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Too many watts?



How long to charge?

Plus Avoid these sneaky travel fees PAGE 13

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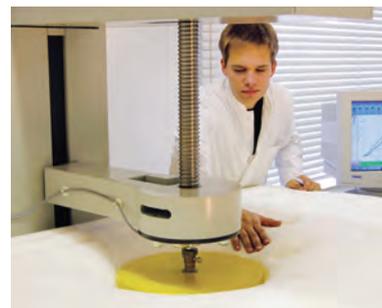
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\$1,020

Buy a Novaform **foam mattress** for \$900 instead of the Simmons ComforPedic foam and save this much.

\$749

Fill your **generic prescriptions** at Costco instead of CVS and you could save this much on a month's supply of five common medications.

\$400

Get a Ninja Master Prep Professional **blender** for \$60 and save this much over a Blendtec Total Blender.

Coming in June

Mobile-phone privacy, State of the Net, security software, sporting-goods stores, auto insurance, gas grills, exterior paints and stains, compact refrigerators, and heart-rate monitors.

Check out our iPad app

Look for expanded Ratings, videos of road tests and lab tests, plus more photos and interactive navigation. Now included with your paid magazine subscription.



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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 of 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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 • For subscription information, go to ConsumerReports.org/magazine or call 800-666-5261. See page 60 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

Too many scans

I am a physician who is very concerned about the escalating costs of health care in this country. Your article "Hospitals Still Order Too Many CT Scans" (Up Front, February 2013) is misleading. Hospitals do not order CT scans; doctors do.

However, too many doctors order CT scans with scant evidence of diagnostic value.

—John Yeast, M.D. Kansas City, MO

Talk about expired

"Does Canned Food Go Bad?" (Up Front, March 2013) made me think of my time in the service. We were told that as long as the can was not damaged, the contents would last a long time. How long? When I served in Vietnam, we would appropriate C rations by any means possible. I remember the packing dates on



the crate boxes—1945 and 1946—though the actual date was June 1967. Most of the time the food tasted good. Pound cake and peaches were the best, but canned ham and lima beans: a horror story.

—Hugo Ciaffaglione Berlin, CT

February 2013). When she died in 2008, the insurance company still had record of it, with her parents as beneficiaries. But I had to prove that both were dead, and I could find no official records. I asked if I could send a picture of the parents' headstones, and was thus able to add the insurance money to her estate.

—Carol Corcoran Colorado Springs, CO

Vive la liberté

"Made in America?" (February 2013) referred to logos based upon American icons such as Mt. Rushmore and the U.S. flag, as well as the Statue of Liberty, which is a nice antique figure ironically made in France.

—Jeff Nelson Vero Beach, FL

Happy ending

I was recently executor of the estate of a woman with a life-insurance policy taken in 1910 ("Finding Lost Life-Insurance Policies,"

Corrections

• In "Save Your Life" (March 2013), the recommendation for cervical-cancer screening should have stated: Those 30 to 65 can go five years between Pap smears if they also have HPV testing at the same time as their Pap smear.

• Behr Premium Plus Ultra paint claims 50 grams/liter of VOCs. The article on interior paints in the March 2013 issue said it claimed 0 grams/liter.

SEND YOUR LETTERS TO

ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor.

Ask our experts

Q We had three remote-controlled ceiling fans installed, and we've tried several times using compact fluorescent bulbs. Every time, the bulbs blink and burn out within minutes. Is there a special type of bulb needed?

—Helen Dula Puyallup, WA

Though it's not clear what might cause that, have an electrician check out the installation. Also, check whether the manufacturer has a recommendation for particular types of CFLs or LEDs. Or you could consider a halogen bulb; many are about 30 percent more efficient than a standard incandescent bulb.

Q You've said that image burn-in is not an issue with the newer plasma models during normal viewing. Does that include tuning to a music channel for long periods of time? The onscreen info doesn't change that often.

—Marvin Shuman Randolph, NJ

Normal viewing is a mix of programming over time so that no fixed single image is sitting on the screen for hours or days on end. If you're watching an image with a fixed graphic, you may see a subtle dimming of the display in the area of the fixed image, but permanent damage would probably require months of that kind of use. Plasmas usually have a feature you can activate that helps minimize burn-in, so check the owner's manual.

Q I recently purchased a new car, and the dealer offered undercoating, rustproofing, and a TST paint protection service for \$500. I declined, but are any of those services actually worthwhile?

—Dan Doherty Belle Vernon, PA



SWITCHING BULBS Check whether the manufacturer recommends certain CFL or LED bulbs for your ceiling fan.

You chose wisely. Today's vehicles have good corrosion protection. In fact, according to CONSUMER REPORTS reliability surveys, rust problems have almost vanished in modern cars. Standard rust-through warranties for most cars run five years or more, and many will cover you for an unlimited number of miles during that period. As to paint sealant, it's little more than overpriced wax. Just buy a good protectant from any auto-parts store.

Q My wife and I are moving our laundry from the basement to the top floor of our three-story condo. What are the pros and cons of using a venting

or non-venting dryer? Which is preferable?

—Vic White Park City, UT

Either could work, depending on your space. A non-venting dryer is usually connected to a hose to release moisture down a drain or fitted with a reservoir that you empty yourself. A venting dryer requires a duct to send heat and moist air outside. That duct should be rigid or flexible metal, and must be checked regularly for lint buildup. Avoid foil or plastic ones because they sag more readily, leading to excessive lint buildup.

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

Dead first

The U.S. makes an embarrassing showing in an Institute of Medicine report released in January that compares the health of people in 17 wealthy countries. (Go to IOM.edu and enter "shorter lives" in the search box.)



The one place we shine: People older than 80 living in the U.S. are likely to have a longer life than their peers in several other countries.

By most other measures, the U.S. does miserably. We have the highest infant mortality rate, poorer health, and the shortest lives.

The report gives plenty of reasons—individual and systemic—why the U.S. is at the bottom. We eat more, weigh more, and are more apt to use guns violently. We're more likely to take a car than walk, to drive drunk, and to leave the safety belt unbuckled. On the macro side, the U.S. health-care system encourages providers to test and treat in ways that often don't keep people healthy. We simply don't focus enough on cost-effective primary care.

The U.S. spends more on health care than any other nation in the world, but overall, we're not getting the value we should. An estimated 30 percent of health-care dollars is wasted on care that doesn't help or, worse, can do harm. Our system is fragmented and inefficient, and millions of Americans don't have reliable access to it.

The U.S. has some of the best medical professionals in the world, but they're hampered by a structure that encourages them to overtest and overtreat, without enough scrutiny of procedures' effectiveness. Among the goals of health-care reform is to add to our knowledge of which procedures are effective and to change how care is delivered by rewarding providers to keep people healthy in the first place. Over time, combined with targeted public health efforts, that will vastly reduce unnecessary care and slow the steep rise in costs we've seen for decades.

Consumers Union believes that to become a healthier nation, we must concentrate on policies that foster access, education, healthy lifestyles, prevention, and coordinated care while ensuring that high-tech, specialized care is available to those who need it.

Jim Guest
JIM GUEST
 President

WHERE WE STAND

Where does your food come from?

THE ISSUE Labels that tell you where your beef comes from are in danger.

OUR TAKE When you buy imported meat, fish, or fresh vegetables, there's usually a label noting the country of origin—COOL for short—that states where the food was raised and processed.

The labels help consumers make informed choices about their food. If there's an outbreak of food contamination in a certain country, a COOL can help you avoid those products. If you prefer fruit from a specific country, you can identify it.

In December, the World Trade Organization told the Department of Agriculture that it's fine for the U.S. to require retailers to label where meat comes from but that the U.S. rules were too complicated and expensive for other countries to comply with. Now the U.S. must decide whether to change the labeling rules, get rid of them, or leave them as is and risk being penalized by the WTO.



A group of Republican and Democratic senators wrote U.S. regulators in support of preserving the fundamental elements of the COOL. Consumers Union agrees. The U.S. should be able to adjust its rules through regulations without compromising the critical information that consumers want and deserve.

WEB WATCH

Tax dollars at work

A new "key issues" page on the Government Accountability Office's website, GAO.gov, makes it easy to find the agency's reports on a range of topics that interest consumers. The titles may not be catchy ("Federal Telework"), but the reports exemplify the GAO's goal of producing "objective, fact-based, nonpartisan, nonideological, fair, and balanced" assessments of what isn't working in government (and sometimes what is).

The GAO's mission is to investigate how our tax dollars are spent. Among the key-issues reports are those about federal help for entrepreneurs (it's scattered across 52 programs, more than half of which aren't evaluated to determine whether they're working), disability compensation benefits for veterans (more than 565,000 claims are in a backlog past the VA's 125-day target), and nuclear waste. (Just what should we be doing with the 2,000 metric tons that are produced every year in the U.S.?)



Show us the evidence

The maker of POM is now required to provide two randomized, controlled, human clinical trials to back up its disease-related claims. The Federal Trade Commission says the producer of POM Wonderful 100% Pomegranate Juice and POMx supplements deceptively advertised the products and could not support claims that they help prevent heart disease and prostate cancer. The company is appealing the decision.

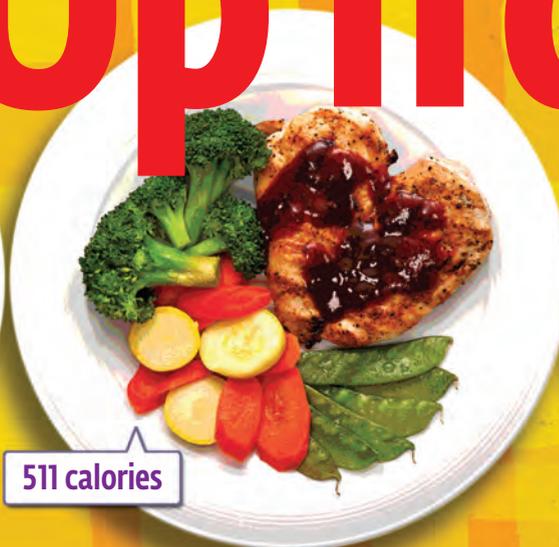
Up front

494 calories



Denny's

511 calories



OUTBACK STEAKHOUSE

585 calories



Olive Garden ITALIAN RESTAURANT

Do these dishes tell the truth?

“TASTE THE LIGHTER SIDE of delicious when you go Olive Garden,” an ad says. But when we analyzed one of the restaurant’s new Lighter Fare dishes, it had more calories and fat than claimed in the company’s online stats.

Now that calories and fat content are widely listed on websites (and calories are listed on many menus), we chose 17 items from 12 casual restaurants and fast-food chains and compared their claimed nutrition with reality. And we weighed each serving. We tested the same items from three restaurants in each chain.

The good news is that most dishes told the truth. Olive Garden’s Lasagna Primavera with Grilled Chicken was one of only two dishes with calories or fat content higher than the restaurant’s website said at all three locations. The claim: 420 calories and 15 grams of fat. The reality: 508 to 585 calories and 25 to 32 grams of fat.

Another item with more fat in our tests than advertised online was Outback’s Chicken on the Barbie. Other dishes were

either on target (on average) or had fewer calories or less fat than claimed.

Still, nutrition varied widely at some locations. Case in point: Denny’s Fit Slam, claimed to have 390 calories and 12 grams of fat. We found those approximate levels in two restaurants. At a third, the Fit Slam had 494 calories and 19 grams of fat.

