MXM4, P235/60R18 102V	Continental Cross Contact LX Sport, 235/60R18 103H	Michelin Latitude Tour HP, P235/65R18 104H	Hankook Optimo H426, 235/55R18 100H	Pirelli Scorpion STR, P245/50R20 102H
RATINGS						
PERFORMANCE						
Acceleration	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊕	⊖
0 to 60 mph, sec.	7.3	6.6	7.9	7.1	7.1	8.9
45 to 65 mph, sec.	4.5	4.3	4.6	5.0	4.6	5.2
Quarter-mile, sec.	15.8	15.2	16.2	15.7	15.5	16.9
Transmission	⊖	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊖
Routine handling	⊖	○	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖
Emergency handling	⊕	⊖	⊖	○	⊖	○
Avoid. maneuver, speed, mph	53.0	51.0	52.0	52.5	53.5	50.0
Braking	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊖	⊖
From 60 mph, dry/wet, ft.	130/138	132/144	130/138	135/147	135/144	132/156
Headlights	○	○	○	○	○	○
COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE						
Ride	⊖	○	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖
Noise	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	○	⊖
Driving position	⊖	⊕	⊖	○	⊖	⊖
Front-seat comfort	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊕	⊖	⊖
Rear-seat comfort	○	⊖	⊖	○	⊖	⊖
Access	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖	⊖
Controls and displays	○	⊕	○	⊖	⊖	⊖
Interior fit and finish	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊕	⊖	⊖
Cargo area	○	⊖	○	⊖	⊖	○
PREDICTED RELIABILITY	New	⊖	○	⊖	New	New
FUEL						
Overall mpg	23	22	21	18	21	21
City/highway mpg	16/30	14/31	14/29	12/26	15/29	14/29
Type	premium	premium	premium	regular	regular	regular
Capacity, gal./Cruising range, mi.	17.7/400	16.0/345	19.8/410	21.0/375	15.3/320	18.3/385
Annual cost, 12K mi. at \$3.80/gal.	\$2,025	\$2,110	\$2,205	\$2,425 @ \$3.60/gal.	\$2,055 @ \$3.60/gal.	\$2,050 @ \$3.60/gal.
SAFETY						
CRASH TESTS						
IIHS frontal offset	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good
IIHS side	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good
IIHS rear	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good
IIHS roof strength	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good	Good
NHTSA front, driver/pass.	NA/NA	NA/NA	NA/NA	⊕/⊖	⊕/⊖	○/○
NHTSA side, driver/rear	NA/NA	NA/NA	NA/NA	⊕/⊕	⊕/⊕	⊕/⊕
NHTSA rollover 2WD/4WD	NA/NA	NA/NA	NA/⊖	⊖/⊖	⊖/⊖	⊖/⊖
AIR BAGS						
Side, front/rear	std./no	std./no	std./opt.	std./no	std./no	std./no
Head protection	standard	std. w/rollover	std. w/rollover	standard	std. w/rollover	std. w/rollover
SPECIFICATIONS						
DIMENSIONS AND WEIGHT						
Length/width/height, in.	183/74/65	184/74/66	182/75/65	190/75/66	175/73/64	184/76/67
Wheelbase, in.	111	106	111	111	104	111
Turning circle, ft.	40	40	39	41	37	41
Ground clearance, in.	7.5	7.0	6.5	6.5	6.0	4.5
Curb weight, lb. (% front/rear)	4,135 (49/51)	3,850 (59/41)	4,190 (53/47)	4,525 (57/43)	3,645 (59/41)	4,110 (58/42)
Maximum load, lb.	905	870	1,045	980	925	910
Cargo volume, cu. ft.	33.0	31.5	32.0	28.5	28.0	36.5
Towing capacity, lb.	3,000	1,500	4,410	2,500	2,000	1,500
INTERIOR ROOM						
Front shoulder room, in.	57.0	58.0	57.0	58.0	56.5	59.0
Front leg room, in.	43.0	41.0	42.0	42.5	41.0	41.5
Front head room, in. ^②	4.5	4.0	4.5	4.0	3.0	3.0
Rear shoulder room, in.	55.5	56.0	55.0	55.5	54.0	59.0
Rear leg room, in.	28.5	30.0	25.5	28.0	28.0	31.0
Rear head room, in. ^②	4.0	4.0	2.5	2.0	2.0	2.0

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

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Sound advice

While you're at it, keep that blade out of adults, too.