That’s because serving sizes ran the gamut. In three Olive Garden restaurants, Fettuccine Alfredo weighed roughly 14 to

22 ounces. Portion sizes also varied widely at Applebee’s, Denny’s, and Red Lobster.

Bottom line. Nutrition numbers from chain restaurants were generally accurate in our tests. But watch out: The Cheesecake Factory’s 36-ounce (more than 2 pounds) meatloaf dinner had up to 2,016 calories (the maximum number most people should have in a day) and up to 132 grams of fat (about twice as much). And that’s before any cheesecake.

Calorie check What they said vs. what we found

In alphabetical order, within types.

	WEBSITE CLAIM		WHAT WE FOUND	
	Calories	Fat (g)	Calories	Fat (g)
Applebee’s Fiesta Lime Chicken	1,200	66	847-1,111	38-45
Denny’s Fit Slam	390	12	384-494	11-19
IHOP Rooty Tooty Fresh ‘N Fruity	840	48	711-851	38-48
Olive Garden Fettuccine Alfredo	1,220	75	879-1,179	54-72
Olive Garden Lasagna Primavera w/Grilled Chicken	420	15	508-585	25-32
On the Border Grande Taco Salad w/Ground Beef	1,280	85	1,191-1,302	83-90
Outback Bloomin’ Onion w/Spicy Sauce (serves 6)	1,959	161	1,418-2,099	114-160
Outback Grilled Chicken on the Barbie	401	7	391-511	10-13
Red Lobster Walt’s Favorite Shrimp	1,300	88	1,128-1,368	64-78
T.G.I. Friday’s Chocolate Peanut Butter Pie	770	52	716-754	51-55
The Cheesecake Factory Meatloaf Dinner	1,950	NA	1,643-2,016	109-132
Burger King Whopper w/Cheese	710	42	678-707	40-41
McDonald’s Big Mac	550	29	520-528	29-30
Wendy’s Dave’s Hot ‘N Juicy ¼ lb. Single	580	33	573-584	32-34
Burger King small fries	340	15	295-338	13-15
McDonald’s small fries	230	11	213-252	10-12
Wendy’s small fries	320	16	297-328	14-16

HOW TO CHOOSE WISELY—AND NOT

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





CLAIM CHECK

Edge of Glory

The claim. Edge of Glory, two tungsten carbide teeth set in a plastic base, is claimed to be “The World’s Best Knife Sharpener!” A video boasts of its skills, including the ability to sharpen a credit card, which is then used to slice a tomato. We paid \$11 plus \$7 shipping and handling.

The check. We took pairs of chef, santoku, and serrated knives that were equally sharp, dulled one of each pair, used Edge of Glory to sharpen the dulled knife, then compared its cutting skill with that of its twin. We cut ham, dried sausage, tomatoes, carrots, onions, and celery. And we sharpened a credit card and did battle with a tomato.

Bottom line. Try Edge of Glory if you need to slice a tomato with a credit card. That trick worked. Otherwise, the device is not so sharp. It’s worth using only if:

- The knife is not too dull. (The four quick swipes shown in an ad work only if the knife is already fairly sharp.)
- The knife is not of hard metal. (That makes it tougher for the device to work.)
- The serrations aren’t small. (They can catch on Edge of Glory’s teeth.)
- You don’t need a knife edge that’s super-smooth. (The sharpener left a fairly rough edge.)
- You don’t care that the knife is sharpened from one side only. (One of the device’s teeth sharpens while the other holds the blade; knives can get an asymmetric or “chiseled” edge.)



WE PUT THE EDGE TO THE TEST

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



Quirky cleaners

We recruited staffers to take these devices home and compare them with their usual cleaning products. None was a home run for home cleaning. (The costs below don’t factor in any shipping and handling.)

Fuzzy Wuzzy Microfiber Mitt \$6

The claim. “Can be used on virtually any surface. Used dry it is a dust magnet.”

Bottom line. Fuzzy Wuzzy’s flat side was effective on smooth surfaces, and its fuzzy side worked in nooks. But staffers said it wasn’t much better than their usual cleaning products.



Squeegee \$15

The claim. “A window washer and wiper in 1.”

Bottom line. It requires perfect positioning to work well. The microfiber cloth was harder than regular cloth to wring when used with lots of water. And the squeegee and cloth interfered with each other while cleaning corners and edges.



Relaxation drinks: An anti-frazzle fizzle?

Beverages to help you chill out are popping up in supermarkets, drugstores, and even gas stations. But labels we examined didn’t usually list the amounts of their de-stressing agents. And our analysis of eight widely sold drinks showed that many didn’t have enough of those ingredients purported to help you unwind.

What we found. Only iChill Relaxation Shot, Relax Drank Extreme Relaxation, and ViB (Vacation in a Bottle) listed amounts of relaxation ingredients; the rest just named them or listed a blend of ingredients. (We tested all products within the past year; some have since been reformulated.)

Three drinks listed GABA, a chemical that may help regulate stress and anxiety, but even

at their maximum recommended daily doses, two drinks—Dream Water 0-Calorie Sleep and Relaxation Shot and RelaxZen Night—contained far lower amounts than the daily dose of GABA used in a published study. The third, RelaxZen Day, had far higher amounts.

Dream Water, Marley’s Mellow Mood, and RelaxZen Night labels listed unspecified amounts of melatonin, a hormone with mixed results in treating insomnia. They had less than the typical 0.3-milligram to 5-milligram dose used in clinical trials to treat insomnia. Relax Drank and iChill listed amounts per serving (1 and 5 milligrams, respectively) but averaged less than claimed (0.02 and 0.3 milligrams).

Four products listed L-theanine, an amino acid in green tea leaves that some evidence shows might help with relaxation and sleep. Three of the four listed L-threonine, an amino acid in proteins, but we found no evidence that the amino acid aids mental relaxation. Of the four products, only ViB specified the amounts of both amino acids on its label, and those levels varied widely.

Dream Water listed 5-hydroxytryptophan, a supplement that might help raise serotonin levels and have a positive effect on anxiety and sleep. But the average level we found was much lower than those used to treat sleep disorders in published studies.

Five drinks listed one or more botanicals. RelaxZen Day had significant levels of a compound that indicates the presence of

DID YOU KNOW?

Beverage vs. supplement

Seven of the eight drinks we tested were labeled dietary supplements. The exception, ViB, bore a nutrition-facts label indicating that it was a conventional beverage. (The new Marley’s label bears a nutrition-facts label, but the samples we tested were labeled dietary supplements.) Dietary ingredients in supplements require no FDA preapproval; in conventional beverages, the same ingredients must be FDA-approved as food additives or termed “generally recognized as safe.”



The Original Smart Mop \$15

The claim. "Cuts your cleaning time in half... no vacuuming or sweeping."

Bottom line. It's fine at cleaning floors, but wringing the mop can loosen a screw attaching the mop head, which can then drop off. Wringing can also cause the three-part handle to come apart. And it has no hard bar to help press the mop onto the floor—only the nub of the mop handle.



Deluxe Hi-Reach Cleaning Kit \$37

The claim. "Allows you to reach hard-to-reach places with ease."

Bottom line. Its 8-foot telescoping pole duster does reach high, but the duster is very bendable, so staffers had a hard time applying pressure; and it tended to bend at a weak point. In one of our samples, it broke from repeated bends.

And two grout cleaners

The claims. Rub the spongelike Groutinator, \$10 online for two sponges of different sizes, along a grouted joint and it "instantly restores grout to original color." The Grout Bully, also \$10 online, is like paint and is claimed to "clean mold & eliminate mildew." It's available in five colors and comes with two sponges to remove excess product.

The check. We used Groutinator (at right) and Grout Bully on dirty floor tiles at our headquarters and on a staffer's mildewed bathroom tiles.

Bottom line. Groutinator removed soil, but we had to sand it periodically to maintain an edge that fit into grouted joints. It also took elbow grease. It doesn't prevent future soiling, so consider sealing your grout after cleaning.

Grout Bully goes on easily, but removing excess "paint" is hard and can cause smearing. Although the package shows the Bully being used on dirty grout, the directions say to apply it to a clean surface—which defeats the purpose. When we tried it, it hid mildew at first but didn't keep it from returning.



passion-flower extract; levels of compounds in the rest suggest low or trace amounts of claimed botanicals.

Health concerns. Some labels noted that the drink may cause drowsiness and shouldn't be used when driving. Many indicated that pregnant or nursing women and children shouldn't drink it. Yet our mystery shoppers sometimes found relaxation drinks in refrigerator cases near sodas and juices.

The Food and Drug Administration said it has received six adverse-event reports. (Such reports don't prove that a product caused a problem.) In the reports, a 12-year old boy became "symptomatic" Nov. 30, 2012, after drinking Marley's Mellow Mood. He was "shaking and twitching," but symptoms

abated, according to the reports. Five other children complained of vomiting, headache, nausea, chills, and fatigue.

A Marley's spokesman said that "packaging clearly states that Marley's Mellow Mood is not intended for consumption by children," that Marley's "cooperated fully with the FDA," and that the company found "no issues with product quality or package integrity." (Samples of Marley's we tested didn't have a child warning.) An FDA spokeswoman said the reports were being investigated.

Bottom line. An occasional relaxation drink is probably fine for healthy adults. But read the labels and consult with a health-care provider about possible interactions. Check our chart for price, calories, and more.

Drinks we tested

We bought the drinks between October 2011 and August 2012. For each product we tested at least one sample from each of three batches, choosing one flavor (usually fruit).

Product	Can/bottle size (fl. oz.)	Cost	Calories	Sugars (g)
Dream Water 0-Calorie Sleep and Relaxation Shot	2.5	\$3.00	0	0
iChill Relaxation Shot	2.0	2.25	0	0
Just Chill	8.4	2.00	50	12
Marley's Mellow Mood*	12.0	1.75	173	44
Relax Drank Extreme Relaxation	16.0	2.25	220	54
RelaxZen Day Formula*	2.5	2.50	0	0
RelaxZen Night*	2.5	2.50	0	0
ViB (Vacation in a Bottle)	12.0	2.00	60	15

*Now sold under new names and/or formulations, or other label info has changed.



Cracker crunch-off



DOES A HEALTHFUL cracker have to taste like sawdust? Not according to our latest tests. Of five fairly new crackers that earned Good or Very Good scores for nutrition, three also tasted very good.

Our experts also compared the taste and nutrition of four iconic crackers (think saltines and Triscuit) with store-brand and reduced-fat counterparts. Our nutrition ratings take into account calories, fat, sodium, iron, sugars, and fiber per serving.

What we found. Of the five new crackers, Kashi Pita Crisps scored the best for nutrition and are tasty, with a definite crunch. Crunchmaster and Jingos scored Good for nutrition and Very Good for taste

(see the descriptions below). Serving sizes for most are similar in terms of weight, but the number of crackers per serving ranges from six (Nabisco Triscuit Original) to 24 (Kellogg's Special K Multi-Grain).

In our taste-off, most store brands held their own against big brands. The exception: 365 Everyday Value Organic Wheat Squares (Whole Foods), which couldn't pass for Wheat Thins. Surprisingly, reduced-fat crackers tasted similar to their full-fat siblings. And as we've found in many tests, store brands usually cost less than the name brands. Be aware that the reduced-fat crackers also came in reduced package sizes.

We crunched nutrition numbers for

25 other crackers and found that some healthy-sounding types—Milton's Original Multigrain and Keebler Club Multi Grain among them—scored just Fair for nutrition and have no fiber at all.

Bottom line. For a nutritious cracker that's crunchy and tastes a bit different, try Kashi Original 7 Grain Sea Salt Pita Crisps. Don't hesitate to try reduced-fat or store-brand versions of oldies but goodies.

In order of nutrition score.



▶ Kashi Original 7 Grain Sea Salt Pita Crisps

COST 46 cents
CALORIES 120
FAT 3 grams
SODIUM 180 mg
FIBER 5 grams

TASTE Very good
Crunchy, slightly hard, toasted-wheat crackers, mild seasoning.



▶ Sensible Portions Pita Bites Original Sea Salt

COST 60 cents
CALORIES 120
FAT 3.5 grams
SODIUM 220 mg
FIBER 1 gram

TASTE Good
Mild, lightly toasted white-flour crackers. A bit dry and hard. Needs a topping.



▶ Mediterranean Snacks Lentil Sea Salt

COST 67 cents
CALORIES 110
FAT 3 grams
SODIUM 200 mg
FIBER 1 gram

TASTE Good
Crunchy little squares with a bit of salt. Moderately toasted, mild grain flavor.



▶ Crunchmaster Multi-Seed Original

COST 88 cents
CALORIES 140
FAT 5 grams
SODIUM 110 mg
FIBER 2 grams

TASTE Very good
Toasted sesame-flavored crispy rice crackers with salt and a variety of seeds.



▶ Pepperidge Farm Jingos Lime & Sweet Chili

COST 44 cents
CALORIES 130
FAT 4 grams
SODIUM 220 mg
FIBER 1 gram

TASTE Very good
Spicy little crackers with garlic, onion, lime, and cayenne. Flavorful enough to eat alone.

Four icons take on the competition

THE ICON Nabisco Ritz, 11 cents per serving

THE COMPETITION Nabisco Ritz Reduced Fat, 15 cents; Nice Golden Rounds (Walgreens), 20 cents.

THE VERDICT: SIMILAR. Nabisco Ritz are crispy, flaky, buttery, salty, and slightly sweet. Reduced Fat (2 grams of fat vs. 4.5 grams) and Walgreens are similar to the original but a little less buttery and tender. All scored Fair for nutrition. A serving of Nice has 380 milligrams of sodium, more than all others in our taste-off.

THE ICON Nabisco Triscuit Original, 39 cents per serving

THE COMPETITION Nabisco Triscuit Reduced Fat, 44 cents; Market Pantry Woven Wheats Whole Grain (Target), 25 cents.

THE VERDICT: SIMILAR. Triscuit Original are crunchy squares with a big toasted-wheat flavor and a touch of saltiness. Reduced Fat and Market Pantry versions taste very similar to Original. Reduced Fat (2.5 grams of fat vs. 4 grams in Original) scored Very Good for nutrition; the others, Good.

THE ICON Nabisco Wheat Thins Original, 44 cents

THE COMPETITION Nabisco Wheat Thins Reduced Fat, 44 cents; 365 Everyday Value Organic Wheat Squares (Whole Foods), 38 cents.

THE VERDICT: DIFFERENT. Nabisco's Original and Reduced Fat are crunchy, sweet, and toasted. Whole Foods are pale, speckled, less sweet, and less crunchy. All scored Good for nutrition.

THE ICON Nabisco Original Premium Saltines Topped with Sea Salt, 10 cents

per serving

THE COMPETITION Clover Valley Saltines (Dollar General), 4 cents. Nabisco Saltines are already low in fat and don't have a reduced-fat version.

THE VERDICT: SIMILAR. Original Saltines have a mild, salty, flour-based taste, and so do the store-brand crackers, though they were slightly stale. Both scored Fair for nutrition.



▶ Showstopping screen

It's not often that we test a product that literally stops our employees in their tracks, but that was the effect when head TV tester Claudio Ciacchi wowed a lunchtime crowd with LG's giant 84-inch Ultra High Definition TV. The set, model 84LM9600, is among the first of a new breed of so-called 4K TVs with four times the resolution of current 1080p sets, promising even more detailed images than the best 1080p models. The bad news: a \$20,000 price tag, plus a lack of 4K content that can take full advantage of the TV's higher resolution.

▶ SEE WHAT 4K TV HAS TO OFFER

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



U.S. hospitals still not safe enough

Looking for good news about hospital safety? More hospitals are required to track and report more data, so our updated hospital safety Ratings now include 2,031 hospitals—up from 1,159 institutions in our August 2012 report.

But we still find cause for concern:

- The lowest-scoring hospital, Clinch Valley Medical Center in Richlands, Va., got only a 14 on our 100-point scale. Beth Stiltner, the hospital's quality/risk manager, says that the score represents "only a small piece of the entire hospital's performance" and that in 2012 the hospital reduced its infection rates. We'll incorporate new data into future updates when they're released by the government.
- The average score for all hospitals was 49. "When it comes to health care, average should never be good enough, and this average is clearly not even close," says John Santa, M.D., director of the Consumer Reports Health Ratings Center.
- The highest-scoring hospital, Bellin Memorial Hospital in Green Bay, Wis., got a 74. That's up from another hospital's high score in August of 72 but shows that even top-scoring hospitals can improve.

In addition, teaching hospitals, which are supposed to prepare future doctors, are lagging. Almost two-thirds of the nation's 258 teaching hospitals that have a safety score ranked below average. "Those hospitals should set the bar higher," Santa says. "But that is not happening."

That trend is especially acute in and around New York City: 27 of the 28 teaching hospitals in the region scored

below the national average. The exception: Winthrop University Hospital in Mineola, N.Y. Overall, 58 of the area's 70 hospitals with a safety score ranked below average.

Our updated safety score focuses on five key measures: readmissions, complications, communication, the overuse of CT scans, and infections. The data, which come from the government, cover different time ranges, depending on the specific measure. Full Ratings, as well as advice on other factors to consider when choosing a hospital, are available to online subscribers at ConsumerReports.org/hospitalratings.



HIGHEST-SCORING teaching hospitals

Mayo Clinic Hospital	Phoenix	69
Mayo Clinic Jacksonville	Jacksonville, Fla.	68
Gundersen Lutheran Medical Center	La Crosse, Wis.	66
Bronson Methodist Hospital	Kalamazoo, Mich.	65
Saint Mary's Hospital	Waterbury, Conn.	65
Mayo Clinic-Saint Marys Hospital	Rochester, Minn.	65
Indiana University Health Ball Memorial Hospital	Muncie, Ind.	64
Avera McKennan Hospital and University Health Center	Sioux Falls, S.D.	63
Baystate Medical Center	Springfield, Mass.	63
University of Utah Health Care-Hospital and Clinics	Salt Lake City	62

LOWEST-SCORING teaching hospitals

University of Connecticut Health Center, John Dempsey Hospital	Farmington, Conn.	17
Kings County Hospital Center	Brooklyn, N.Y.	22
Bronx-Lebanon Hospital Center Health Care System	Bronx, N.Y.	25
Grady Memorial Hospital	Atlanta	27
Shands Jacksonville Medical Center	Jacksonville, Fla.	27
Tulane Medical Center	New Orleans	28
Westchester Medical Center	Valhalla, N.Y.	28
Harlem Hospital Center	New York City	28
Jacobi Medical Center	Bronx, N.Y.	29
University Medical Center	Lubbock, Texas	30
Saint Louis University Hospital	St. Louis	30

Same generic drug, many prices

IF YOUR INSURANCE has ever stopped covering a prescription drug, or you don't have coverage at all, you know how quickly costs can mount. Americans spent on average \$758 out of pocket for medication in 2012, according to a recent CONSUMER REPORTS national telephone poll. And in our survey of 1,130 people who regularly took prescription drugs—the insured and uninsured—12 percent spent more than \$1,200 last year. Our advice if you're looking to reduce out-of-pocket drug costs: Shop around.

Our secret shoppers called more than 200 pharmacies throughout the U.S. to get prices on a month's supply of five blockbuster drugs that have recently become available as generics: Actos (pioglitazone), for diabetes; Lexapro (escitalopram), an antidepressant; Lipitor (atorvastatin), for high cholesterol; Plavix (clopidogrel), a blood thinner; and Singulair (montelukast), for asthma. The result? A whopping difference of \$749, or 447 percent, between the highest- and lowest-priced stores.

Costco was the least expensive overall, and you don't need to be a member to use its pharmacy. A few independent pharmacies came in even cheaper, though their prices varied widely, as did grocery-store pharmacies. The online retailers Healthwarehouse.com and FamilyMeds.com also had very low prices. On the other end of the spectrum, CVS, Rite Aid, and Target had



ASK FOR IT Our shoppers weren't always offered the lowest available price at first.

the highest retail prices. The full results of the study appear in the chart below.

A representative of CVS told us that its retail drug prices reflect other services offered by the chain, including drive-through windows, automated prescription refill systems, free outreach programs to help make sure patients are taking their prescriptions correctly, and 24-hour pharmacies. Costco pharmacies, the cheapest overall, are open only from 10 a.m. to 7 or 8:30 p.m. and are typically closed on Sundays.

"Big-box stores such as Costco and Walmart use the pharmacy as a traffic builder for their stores, whereas tradi-

tional chain stores, such as CVS, Rite Aid, and Walgreens, make the majority of their revenue and profits from the pharmacy," says Stephen W. Schondelmeyer, Ph.D., Pharm.D., a professor of pharmacy economics at the University of Minnesota.

How to save

Whichever drugstore or pharmacy you use, choosing generics over brand-name drugs will save you money. Talk to your doctor, who may be able to prescribe lower-cost alternatives in the same class of drug. In addition, follow these tips:

Request the lowest price. Our analysis showed that shoppers didn't always receive the lowest available price when they called the pharmacy. Sometimes they were given a discounted price, and other times they were quoted the list price. Be sure to explain—whether you have insurance or not—that you want the lowest possible price. Our shoppers found that student and senior discounts may also apply, but again, you have to ask.

Leave the city. Grocery-store pharmacies and independent drugstores sometimes charge higher prices in urban areas than in rural areas. For example, our shoppers found that for a 30-day supply of generic Actos, an independent pharmacy in the city of Raleigh, N.C., charged \$203. A store in a rural area of the state sold it for \$37.

Get a refill for 90 days, not 30 days. Most pharmacies offer discounts on a three-month supply.

Consider paying retail. At Costco, the drugstore websites, and a few independents, the retail prices were lower for certain drugs than many insurance copays.

Look for additional discounts. All chain and big-box drugstores offer discount generic-drug programs, with some selling hundreds of generic drugs for \$4 a month or \$10 for a three-month supply. Other programs require you to join to get the discount. (Restrictions apply and certain programs charge annual fees.)

Although the low costs we found at a few stores could entice you to get your prescriptions filled at multiple pharmacies based only on price, our medical consultants say it's best to use a single pharmacy. That keeps all of the drugs you take in one system, which can help you avoid dangerous drug interactions.

How drug costs compare

In our pharmacies study, Costco had the lowest retail prices overall and CVS the highest for five widely prescribed generics.