A truly nutty pistachio

The green color and nut pieces shown in this product certainly suggest that it's pistachio, as advertised. But wait, pistachio lovers. The ingredients reveal that the nuts are diced almonds; the flavor, artificial. And the green color? Yellow and blue dyes.

Weekend Specials
THU., APR. 13TH SAT., APR. 14TH
APPETIZER
 Spicy Tortellini
SOUP DU JOUR
 Cream Of Crap
ENTREES
 Chicken Provecale
 Black & Bleu Delmonico
DRINK FEATURE



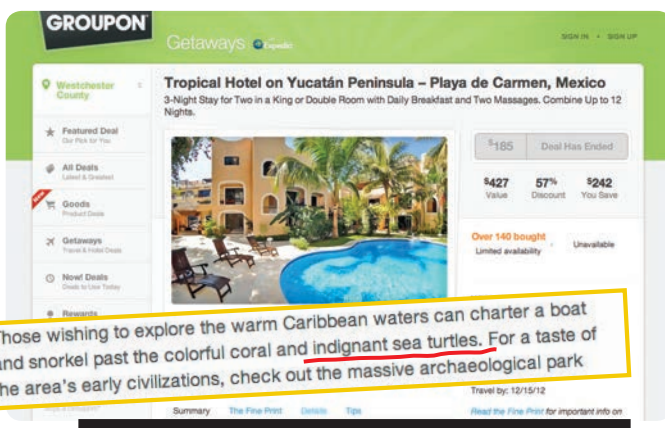
Unappetizers

Left, a "weekend special" from a restaurant named Oscar's. Right, a supermarket's dessert. "It looked tasty," a reader wrote of the misspelled mouse, "but I decided to go with the ratberry torte."

This garment is made with yarn blended with pure silk. The irregularities and variations in the knitting and color are in no way to be considered as defective. They are characteristic of the fine silk yarn which gives this fabric its beauty and texture. Dyed colors have a tendency to fade when exposed directly for long periods of time to either sunlight or electric lights. Therefore, every precaution should be taken in order to avoid such exposures. The manufacturer is not responsible for fading related to the above conditions.

For vampires only

A puzzled reader sent this tag from a Calvin Klein sweater.



Riled reptiles

"Living in Madison," a reader wrote, "I've been missing out, just because sea turtles are not indigenous to Wisconsin!"



You don't look like a chickadee

An Alabama reader wrote that he snapped this shot two days after tying two bags of squirrel repellent to his feeder. "Squirrels get one whiff," claims one of the product's sellers, "and they take off for good!" Or not.

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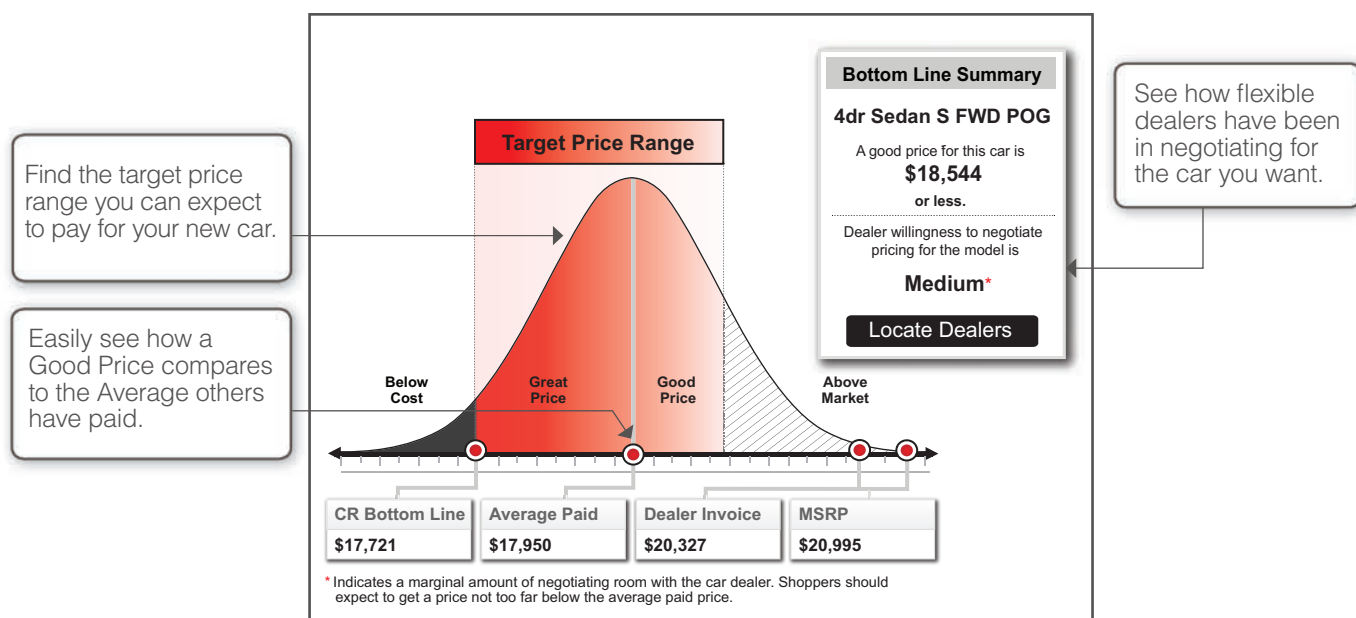
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Canada Extra