Drugstore/store	Price ¹					Total
	Generic Actos, 30 mg (pioglitazone)	Generic Lexapro, 20 mg (escitalopram)	Generic Lipitor, 20 mg (atorvastatin)	Generic Plavix, 75 mg (clopidogrel)	Generic Singulair, 10 mg (montelukast)	
Costco ²	\$101	\$7	\$17	\$15	\$27	\$167
Healthwarehouse.com	141	11	16	12	29	209
FamilyMeds.com	140	12	15	30	29	226
Sam's Club ²	140	87	56	48	47	376
Independents ³	180 (\$37-\$393)	52 (\$6-\$164)	42 (\$8-\$197)	48 (\$8-\$222)	58 (\$10-\$193)	381 (\$131-\$1,073)
Kmart	145	96	65	46	40	392
Walmart	160	84	68	58	57	426
Walgreens	158	105	65	50	55	433
Grocery stores ³	252 (\$48-\$346)	115 (\$12-\$190)	84 (\$10-\$146)	99 (\$5-\$209)	108 (\$15-\$173)	658 (\$176-\$1,018)
Target	274	85	144	158	135	796
Rite Aid	286	119	134	137	144	820
CVS	295	126	150	180	165	916

¹ For walk-in stores, average price for one-month supply. ² Nonmember, nondiscounted prices. At Sam's Club, prices could be up to 40 percent less.

³ Prices in parentheses are the range across sampled stores.

How to beat travel fees big & small

WHEN READER LIVIU GIURIOIU of Warren, Mich., booked a flight on a major U.S. airline for his wife from California to Romania, he says he tried to prepay for her second checked bag to get the discounted fee of \$60 each way. But when she arrived at the airport, the carrier for the first leg of the trip charged her \$75 for the flight. Giuroiu says the airline did not respond to his many e-mail messages requesting a refund, though it reduced the fee after he complained to the Better Business Bureau.

Travelers have been complaining about airline fees for booking, itinerary changes, and checked baggage for years. But now airlines seem to have a fee for almost everything—Wi-Fi, extra leg room, and more. “Anything that some might consider a perk, there’s now a fee for that,” says Rick Seaney, co-founder of FareCompare.com, a travel-planning website.

Even low-fee carrier Southwest Airlines added a \$40 fee in January for passengers who want to be among the first 15 people to board their plane. It has also raised its “EarlyBird” check-in for slightly less exclusive priority boarding from \$10 to \$12.50.

Some airlines offer a bundle of services for a single fee. For example, American Airlines’ “Choice Essential” option allows no-fee changes, one checked bag, and priority boarding for \$68 round-trip. For \$88, you also get 50 percent more bonus miles and an alcoholic beverage. Southwest and Delta also offer bundles.

Extra fees from airlines and hotels often aren’t disclosed when you book a trip. But more transparency may be on the way. In November, the Federal Trade Commission sent a warning letter to 22 hotel operators telling them to disclose “resort fees” in their total price. And this month the Department of Transportation expects to release a proposed rule that would require airlines to provide fee information to travel agents so that consumers can



NO FREEBIES Airlines are charging for baggage, seat selection, Wi-Fi, and even pillows.

compare fees among carriers and pay for optional services when they book flights.

Until then, here’s what to do to avoid certain fees.

Airline extras

The fees most likely to aggravate you are those for changing your ticket and for checking your bags. Change fees typically run \$75 to \$150 for domestic flights and \$200 for international trips. Your first checked bag typically costs \$20 to \$25 on domestic flights and is free if you fly internationally. But if your checked bags weigh too much, you’ll get slapped with overweight fees of \$25 to \$200. You might also pay fees of \$10 to \$35 to book by phone, up to \$99 for advance seat selection, and \$10 to \$199 for extra leg room. If those aren’t bad enough, Spirit Airlines charges up to \$50 for a carry-on, and Virgin America has a \$10 fee for pillows and blankets.

What you can do. Travel light. Or fly a low-fee airline, such as JetBlue or Southwest. JetBlue allows you one free checked bag; Southwest gives you two. If you need to check a bag or pay for a carry-on, see whether there’s a discount for prepaying on the airline’s website. On Spirit flights, carry-on baggage is \$50 if you pay for it at the airport, \$35 if purchased when booking online.

Check your airline’s luggage fees and weight limits. For example, United charges \$100 to \$200 (depending on your destination) for a checked bag weighing from 51 to 70 pounds; Hawaiian Airlines charges

\$50 for travel outside Hawaii. Complicating things, overweight fees kick in at just 41 pounds on Spirit and Allegiant Air.

You might avoid some fees if you charge your travel to an airline credit card. The cards often carry annual fees of \$40 to \$100, but many waive them in the first year. The perks they typically offer—priority boarding, free checked luggage, car-rental insurance, travel insurance, and access to airport lounges—can more than make up for the annual fee.

Hotel add-ons

Once you arrive at your destination, you might get hit with “resort fees” tacked onto your hotel bill at checkout to the tune of \$12 to \$40 per day. Those fees can cover services such as access to a pool, gym, or business center; daily newspapers; or making “free” local calls—whether you use the services or not.

What you can do. Try negotiating with the hotel clerk to remove or reduce the extra fees. Or stay at a hotel that doesn’t charge them in the first place. Mid-tier chains such as Courtyard by Marriott, Hilton Garden Inn, and Hyatt House typically offer free Wi-Fi, parking, gyms, pools, and business centers.

Joining a hotel loyalty program or getting a hotel credit card can score you free amenities. For instance, Omni Hotel group’s complimentary loyalty program gets you free Wi-Fi, morning beverage service, newspapers, clothes pressing, and bottled water on your arrival.

BY THE NUMBERS

\$2.6 billion

That’s how much the major U.S. airlines made in baggage fees in the first three quarters of 2012, according to the Department of Transportation.

▶ Polymer balls raise alarm

A recent recall of toys made of a material that can expand significantly when ingested has revealed a potential health risk that the Consumer Product Safety Commission considers serious enough to warrant a broader investigation.

In December 2012, Cleveland-based

Dunecraft recalled about 95,000 packages of marble-sized toys that expand in water. That recall came three months after doctors at Texas Children's Hospital reported in the journal *Pediatrics* that an 8-month-old girl swallowed one of the brightly colored balls from a set of Dunecraft's Water Balz. It had to be surgically removed after it expanded inside her, blocking her small intestine.

The doctors warned that such cases might become more common because superabsorbent polymers such as those used to make the Dunecraft toys are increasingly prevalent not only in other toys but also in



DANGEROUS Kids can swallow polymer toys that expand in water.

widely available household products, such as water-retaining pellets used for gardening or in flower arrangements. Some day-care providers actually use those versions as playthings for babies and preschoolers. In the dry state, the polymer beads are tiny but could pose life-threatening risks.

"If one of these is in the airway and doubles within 2 to 4 hours, a child can go from not breathing well to not breathing at all," says Paul Krakowitz, M.D., a pediatric ear, nose, and throat surgeon and vice chairman of surgical operations at the Cleveland Clinic. "We view the recall with Dunecraft and the incident involving the 8-month-old girl to be very serious and as a result, CPSC staff are taking a broader look at this product class," said CPSC spokesman Scott Wolfson.

Two cases were recently reported among children in Pakistan, one of whom died as a result. Malaysia banned the sale of such products in August 2011 after hospital reports of seven children needing surgery after ingesting them. Italy has imposed a ban, and New Zealand says they should not be promoted as children's toys or craft products.

"These are colorful and look cute when you watch them expand, but they could have disastrous effects if they are ingested, so any of these superabsorbent polymer products should be kept out of the reach of children or pets," says Oluyinka O. Olutoye, M.D., a pediatric surgeon at Texas Children's Hospital who operated on the baby whose case was reported in *Pediatrics*.

▶ RECALLS

AUTOMOBILES

'03-'04 Toyota Corolla/ Corolla Matrix and Pontiac Vibe

Supplemental restraint system (SRS) circuits are susceptible to shorting, which may increase heat and damage circuits. Damaged circuits may deploy front air bags and/or safety-belt pretensioners, which increases the risk of injury and the possibility of a crash.

MODELS 887,709 '03-'04 Toyota Corolla, Corolla Matrix, and Pontiac Vibe.

WHAT TO DO Dealer will install a supplemental harness with an electrical filter between the air bag control module and its wire harness. Toyota owners call 800-331-4331 and Pontiac owners call 800-620-7668 for more details.



HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTS

Royal Prestige cookware

Cookware can collapse, crimp, or severely deform when heated, causing a risk of fire and burns.

PRODUCTS

1.7 million stainless-steel nine-ply "Thermal Wall" pans sold door-to-door for \$250 to \$800 (individual products) and \$800 to \$3,500 (sets). The importer, Hy Cite Enterprises, has received 1,136 reports of cookware being compromised by heat.

WHAT TO DO Don't use the cookware. Contact Hy Cite at 800-609-9577 or go to royalprestige.com for instructions on returning cookware for repair. Damaged cookware will be replaced.



LOOMING LARGE
This Water Balz expanded fivefold after 96 hours in water (both actual size).

▶ SAFETY UPDATE

Arsenic rules on hold

The Food and Drug Administration said more than a year ago it would conduct tests and possibly draw up new guidelines to reduce risks posed by arsenic in apple juice. It also pledged last fall to expand testing for arsenic in rice to see whether limits are needed.

Though the agency has completed tests of more than 1,300 samples of rice and rice products, the full results have not yet been disclosed. And an FDA report that may propose limits for arsenic in apple juice is under wraps while under review by the Office of Management and Budget. CONSUMER REPORTS tests published last year found worrisome levels of arsenic in juice and rice.

Five steps to a safer spring season

- Test that smoke alarms and CO₂ detectors work, and change the batteries if necessary.
- Check fire extinguishers for corrosion, leakage, and intact safety seals. Make sure the pressure gauge reads in the operable range. Dry chemical extinguishers that are meant to be discarded after use should be replaced after 12 years from manufacture.
- Replace lightbulbs where needed for illumination of pathways and working areas.
- Remove expired medication from the medicine cabinet. Check with your local trash or recycling service or pharmacist for proper disposal. Old medication should not be flushed or poured down a drain.

- Check your first-aid kit and replace any supplies that are expired or missing.
- For more tips and resources, go to the National Safety Council site at nsc.org.



101 secrets from our experts

The insider's guide to practically everything

THE TESTERS, REPORTERS, and other experts who create our articles and product Ratings have a dazzling depth and breadth of knowledge about all kinds of products based on their decades of experience. For this roundup, we've asked them for their best tips—money savers, time savers, and just plain interesting tidbits. Enjoy.



▣ **If you're serious** about buying a car, ask the dealer to let you borrow or rent a model overnight. Or consider renting one for a few days; you and your family will get more of a feel for the car than you would with a 15-minute test drive.

▣ **Oldies are still goodies.** We recently rated Pine-Sol tops among general cleaners, and Fels Naptha was good for pretreating stains.

▣ **It's perfectly fine** to leave your laptop connected to its charger at home. The smart charger will prevent overcharging, and the laptop's processor will run faster when it's connected.



▣ **If you drop an electronic product in water, don't assume it's a goner. Let it dry completely, then see whether it works.**



❑ **When you buy sunglasses** know that polarizing lenses can make the LCD screen on your smart phone, tablet, or GPS display impossible to view at certain angles (though it won't affect an e-book reader).

❑ **In your refrigerator**, don't put delicate foods like lettuce near the vent—they might freeze.

❑ **Many retailers that use coupons** or other promotional sales tools will offer receipt adjustments before or after start or expiration dates. Just ask.

❑ **To tell whether that new lightbulb** will work in a fixture rated for a certain wattage, check the actual wattage used, not the claimed equivalent. A compact fluorescent bulb that claims to have the light output of a 75-watt bulb uses only around 17 watts.



❑ **When you're replacing windows**, the installer should measure each new window before taking out the old one to make sure the factory sent the right size. You don't want to end up with a boarded-up hole as you wait for the right window.

❑ **On computers**, the Enter, Select, or OK buttons are your friends. We hear many complaints from people who think their computer is to blame when a document doesn't reflect their changes, but the reason is that they didn't save their work.

❑ **Microfiber cloths**, though a little pricier, do a much better job wiping off car wax than rags do.

❑ **Scope out products** that have many user reviews when you research online. That can indicate, among other things, that they're best sellers and/or have been on the market a long time and have a broad base of reviews.

❑ **Just in case your GPS device** winds up in the hands of a crook, don't input your address under "Home." Instead, pick a local landmark—like a police station.

❑ **When you change your car battery**, you typically lose radio presets and other electronic functions. Consider using a jump-start battery you plug into the cigarette lighter to power those functions while the battery is out.

❑ **Bigger or smaller TV?** Go bigger.

❑ **To save money on printing**, avoid the Arial font; our tests have shown that it uses more ink than Times New Roman and other fonts. Minimize the use of color ink by printing text in grayscale or use black-only mode. And recycle spent cartridges for a refund or credit at an office-supply store.

❑ **Can't log in? Always check that "caps lock" isn't on, which scrambles your password.**

❑ **To clean ground-in sand** or dirt from your carpet, set the carpet head to the lowest level. That will allow brushes to really get the grit out. (Don't use that setting all the time; you could wear out your carpet.)

❑ **If your printer has a "standby" timeout** (most do), leave it on; don't shut it off after each use. Models we've tested in the past five years use only a tiny amount of power that way (about 1 watt). And we've found that



The fact that you bought an HDTV doesn't mean you're watching HD. You need an HDMI cable or component-video connections (not a coaxial cable) and a high-def-capable cable box. And make sure you're set for 1080p or 1080i.

❑ **For any equipment that requires gas**—your generator, mower, and more—add a gas stabilizer to your gas can. It will help the gas from gumming up the carburetor. (For gear that requires an oil-and-gas mix, the stabilizer is already in the oil.)

❑ **When you're comparing the prices** of electronics, know that some brands include a charger and a case; others make you pay extra.

some inkjet printers waste more ink getting ready to print when switched on than when left in standby between uses.

❑ **Don't shop for a new car** during sales events advertised by direct mail. They're often run by contracted specialists trained in techniques to increase the dealer's profit.

❑ **It usually pays to upgrade** your phone at the end of a two-year contract. (Phones are subsidized as part of your contract, so you're paying for the subsidy anyway.)

❑ **If your computer hard drive** is more than half full, programs and disk operations like copying and backing up will slow down, since the hard drive's heads have to move farther across the spinning disk surface as they gather data. That's a reason to pick a hard drive with more capacity than you think you'll



Auto headlights dim over time, so replace them after several years even if they haven't burned out. You can also make them brighter by using a lens cleaner or restorer.

PHOTO (BOTTOM RIGHT): THINKSTOCK

need when you buy a new computer. It's also one of the advantages of SSDs (solid-state drives), which have no moving parts: They don't slow down as they fill up.

❑ **Smart phones need a fresh (re)start.** They're actually full-fledged computers and need to be restarted every few days to purge memory reserved by programs no longer running and to fix glitches that can hinder performance.

❑ **To quickly find info** about the new product you bought, download the manual, then use "Control F" ("Command F" on a Mac) to search for a particular word, etc.

❑ **Laptop or tablet?** Here's one way to tell what you need: Tablets are good for consuming media. Computers and laptops are good for creating it.

❑ **Don't bother using nitrogen** in your tires to keep up tire pressure. It's a waste of money. Air is about 80 percent nitrogen anyway, and air or nitrogen will leak out of tires over time, our tests show. Check your tire pressure regularly.

❑ **Never wash or rinse raw chicken** in the sink. You'll splash germs around the kitchen and risk food poisoning.

❑ **If your gear doesn't start, unplug it or otherwise reboot it and start over.**

❑ **To save money on airfare,** shop online on weekdays, specifically from Monday evening about 8 p.m. EST to Thursday 8 p.m. EST. And the best time of all, according to one expert we interviewed: 3 p.m. EST Tuesday.

❑ **Vacuum filters** need replacing twice a year or so. That will help ensure adequate suction.

❑ **Relax. Our surveys show** that very few readers inadvertently destroy their electronic gear by dropping it, immersing it in water, or sitting on it.



Cook rice in twice the amount of water recommended on the package. It could reduce any arsenic in the rice by 30 percent.

❑ **When it's time to clean** and store the stainless-steel carafes we use in our coffee tests, we fill them with hot water, add several denture tablets, and let them soak overnight. The results are amazing. Scrupulous rinsing is essential—unless you enjoy that "minty fresh" taste in your coffee.

❑ **Your lawn mower** will cut better if after each use you turn it on its side and rinse it off.

❑ **If you think granola is healthy,** think again; it's often loaded with fat and sugar. Try mixing it with a puffed cereal to lighten the calories.

❑ **If you feel you were tricked,** manipulated, or maneuvered into an unfair consumer transaction, never be sheepish or too embarrassed to demand your money back or to undo the deal.

❑ **In cars, leather or leather-like seats** are much easier to clean than fabric.

❑ **To conserve** your smart-phone battery, seek strong signals and don't bury the phone in a desk; it uses more power trying to access a weak signal. Turn off Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, and other wireless access when you're out of range. Reduce screen brightness. And cut the number of times you allow updates of news, e-mail, and other network feeds.

❑ **With photographs and home videos,** back everything up. Then back it up again. Too many people lose those cherished moments. Many of our experts back up to external hard drives and cloud storage services.

❑ **Don't reuse water** from your dehumidifier. It contains dust, mold, pollen, and other irritants.

❑ **Your smart-phone lens** can easily pick up smears and dust, and make your photos look blurry and dirty. Use a microfiber cloth to clean it.

❑ **No matter how fancy they look,** dried plums are prunes. Don't pay extra for clever packaging.

❑ **Generators aren't supposed** to get wet. Get a cover. (Manufacturers make them.)

❑ **Never, ever** take out a payday or auto-title loan. Those small, short-term loans come with interest rates of several hundred percent. Research suggests it takes people five months to pay them off.

❑ **Need help with research?** The public library is a resource many people overlook. Libraries subscribe to databases you undoubtedly don't, and librarians can find information not easily available with a Google search or to a person without library-science training.

❑ **You don't need to pay** for a high-definition TV calibration. Do it yourself: 1. Use your typical room lighting. 2. From a DVD or DVR video, freeze on a frame with a face and some detail. 3. Press the Menu button on the remote to find picture mode. 4. Try the options, such as THX mode, Cinema, Movie, and Pro. See which provides the most natural-looking picture.

❑ **Attention, technophobes:** Don't be afraid of your computer. You won't break it by merely typing.

❑ **Pet insurance** generally cost more than it paid out in our comparison of policies. Only in uncommon cases when a pet required very expensive care would the coverage have more than paid for itself.

Don't wait until the vacuum bag is full to replace it. By then, it will have lost significant suction power.



❑ **Our tech and auto testers** aren't usually early adopters. If you can wait a year or so for a new product, do so. The kinks get worked out.

❑ **Ever wonder about** those warning tags on pillows—the ones that say by law, you can't pull them off? It's OK to remove them. The tag is meant for pillow manufacturers, distributors, and retailers.

❑ **Many devices draw power** when they're off or in standby mode. You could save \$125 a year by pulling the plug or turning off the power strip they're plugged into. For air conditioners, the biggest energy hog is leaky ducts. A contractor can fix leaks.

❑ **Use your Android Power Control widget**, which lets you turn Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, GPS, and Sync off and on, and adjust screen brightness. It's free and comes with your device, and it can really help battery life without your having to search through Settings.



❑ **Wipe up spills** immediately from your smoothtop; sugars in, say, tomato sauce can bond to the surface and damage it.

❑ **To install audio gear** with fewer headaches, consider using



Don't slide pots on a smoothtop range or cooktop; they can scratch the surface.

a labeling kit, which helps you identify all the wires and inputs.

❑ **Buy the cheapest** TV cables and connectors you can find. Don't overspend on those accessories.

❑ **Many toaster ovens** have a built-in convection oven, but if you don't use that feature, you can save \$50 with a basic model.

❑ **Home speakers** have an equalization system that balances sound so that you don't have to do it manually.

❑ **Create a strong password**—and remember it—by creating a saying or sentence and using the first letter of each word. That

probably will provide stronger protection than using a word that can be found in a dictionary, often the place where hackers start. Then substitute a few numbers or symbols. The length of a password is more important than its complexity.

❑ If you use dryer sheets, periodically wash the dryer sensors and lint filter with warm, soapy water.

❑ **All charged cell phones**—even those with expired service contracts—are required by law to be able to make an emergency 911 call. Keep an older phone and charger handy in case you or a family member needs it.

❑ **Count the features** on any double oven you're considering. In some we've tested, features like convection cooking, which helps shorten cooking times, are available for only one oven.

❑ **Before you buy that car**, check the manufacturer's recommendation about oil. More are recommending expensive synthetic blends, which could noticeably add to the price of an oil change.

❑ **If you're painting** with dark colors, use a tinted primer.

❑ **Don't wash or dry** one or two small items. They won't get as clean as they would in a fuller load, and the dryer's moisture sensors might not work.

❑ **You need two kinds** of smoke alarms: ionization types that detect fast-moving flames and photoelectric alarms that warn you of a smoldering fire. Dual-sensor models exist, though many models use one or the other. Also make sure you have a carbon-monoxide detector.

❑ **If your barbecue grill** seems to overcook or undercook meat or fish, the problem could be uneven flames, a sign of blocked burner tubes or ports. To check, follow the manufacturer's directions for cleaning. A toothpick can sometimes help clear burner holes.

❑ **We haven't tested** a commercial deer or squirrel repellent that works well.

❑ **Measure your laundry detergent** with the provided cap. Use too much, which many people do, and you could get residue on your clothes. Remember that today's washers use much less water than older machines.

❑ **Don't use cooking sprays** on your nonstick pans. They can build up and actually cause food to stick. Instead, use nonstick pans on low or medium heat without spray.

❑ **An empty freezer** makes your compressor cycle on and off, creating more temperature swings than a full one. Consider freezing bottled water to help fill it.

❑ **Here's how to take** your blood pressure: Sit quietly for at least 5 minutes before taking a measurement and



When you read food labels, don't assume that a health claim applies to everything on the nutrition panel. Low-fat foods may claim to be good for heart health, but they may also be high in sodium or sugar.





If you're considering an electric or plug-in car, consider leasing instead of buying. The technology is changing quickly, and some lease deals are attractive.

put your feet flat on the floor while sitting straight up. Don't talk or move. It also helps to take readings at the same time of day.

❑ **Synthetic paintbrushes** and rollers tend to hold latex-based paints better and apply it more evenly than those with natural materials.

❑ **Change your** sewing-machine needle! And don't sew with cotton thread that's more than a few years old; it can become weak.

❑ **For outdoor lighting,** compact fluorescent bulbs usually take longer to brighten up in cold weather. LED bulbs aren't affected by the cold.

❑ **Today's smart-phone bodies** often include Kevlar, carbon fiber, or other tough material. After-market cases may offer extra protection but often hinder access or slow the responsiveness of the phone's screen, buttons, and ports.