Information from CONSUMER REPORTS® for Canadian readers

In this special section

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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.

Blenders

Report and Ratings, page 41

Recommended models only, from 48 tested.

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
				0 100 P F G VG E
✓	1	Vita-Mix 5200	\$580	76
✓	2	Ninja Master Prep Professional QB1004C ¹	70	73
✓	3	L'Equip 228	200	70
✓	5	KitchenAid KSB565 ²	100	66
✓	6	Breville Juice & Blend BJB840XL ² ³	500	66

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
				0 100 P F G VG E
✓	7	Breville Ikon BBL600XL ²	\$250	65
✓	8	Cuisinart SmartPower CPB-300C ¹ ⁴	80	64
✓	9	Cuisinart SBC-1000C ² ⁵	220	64
✓	10	Ninja Professional NJ500C ⁴	100	61

¹ Food chopper. ² Glass container. ³ Juicer. ⁴ Touchpad. ⁵ Cooks soup.

Flooring

Report and Ratings, page 31

Recommended products only, from 42 tested.

Rec.	Rank	Brand & product	Price (sq. ft.)	Overall score
		All engineered-wood, plastic-laminate, and linoleum products can be floated unless otherwise indicated.		
				0 100 P F G V G E

A VINYL Can usually be glued anywhere in the house.

✓	1	Congoleum DuraCeramic Sierra Slate SI-74 Golden Greige	\$5.50	92
✓	2	Armstrong Alterna Mesa Stone Canyon Sun D4112	5.50	90
✓	3	Armstrong LUXE Plank Timber Bay Barnyard Gray A6861	5.50	80

B PLASTIC LAMINATE Can usually be floated anywhere in the house.

✓	1	Armstrong Coastal Living L3051 White Wash Walnut	3.50	87
---	---	---	------	----

C LINOLEUM Can usually be glued or floated anywhere in the house.

✓	1	Armstrong Marmorette Oak Brown LP066 ¹	4.50	62
---	---	--	------	----

Rec.	Rank	Brand & product	Price (sq. ft.)	Overall score
				0 100 P F G V G E

D ENGINEERED WOOD Can usually be nailed or stapled anywhere in the house. Some can float.

✓	1	Teragren Synergy Strand with Xcora Java ²	\$7.00	73
✓	2	Armstrong Century Farm Hickory Natural GCH452NALG	6.00	61

E PREFINISHED SOLID WOOD Usually nailed to a subfloor at grade or above.

✓	1	EcoTimber Woven Honey WBH061 ²	6.00	78
✓	3	Bruce Dundee Plank CB1210	5.70	62

¹ Cannot be floated. ² Bamboo product.

Toilets

Report, page 32; Ratings, page 33

Twenty-five of the single-flush and dual-flush toilets are available, including 10 of the recommended models.

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Type	Liters per flush	Price	Overall score
		All models have elongated bowls.				
						0 100 P F G V G E

A SINGLE-FLUSH These use the same amount of water with each flush.