❑ **You don't necessarily need** the Swiffer brand, but a microfiber cloth will attract dust better than a regular cloth.

❑ **It's harder for vacuums** to thoroughly clean high-low-patterned carpets than smooth-pile carpets.

❑ **It's a hassle to organize** smart-phone photos on your phone. Transfer them to a computer and use software to organize them.

❑ **Wrinkle creams?** Sigh. They don't work as well as you might hope.

❑ **Cut down on your cell phone's data charges** by using a Wi-Fi network. Start at home and in the office, but there are more that you can take advantage of. Many cable TV providers, including Comcast, Cablevision, and Time Warner, have Wi-Fi hotspots that you can access if you're a cable customer. AT&T

wireless customers can use 29,000 mostly free hotspots around the country.

❑ **To clean your computer screen,** put a drop of dishwashing liquid on a soft, damp, lint-free cloth and wipe the screen. Non-ammoniated glass cleaners are OK, too. Don't use ammonia-based cleaners.

❑ **Many cell-phone touch screens** come with a protective layer that makes scratches unlikely. Some protectors reduce glare, but they can also make your display less responsive, and they often develop air bubbles and scratches of their own.

❑ **The refrigerator door** is warmer than elsewhere in the fridge; don't store milk there.

❑ **Don't pay extra** for ID-theft protection for your credit card. If your card is stolen, federal law limits your liability to \$50. And if your card number (not the card itself) is stolen, you're not liable for anything.

❑ **Pass up built-in car navigation** systems, which can add \$1,500 or more to the sticker price. Instead, consider a \$100-to-\$250 portable device or a smart-phone app.

❑ **Any shampoo** will clean your hair, our tests have shown. So buy by what you like and want to pay.

Fire extinguishers, smoke detectors, and carbon-monoxide alarms have expiration dates (typically 12 years for single-use extinguishers and five years for the others). Write down the dates where you can see them to know when to replace the devices.



❑ **You don't have to change your oil** every 3,000 miles as some service shops suggest. Follow the interval recommended in your owner's manual, usually 5,000 miles or more.

❑ When choosing a product from our Ratings, first check out the brand's reliability. Then pick the model.

❑ **Bug repellents** that contain deet (25 percent is best) are top picks in our tests.

❑ **Cut your grocery bill** by up to 60 percent by choosing store brands over name brands, shopping at a warehouse club, and using coupons and store reward cards.

When you pick paint colors, use magazines or paint chips for inspiration—not the Internet. Your monitor and printer can misrepresent colors.

❑ **We hope you never face this,** but here's how to tame a runaway car: Press and hold the brakes and shift the transmission into neutral. Then use your brakes to bring the car to a stop on the side of the road and shut off the engine. Shift the car into Park.



Bundle for savings

84,000 readers help you choose and save on TV, Internet, home phone, and now cell phone, too

MANY OF US are one-stop shoppers when it comes to home telecom, opting for a “triple play,” the industry term for a discounted bundle of TV, Internet, and phone service. The majority of CONSUMER REPORTS readers who bundled are happy with that arrangement, a new Consumer Reports National Research Center survey suggests. Among the more than 20,800 readers who told us about their triple- or quad-play package, three in four said they would definitely or probably buy that bundle of services again.

Deep discounting helps explain the bullishness about bundling. You can get big savings by bundling three services with one provider. “Friends who went with a bundle were saving a good deal of money, so I decided to do it as well,” says Mary Kelly of Chico, Calif., whose Comcast bill dropped by more than \$50 a month.

You can get more discounts by adding cell-phone service to a triple play. Verizon and AT&T offer such “quad plays.” Comcast, Cox, and Time Warner offer them (with Verizon Wireless phones) in some locations.

Such breaks are welcome relief from the upward climb of telecommunications rates. Many big providers boosted monthly bills for one or another of their telecom

services by \$5 or so this year, driven in part by the rising costs of TV programming. Industry analysts forecast continuing hikes over the next few years. “I expect to see TV rates continue to climb about 4 to 5 percent a year,” says Arthur Gruen, president of Wilkofsky Gruen Associates, a telecom consulting firm in New York.

The more services in your bundle, of course, the more services you have to switch when changing providers and the tighter

Three in four triple-play bundlers would do it again.

the grip your current company has on you. This report should embolden you to tackle your telecom costs head-on. Our Ratings—of bundles from 14 companies, along with individual phone, TV, and Internet services from many more—show that most people have at least one decent choice in telecom. And our reporting and exclusive survey results reveal ways to slim down service—maybe because you’re using cell phones more or streaming more online

video—or at least to negotiate a price break or some freebies to soothe the sting of that higher bill.

What our survey found

Here are key findings from our survey, along with advice on how to use the info to get better or cheaper telecom service:

Verizon’s fiber service satisfies. Among major carriers, the highest proportion of subscribers who said they’d “triple play” again had bundles with FiOS, Verizon’s fiber-optic-based TV, digital-landline phone, and high-speed Internet service. “Quad play” customers who added Verizon cell-phone service to the bundle were even more enthusiastic. FiOS received standout scores for its broadband speed and reliability, TV picture and reliability, and even phone call quality and reliability. But respondents with FiOS bundles were more likely than most other providers’ customers to say bills were hard to read or error-prone.

Verizon FiOS is available to about 18 million homes in 12 states (mostly on the East Coast and in parts of California, Florida, and Texas) and Washington, D.C. If your neighborhood is wired for FiOS, you’ll probably know it. Consumers in those areas (including our own staffers) report a flood of direct-mail promos and door-to-door calls pitching the service.

Areas that aren’t wired for FiOS probably can’t expect to get the service anytime soon, even if FiOS is available nearby. Verizon says it’s focused more on signing up customers in areas it already serves than in expanding coverage.

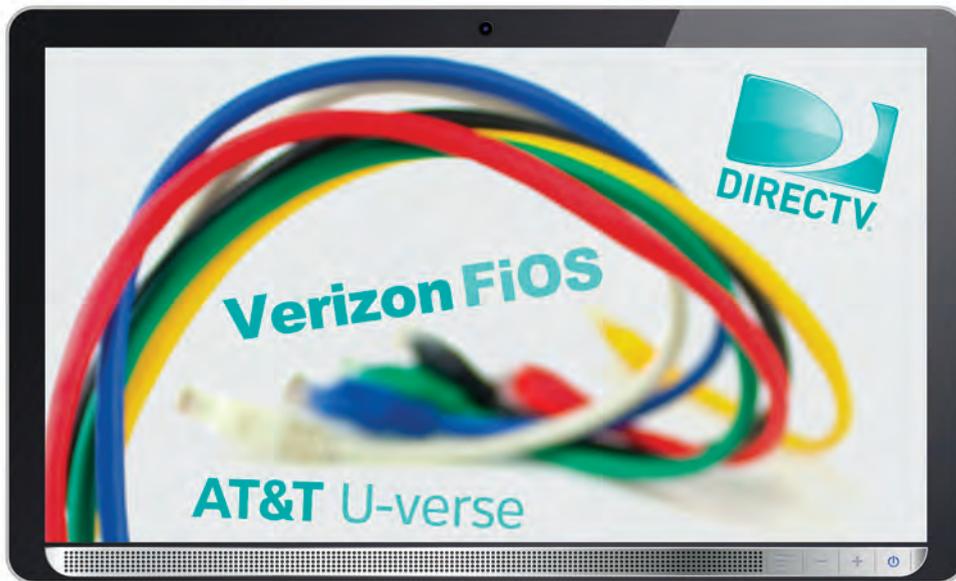
Ooma is a top phone option. Ooma, which provides VoIP service (the same technology used by cable and fiber companies), was one of the top-rated phone services of

▣ DID YOU KNOW?

Speed you may not need

With Internet service, you probably don’t need the higher speeds many ISPs are now pitching as an upgrade. Cablevision’s Optimum service, for instance, offers 50-megabits-per-second (Mbps) downloads with Boost Plus, a \$15-a-month upgrade to its regular Internet speeds, which are “up

to 15 Mbps,” according to the company. A 15 Mbps speed is fairly typical now for standard Internet service. That should be all most consumers need, even if multiple users are simultaneously doing bandwidth-hungry tasks, such as streaming high-definition video, Web browsing, and playing a two-way high-definition video game.



BY THE NUMBERS

Survey respondents who judged Internet speed very good or excellent:

74% fiber

64% cable

39% DSL



any type in our survey. It requires a \$180 device (often discounted to \$150) that connects to your broadband service and a regular phone. There's no charge for unlimited local calls and 5,000 minutes a month of domestic long distance (though you have to pay a few dollars a month in taxes), and international rates are very low.

Before you drop your bundled phone service to go cell-only, make sure your cell phone works well throughout your home. And if you're considering Ooma or another VoIP service, keep in mind that it might not work with a home-security system. (Don't think you need to keep a landline

for emergency calls, though. A past CONSUMER REPORTS survey found cell phones reliable enough for calling 911.)

Also, dropping phone service from a triple play might save you as little as \$5 or so a month. That's because the discount on buying a bundle of two services is usually not as big as when you buy three. That's the reason 34 percent of survey respondents who thought about switching phone services decided to stick with their bundle provider after all. Comcast, Cox, and Time Warner were among the companies whose subscribers were markedly less satisfied with value from double plays than triples.

But that's not always the case. Our survey found that customers of Verizon FiOS, AT&T, and some small providers were equally satisfied with the value they got from double bundles as they were with the value from triple plays.

Verizon and satellite are TV standouts. Verizon FiOS TV and DirecTV's satellite service had higher ratings than most other providers for picture and sound quality, channel selection, and reliability. Satellite rival Dish Network also fared well with survey respondents, as did a few (mostly smaller) cable companies.

If you're a TV aficionado who owns an especially large set, you might want television service from one of the standout providers, if any are available to you. (Satellite TV requires you to mount a pizza-

WHAT'S OOMA? SEE OUR VIDEO

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



sized dish antenna with a clear view of the southern horizon.)

At the other extreme, perhaps you're relatively unattached to your TV service and want to cut back on it—or even eliminate it altogether. Around one in 10 survey respondents make do without any pay-TV service.

See whether your provider offers a low-priced basic package that would satisfy your viewing needs. Or cut the cord and use an antenna to get free over-the-air digital signals, including HD, from broadcast networks such as ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS. That might be enough TV for you, especially if combined with a streaming-video subscription.

Try to bundle your cell phone, too. Bringing your cell phone into your telecom bundle, if it's an option, is as close to a no-brainer as you can get in the complex world of telecom savings.

AT&T gives you \$5 a month off your wireless bill for two years if you sign up for U-verse services for one year and will discount U-verse services as well. AT&T's U-verse Choice bundles offer savings to new customers who sign up for any combination of wireless, TV, landline, and Internet.

At press time, Verizon was offering a \$10-a-month break for combining Verizon Wireless with a FiOS triple-play bundle on one bill. In areas where Verizon FiOS is not available, Comcast, Cox, and Time Warner cable subscribers can add Verizon Wireless cell phone service to a double- or triple-play bundle. With a two-year contract, they'll receive a \$50 to \$400 prepaid Visa card. This isn't a one-bill deal, though; Verizon Wireless and the cable company send separate monthly



Most telecom bargainers got a price break or freebies.

bills for this type of hybrid package.

AT&T and Verizon subscribers reported worse problems with billing, such as errors, with quad-play packages than triple plays—and neither carrier handled triple-play bills very well.

Too few people bargain

The experiences of our survey respondents should empower you to bargain for lower rates. "If you're persistent enough, you can get just about anything," says Faye Burchard of Burke, Va., who subscribes to Cox. By quoting specific offers from competitors, she won savings of more than \$50 a month.

Only one in three survey respondents with a triple or quad play negotiated with their carrier, and many of them got a reduction in their monthly bill, fees waived, or an upgrade in service. About 44 percent of bargainers reported savings of up to \$50 a month, and 7 percent chopped more than \$50 off their monthly bill.

If you're lucky enough to have two competitors offering triple-play packages in your neighborhood, you can play them off against each other, as Burchard and other

survey respondents found. Among readers who had changed TV providers in the previous six months, 18 percent were offered new savings of \$20 or more a month by their old provider if they didn't switch to a new company or if they had switched but were open to coming back.

You might not even need to bargain to enjoy a price break when TV service from Verizon or AT&T is available. As Joey Schultz, AT&T's vice president of wire-line consumer marketing, observed, "When we come to town, the cable companies get more aggressive with pricing."

If you strike out on negotiations with the regular customer-service rep, ask for the customer-retention department. Its mandate to hang onto existing subscribers gives reps more latitude to negotiate. But be ready for the carrier to refuse to budge till the last possible moment. A survey respondent who was switching from cable to FiOS got a great offer the day he called to have his cable service turned off. "They reduced my monthly bill by \$45 and gave me three premium channels free for a year," says Brian Flaherty of Woodland Park, N.J., who canceled the Verizon installation he had scheduled for the next day and stayed with Optimum.

Breaks such as those are usually good for a limited time, but you can always ask for another deal. Carolyn Aloisi of North Springfield, Vt., did just that when her two-year triple-play contract with Comcast was up. "I told them I wanted the lowest special being offered to new customers and no contract," she says, "or I would go back to DirecTV, which I had before." Comcast agreed, keeping her as a customer.

Game on, and even non-fans pay the high cost

Don't watch sports much in your household? That's unfortunate, because sports channels such as ESPN are probably the priciest programming in your TV package, except for premium offerings, and there's often no palatable way to cut that cost.

Where most cable channels account for pennies per month of your programming bill, ESPN commands \$5 of the average expanded-basic monthly TV bill. Providers pay another \$2.50 or so a month for a regional sports network, according to SNL Kagan, a news and data service in Charlottesville, Va.

Because of the high cost of sports programming, some providers are adding sports-related surcharges. Cablevision, Verizon FiOS, and DirecTV are charging

subscribers between \$2 and \$3 a month for access to regional sports networks.

With sports resisters increasingly aware of just how much they are paying for channels they never watch, TV providers are offering new ways to reduce your bill. But they require trade-offs you might not be willing to make.

Some carriers now have programming tiers without ESPN and Fox Sports Net, but they lack other channels, too. Dish Network's \$20-a-month Smart Pack of 55 "family friendly" stations, for instance, doesn't include CNN, Disney, the History Channel, MSNBC, TNT, or USA, among other popular channels. Verizon FiOS' Select HD package of 140-plus channels, more than 30 of them in



EXPENSIVE ESPN The premier sports channel accounts for around \$5 of monthly cable bills.

HD, is missing Fox News, TNT, "and a few other notables," the company said on its website. Select HD costs \$50 a month. That's a great price, but some consumers might prefer to spend \$15 a month more for Prime HD, which has 210-plus channels, more than 55 of them in HD, including ESPN.

Other respondents had similar success. Among the 62 percent of customers whose initial promo period had expired, 40 percent said they were able to negotiate a new discounted rate. You can also ask for more channels: 33 percent of the negotiators got additional premium TV channels, and 10 percent got more regular channels.

Another possible cost cutter: See whether you can get a whole-home DVR instead of paying for multiple units. Philip Roberts of San Rafael, Calif., trimmed his bill substantially by switching to a Comcast AnyRoom networkable DVR, which lets him watch recordings on multiple TVs.

The nasty news in nickel-and-diming

When you're paying \$100 or more a month for your TV, phone, and Internet service, equipment-rental charges are irksome, to say the least. It's even more annoying when new charges start showing up on your bill, as they might this year.

Last fall, the Federal Communications Commission agreed to allow cable companies to encrypt, or scramble, even basic-tier digital cable service. That includes local broadcast stations as well as government and educational channels. (Cablevision and other carriers got that permission sooner.) So the TV in your bedroom that you once connected directly to a cable may now require a digital cable box to get any programming at all.

Cable companies must give customers advance notice and provide free converter boxes (or CableCards) for one or two years, depending on the service subscribers have. At the end of the free period, the cable company must notify the subscribers that they'll be charged for the equipment.

Most cable companies charge \$5 to \$10 a month for each box and remote. Comcast offers a simpler terminal for secondary sets that costs \$2 a month, but you get only the most basic channels and only in standard definition. (An HD terminal was in the works at press time.)

Broadband customers might also be billed for a modem. Time Warner Cable recently joined Bright House, Comcast, and Cox in charging a monthly fee—in Time Warner's case, \$4—for a modem that it used to provide at no charge. (Those other carriers charge \$3.50 to \$7 a month.) Time Warner subscribers have to pay the modem leasing fee for Internet access unless they buy their own modem (most sell for \$80 and up). There is no charge for the modem required for phone service.

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Ratings TV, phone, and Internet services

In order of reader score, within services.

Overview

The recommendations below focus on widely available providers that readers judged best for bundles of TV, phone, and Internet—and for two providers, those that add cell phone. Most readers who bundled would do so again.

BEST BUNDLING CHOICE FOR MOST

A1 WOW

A2, B1 Verizon FiOS

Superior scores make FiOS worth serious consideration for any and all services if the provider is available to you. (The same applies to high-ranked WOW cable service if you live in Detroit, Columbus, Ohio, or the handful of other Midwestern and Southeastern cities where it's available.) FiOS was rated higher than most major cable companies for TV picture, sound, channel selection, and reliability; it also received our highest mark for Internet speed. But Verizon users had more complaints than most about bills for triple play, and quad-play customers had even more gripes.

NEXT-BEST BUNDLING CHOICES

A5, B2 AT&T U-verse

Your cable company

If you can't get FiOS, you're probably best off bundling with AT&T U-verse or your local cable company (unless that provider is bottom-ranked Mediacom). Those choices are likely to be more satisfying for triple-play service than a hybrid bundle of satellite TV and landline phone and DSL Internet.

FOR TV SERVICE OUTSIDE A BUNDLE

3 DirecTV

Have a big TV, a big viewing appetite, and a discerning eye for picture quality? Hybrid bundles that combine satellite TV with landline phone and Internet from other providers were only middling, but DirecTV was a standout for TV service. It had the highest mark for channel selection of all providers and a picture rating that only Verizon FiOS could match.

FOR PHONE OUTSIDE A BUNDLE

1 Ooma

4 Vonage

These alternative VoIP services were among the most satisfying overall and among the better-rated for value. Though you have to buy equipment up front for both, monthly costs are very low. But keep in mind that buying Internet and TV service from another provider might cost almost as much as buying a triple-play bundle that includes phone service.



Telecom bundles

In order of reader score.

Order	Provider	Type	Reader score ^①	Survey results					
				Service satisfaction	Value	Billing	Support	Added fees	Price after promotion
A TRIPLE PLAY (INTERNET, TV, AND HOME PHONE SERVICES)									
1	WOW	cable	79	●	○	●	●	●	-
2	Verizon FiOS	fiber	75	●	○	●	○	○	○
3	Suddenlink	cable	73	○	○	●	●	○	-
4	Bright House Networks	cable	71	○	○	●	●	●	○
5	AT&T U-verse	②	66	○	●	○	○	○	●
6	Cox	cable	66	○	●	●	●	○	○
7	Cablevision/Optimum	cable	65	○	●	●	●	●	●
8	Comcast	cable	61	○	●	○	○	○	●
9	CenturyLink ③	hybrid	61	○	●	○	●	○	○
10	Time Warner	cable	61	○	●	●	○	○	●
11	Charter	cable	60	○	●	○	○	○	○
12	Frontier ③	hybrid	59	○	●	●	●	○	-
13	Windstream ③	hybrid	58	○	●	○	●	○	-
14	Verizon ③	hybrid	58	○	●	●	●	●	-
15	AT&T ③	hybrid	57	○	●	○	●	○	●
16	Mediacom	cable	52	●	●	○	○	●	-
B QUAD PLAY (ADDING CELL-PHONE SERVICE)									
1	Verizon FiOS	fiber	79	-	○	●	○	○	●
2	AT&T U-verse	②	68	-	●	●	●	○	-

① Differences in reader scores of fewer than 7 points are not meaningful. ② Phone-company service that combines fiber-optic and copper cabling. ③ Hybrid plan combining its own landline and DSL Internet service with satellite TV from a different provider.

Guide to the Ratings

Ratings are based on 62,711 responses from CONSUMER REPORTS subscribers with a broadband home Internet account, 67,042 with TV service, and 56,145 with phone service (which includes long-distance calling), all of whom completed the 2012 Annual Questionnaire online in spring 2012. Providers are those for which we had sufficient data to score the service. A “—” indicates insufficient data to yield a score. In phone Ratings, **type** labels independent Internet-based services as VoIP. Cable and fiber providers also use VoIP. For Internet, TV, and phone services, **reader score** reflects overall satisfaction and is not limited to the factors listed under survey results. A score of 80 would mean all respondents were very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly well satisfied; 40, somewhat dissatisfied. **Survey results** reflect average scores on a scale from “Very poor” to “Excellent” for **value** for money, service **reliability**, and the other attributes shown. **Bundled telecom services** Ratings are based on 20,843 respondents' experiences with triple-play or quad-play bundles. **Reader score** for bundled services reflects whether respondents would choose to bundle the services again with the same provider. A **reader score** of 0 would mean “definitely no”; of 100, “definitely yes.” **Service satisfaction** is based on the average of satisfaction scores for all services in the bundle (Internet, TV, and home phone); it's not available for quad-play bundles because this survey did not measure satisfaction with cell-phone service. **Value** ratings represent mean scores on a scale from “Very poor” to “Excellent.” The following ratings are relative, reflecting differences from the average of all brands. Respondents reported on any bundling problems with **billing**, bills that were hard to understand or had errors; **support**, the need to contact different help lines or getting inconsistent help for different bundled services; **added fees**, charges that raised bills unexpectedly. High scores for **price after promotion** indicates that rates did not increase much after promotion ended.

TV

Better ← → Worse


Order	Provider	Type	Reader score ¹	Survey results						
				Value	Reliability	Channel selection	Picture	Sound	Customer Support	
			0	100						
1	Verizon FiOS	fiber	74	●	●	●	●	●	○	○
2	WOW	cable	74	○	●	●	●	●	○	●
3	DirecTV	satellite	72	●	●	●	●	●	○	●
4	Bright House Networks	cable	70	●	○	●	●	●	○	●
5	Dish Network	satellite	70	●	○	●	●	●	○	●
6	Wave/Astound	cable	69	●	○	○	●	○	-	-
7	Cable One	cable	69	●	●	○	○	○	-	-
8	AT&T U-verse ²		68	●	○	●	●	●	○	○
9	Cox	cable	67	●	●	●	●	○	○	○
10	Suddenlink	cable	66	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
11	Cablevision/Optimum	cable	64	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
12	Insight ³	cable	64	●	○	○	○	○	○	-
13	RCN	cable	62	●	○	○	○	○	-	-
14	Comcast	cable	61	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
15	Time Warner	cable	60	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
16	Charter	cable	59	●	○	○	○	○	○	○
17	Mediacom	cable	54	●	○	○	○	○	○	○

¹ Differences in reader score of fewer than 5 points are not meaningful. ² Phone-company service that combines fiber-optic and copper cabling. ³ Purchased by Time Warner in 2012.