✓	1	American Standard Champion 4 2002.014	G	6.1	\$540	85
✓	2	Gerber Avalanche 21-818	G	6.1	540	83
✓	3	Toto Drake CST744S ¹	G	6.1	375	83
✓	4	Kohler Highline Classic K-3493	P	5.3	700	78
✓	5	American Standard Clean 252.3.101 (Lowe's) ²	G	4.8	320	78
✓	7	Toto Eco Drake CST744E ¹ ²	G	4.8	380	75
✓	8	Kohler Cimarron The Complete Solution K-11813 ²	G	4.8	475	75
✓	9	Kohler Cimarron K-3589	G	6.1	450	75
✓	10	Kohler Wellworth K-3575 ¹ ²	G	4.8	320	74
	11	Gerber Avalanche HE-21-818 ²	G	4.8	350	71
	12	American Standard Cadet 3 FloWise 2835.128 ²	G	4.8	400	71
	13	Gerber Avalanche 21-014 ² ³	G	4.8	470	70
	14	American Standard Cadet 3 FloWise 2403.128 ² ³	G	4.8	630	68

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Type	Liters per flush	Price	Overall score
						0 100 P F G V G E

A SINGLE-FLUSH continued

	15	Gerber Ultra Flush 21-318	P	6.1	\$540	68
	16	Gerber Avalanche Ultra Flush 1.1 EF-21-318 ²	P	4.2	\$540	68
	17	Penguin 524 (Lowe's) ²	G	4.8	200	59
	18	American Standard Cadet FloWise Pressure 2462.100 ¹ ²	P	4.2	750	56
	19	Mansfield Alto 137-160	G	6.1	400	34
	20	Kohler Devonshire K-3488 ³	G	6.1	750	31

B DUAL-FLUSH These let you use less water for liquid waste.

✓	1	Glacier Bay Dual Flush N2316 (Home Depot) ²	G	6.1/4.2	175	74
	2	Mansfield EcoQuantum 148-119 ²	P	6.1/4.2	700	64
	3	Kohler Persuade Curv K-3723 ²	G	6.1/3.8	500	61
	4	Toto Aquia MS654204MS ² ³	G	6.1/3.4	750	59
	5	American Standard H2Option Siphonic Dual Flush 2886.216 ²	G	6.1/3.8	450	57
	6	Gerber Maxwell Dual-Flush DF-21-118 ²	G	6.1/4.2	280	40

¹ Regular height (seat less than 43.18 centimeters high); most others are comfort height (ADA-Compliant). ² Model is WaterSense-certified (4.8 liters per flush or less, on average). ³ One-piece model; most are two-piece.

Recalls

2012 Honda Civic

The fuel line might have been manufactured incorrectly, which could result in a fuel leak. May cause fire or personal injury.

Models: 339 vehicles.

What to do: Have dealer replace the fuel supply line.

2008-2009 Mazda3/Mazdaspeed3

The ground terminal of the windshield-wiper motor might have been bent during assembly. Over time that may cause the wiper motor to be inoperative.

Models: 45,729 vehicles.

What to do: Have dealer install an additional ground harness to the wiper motor.

2011 Lexus RX 350

Calibration for hydraulic control valves of the Vehicle Dynamics Integrated Management (VDIM) was incorrectly written and programmed into the brake control unit. The right wheel may lock, which could result in a crash.

Models: 493 vehicles.

What to do: Have dealer replace the brake actuator assembly with an updated version.

Condensation from 2008 Chrysler models

The heater ventilation and air conditioning might leak onto the occupant restraint control module. That might cause the air-bag warning light to illuminate and could cause air-bag deployment. May cause crash and personal injury.

Models: 50,020 Dodge Grand Caravan,

Chrysler Town & Country.

What to do: Have dealer replace the occupant restraint control module.

2012 Chevrolet Impala

The high-pressure (upper) power-steering hose on vehicles equipped with 3.6L engine might have been misrouted. Heat from the catalytic converter might melt the power-steering hose, which could cause property damage and personal injury.

Models: 1,370 vehicles.

What to do: Have dealer install a protective sleeve around both power-steering hoses on all vehicles (regardless of routing).

2005-2010 Honda models

The secondary shaft bearing in the automatic transmission might fail. That might cause unusual noise and malfunction of the indicator lamp, and allow contact between transmission gear and the electronic sensor. The engine might stall, which may increase the risk of a crash.

Models: 135,412 2005-2010 Accord, 2007-2010 CR-V, 2005-2008 Element.

What to do: Have dealer update the automatic transmission control module software.

2002-2005 BMW 3 Series

Vehicles might experience rear lamp malfunctions on the portion of the rear lamps that are mounted in the body.

Models: 20,127 vehicles.

What to do: Have dealer install an additional electrical ground connection to the rear

lamp circuitry. Rear lamp function will be checked and further electrical repair might be necessary, including the replacement of the 8-pin connector housing.

2006 Honda CR-V

Cleaner residue might infiltrate the driver's power window switch, allowing the switch to overheat and melt, which might result in vehicle fire and personal injury.

Models: 13,151 vehicles.

What to do: Have dealer replace the master power window switch with an updated version.

2007-2008 Hyundai models

The clockspring assembly for the driver's air bag might fail. The air bag might not function as intended and the panel warning lamp may illuminate. The air bag might fail to deploy during a crash, which may result in personal injury.

Models: 31,078 2007-2008 Santa Fe, 2007-2008 Veracruz.

What to do: Have dealer inspect and, if necessary, replace the air-bag clockspring assembly.

2009-2011 Honda Pilot

Passenger safety-belt webbing might have been incorrectly manufactured. Safety belt might detach from anchor during a crash.

Models: 9,954 vehicles.

What to do: Have dealer inspect and, if necessary, replace the driver's and front passenger's safety belts.

Canada Extra on the Web

Canada Extra information can be found on ConsumerReports.org, our website, along with the current issue of the magazine and more. The address is www.ConsumerReports.org. Once there, click on the "Canada Extra" link on the opening screen. There you can see which reports have Canadian information available.

The screenshot shows the ConsumerReports.org website. At the top, there's a navigation bar with links for Cars, Appliances, Electronics, Home & Garden, and Babies & Kids. Below this, the "canada extra" section is highlighted. It features a list of categories under "LISTED BY CATEGORY" including Cars, Road tests, Budget cars, Compact pickups, Convertibles, Crew-cab pickup trucks, Family sedans, Hatchbacks, Large sedans, Luxury coupes, Luxury sedans, Luxury SUVs, Mercedes-Benz B200, and Mid-sized SUVs. A central image shows a Canadian flag with the text "CONSUMER REPORTS CANADIAN RATINGS". To the right, there's a "FREE HIGHLIGHTS" section with three items: "Cars & transportation" (We list government, industry, and manufacturer auto information and resources), "Better Business Bureaus" (These non-profit organizations handle complaints, settle disputes, and more), and "Government consumer offices" (Here, federal and provincial offices that can help with a range of consumer concerns). At the bottom right, there's another section for "Government safety offices" (These offices handle consumer issues including product safety and bankruptcy).

Autos

Reports and Ratings, pages 48-60

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
COMPACT SPORTY SUVs								
BMW X3	\$41,900-\$46,900	3.0	7.7	3.4	18.1	14.9	7.8	10.4
Acura RDX	40,900-43,990	2.9	7.0	3.2	17.4	16.3	7.6	10.9
Audi Q5	41,200-49,900	3.2	8.3	3.3	18.6	16.8	8.1	11.4
Cadillac SRX	42,160-54,740	2.8	7.8	3.7	18.1	19.8	9.2	13.2
LOWER-PRICED ALTERNATIVES								
Kia Sportage	21,995-35,295	2.9	7.5	3.3	17.8	16.1	8.0	11.2
Ford Edge	27,999-43,499	3.3	9.4	3.7	19.4	16.6	8.1	11.2

Contact info

How to reach manufacturers in Canada.

American Standard
800-387-0369

Armstrong
800-233-3823
armstrong.com

Breville
866-273-8455
breville.ca

Bruce
800-233-3823

Congoleum
609-584-3000
congoleum.com

Cuisinart
800-472-7606
cuisinart.ca

EcoTimber
877-740-9420
ecotimber.com

Glacier Bay
800-668-2266
homedepot.ca

KitchenAid
800-807-6777
kitchenaid.ca

Kohler
800-456-4537
ca.kohler.com

L'Equip
801-383-1920
lequip.com

Mansfield
877-850-3060
mansfieldplumbing.com

Ninja
800-798-7395
experienceninja.com

Penguin
Contact local Lowe's

Toto
800-456-4537
ca.kohler.com

Teragren
800-929-6333
teragren.com

Vita-Mix
800-848-2649
vitamix.com