Phone

Order	Provider	Type	Reader score ¹	Survey results			
				Value	Reliability	Call quality	Support
			0	100			
1	Ooma	VoIP	85	●	●	●	○
2	WOW	cable	83	●	●	●	-
3	Suddenlink	cable	81	●	●	●	-
4	Vonage	VoIP	80	●	○	○	○
5	Verizon FiOS	fiber	78	○	●	●	○
6	Bright House Networks	cable	77	○	●	●	○
7	Frontier	fiber	75	○	●	○	-
8	Cablevision/Optimum	cable	75	○	●	○	○
9	Cincinnati Bell	land	75	○	○	○	-
10	Cox	cable	74	○	○	○	○
11	TDS	land	74	○	○	○	-
12	Insight ²	cable	73	○	○	○	-
13	MagicJack	VoIP	73	●	●	○	-
14	Windstream	land	72	○	○	○	○
15	AT&T U-verse ³		72	○	○	○	○
16	RCN	cable	71	○	○	○	-
17	Time Warner	cable	71	○	○	○	○
18	Charter	cable	71	○	○	○	○
19	Comcast	cable	70	○	○	○	○
20	CenturyLink	land	70	○	○	○	○
21	Verizon	land	70	○	○	○	○
22	Frontier	land	68	○	○	○	○
23	FairPoint	land	68	○	○	○	-
24	AT&T	land	67	○	○	○	○
25	Mediacom	cable	63	○	○	○	-

¹ Differences in reader score of fewer than 5 points are not meaningful. ² Purchased by Time Warner in 2012. ³ Phone-company service that combines fiber-optic and copper cabling.



Internet

Order	Provider	Type	Reader score ¹	Survey results			
				Value	Reliability	Speed	Customer Support
			0	100			
1	WOW	cable	78	○	○	○	○
2	Verizon FiOS	fiber	76	○	●	●	○
3	EarthLink ²	cable	75	○	○	○	-
4	Wave/Astound	cable	74	○	○	○	-
5	Frontier	fiber	73	○	○	○	-
6	Bright House ³	cable	72	○	○	○	○
7	EarthLink ⁴	cable	72	○	○	○	-
8	TDS	DSL	71	○	○	○	-
9	Cox	cable	70	○	○	○	○
10	EarthLink	DSL	69	○	○	○	-
11	CenturyLink		69	○	○	○	-
12	Cable One	cable	69	○	○	○	○
13	Suddenlink	cable	68	○	○	○	○
14	AT&T U-verse ⁵		68	○	○	○	○
15	Cablevision/Optimum	cable	67	○	○	○	○
16	Insight ⁶	cable	67	○	○	○	-
17	Knology ⁷	cable	67	○	○	○	-
18	Cincinnati Bell	DSL	66	○	○	○	-
19	RCN	cable	65	○	○	○	-
20	Time Warner	cable	65	○	○	○	○
21	CenturyLink	DSL	65	○	○	○	○
22	Windstream	DSL	64	○	○	○	-
23	Verizon	mobile	64	○	○	○	-
24	Verizon	DSL	64	○	○	○	○
25	Clear	mobile	64	○	○	○	-
26	Comcast	cable	64	○	○	○	○
27	Charter	cable	63	○	○	○	○
28	Frontier	DSL	63	○	○	○	○
29	AT&T	mobile	63	○	○	○	-
30	AT&T	DSL	62	○	○	○	○
31	FairPoint	DSL	61	○	○	○	-
32	ViaSat	satellite	57	○	○	○	-
33	Mediacom	cable	57	○	○	○	○
34	HughesNet	satellite	47	○	○	○	-

¹ Differences in reader score of fewer than 6 points are not meaningful. ² On the Comcast system. ³ Using RoadRunner service. ⁴ On the Time Warner system. ⁵ Phone-company service that combines fiber-optic and copper cabling. ⁶ Purchased by Time Warner in 2012. ⁷ Purchased by WOW in 2012.

Warranty protection

You have more rights than you might think

FOURTEEN MONTHS AFTER the manufacturer's warranty for Donald Curtis' \$1,500 plasma television expired, the TV started going haywire, he says. The controls would freeze, and the volume and channels would change by themselves. Curtis, who lives in Northborough, Mass., persuaded Samsung to replace the TV, but only after spending nine aggravating months and almost \$800 trying to repair it.

What Curtis didn't know is that he had additional warranty rights that might have helped him get satisfaction free. Here's what you need to know about warranties.

1 The written warranty isn't the whole story.

Your rights go beyond what you read in a warranty booklet (also called an "express warranty" or guarantee). Any written or spoken claim made by a manufacturer or retailer—in a print or TV ad, on a package, or anywhere else—may be considered an express warranty as well. For instance, TV and Web ads for a product called the Olde Brooklyn Lantern say that its LED bulb will last 100,000 hours. So even though OldeBrooklynLantern.com guarantees satisfaction for only 30 days, if those LEDs stop working before 100,000 hours (more than 4,100 days), you might have the right to a repair, replacement, or refund.

What you should do. Keep copies of all performance promises, no matter where you find them. Try to get spoken claims in writing. Send an e-mail confirming the promise and keep the response.

▶ DID YOU KNOW?

Warranties must be reasonable

A warranty that makes it impractical, if not impossible, to get satisfaction probably can't be enforced, says Amy Schmitz, a professor at the University of Colorado School of Law. For example, to obtain warranty service, a manufacturer can't make you pay shipping charges that exceed a product's cost, something Schmitz said a company tried to do with a defective blender she bought. She negotiated for a new blender by sending a photo of the broken one with the cord cut off to show that she wasn't trying to commit fraud.



2 You have a right to see the written warranty before you buy.

Under a federal rule, retailers must let you read any written warranty for products costing more than \$15. Based on what we've seen, some retailers or their sales staff either don't know the law or ignore it.

When Melodie Eisenberg of Decatur, Ga., went to Best Buy for a computer modem and asked to see the warranty, "the salesperson acted like I was some nut job asking for something weird" and refused to open the box, she recalls. Eisenberg says the salesperson had first tried to sell her a service contract, presumably to supplement the unknown benefits of the warranty. When she complained to Best Buy headquarters, she was told that the employee was not allowed to open the package.

Best Buy provided us with a copy of its operating procedures, which say that stores must provide warranty information for products priced higher than \$14.99. BestBuy.com provides an address and phone number that customers can use to obtain copies of manufacturer warranties. Amazon.com tells shoppers to contact the manufacturer for warranty information, although it might be available on some of its product pages.

What you should do. If a merchant won't show you the warranty even after you explain your rights, consider filing a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission (go to ftccomplaintassistant.gov).



3 Laws give you more rights.

Along with companies' express warranties, you also have "implied warranties" under state law. The Uniform Commercial Code, a set of laws adopted in much the same form by all states and the District of Columbia, provides an automatic "implied warranty of merchantability." That unwritten protection guarantees that consumer products are free of substantial defects and will function properly for a reasonable period of time. What's "reasonable" depends on the type of product and the amount you paid. States typically limit implied warranties to four years. They apply to products you buy from retailers that normally sell such items.

But here's where it gets complicated: Most states allow companies to negate, or "disclaim," the implied warranty by conspicuously disclosing that a product is being sold "as is" or "with all faults," or by simply stating there's no implied warranty. And manufacturer warranties typically do just that. "In my opinion, every warranty you see is taking away rights you would otherwise have," says Richard Alderman, director of the University of Houston's consumer law center.

Eleven states (Connecticut, Kansas, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Mississippi, New Hampshire, Vermont, Washington, and West Virginia) and the District of Columbia prohibit consumer products from being sold "as is." In some of those states, stores can still sell items without implied warranties if they follow strict requirements, such as telling the customer exactly what's wrong with the product or by selling the item as a factory second.

States take these laws seriously. Last year,

Maine reached a settlement with a new-car dealer that it accused of disclaiming implied warranties by telling consumers that only the manufacturer, not the dealership, was responsible for serious vehicle defects. The implied warranty also applies to most used goods sold by merchants, including used cars in some states.

And last, the federal Magnuson-Moss Warranty Act prohibits companies from disclaiming implied warranties during any period that its written warranty or any service contract is in effect.

What you should do. If you discover that something you bought is defective—even after the written warranty has expired—contact the retailer and manufacturer to ask for a repair, replacement, or refund. It doesn't matter what the retailer's return policy is or that the manufacturer put a notice on the box telling you not to return the item to the store.

Don't expect a salesperson or customer service representative to know about these extra rights. To get satisfaction, you might have to go up the corporate ladder or post your complaint online, say, on the company's Facebook page. If that fails, try complaining to the Better Business Bureau (bbb.org) and to your state attorney general or consumer protection office. Send a demand letter threatening to take the company to small-claims court. If it's an expensive product, contact a consumer attorney. (You can find one at naca.net.)

4 You have other protections, too.

You may be able to satisfy a product complaint through other channels, including:

Credit-card warranties. Many credit and some debit cards extend the manufacturer's written warranty, usually for up to one year, on most products you buy using the card. Check the documentation that came with your card or go to the issuer's website.

Credit-card chargebacks. If you have a problem with the quality of a product or service you paid for with your credit card, federal law gives you up to a year to seek a chargeback. The disputed amount must be more than \$50, the merchant must be in your home state or within 100 miles of your mailing address, and you must have first tried to resolve the problem with the merchant. And you can't claim more than the outstanding balance on your credit card, so you're out of luck if the problem crops up after you've paid your bill in full.

Goodwill programs. Companies sometimes quietly offer free or discounted out-of-warranty repairs or product replacement for customers who complain.

Lemon laws. Many states have lemon laws for new and used cars, pets, and, in New York, even wheelchairs. If a problem can't be fixed after a certain number of attempts or a given period, you're entitled to at least part of your

money back. Some lemon laws provide arbitration panels to hear complaints.

Recalls. If you suspect that a product is unsafe or if it is recalled, contact the manufacturer or retailer immediately. You can find news of recalls at saferproducts.gov.

5 You often have more rights in a walk-in store than on the Internet.

You'll find implied-warranty disclaimers on many retail websites, typically in the legalese on the terms-of-sale pages, though the law requires that disclaimers be prominently disclosed. The disclaimers mean that if you discover that a product is defective, the site simply might tell you to complain to the manufacturer or that you're out of luck.

The good news is that you'll rarely find merchandise being sold "as is" in walk-in stores, even at retailers such as Target and Walmart, whose websites disclaim implied warranties in the fine print.

What you should do. Buy from a walk-in store, and avoid products sold "as is" or with similar language. Buying in a state that prohibits warranty disclaimers means you're probably protected no matter how the item was sold. If you live in one of those states but buy from a website based in a less-consumer-friendly state, you're still probably protected, says Edgar Dworsky, a former Massachusetts assistant attorney general who runs ConsumerWorld.org, a resource guide.



6 You don't need the service contract.

Extended warranties or service contracts are a bad deal. Most products don't break during the time covered by them—typically years two and three of ownership. Moreover, the typical cost of repair is on average not much more than the cost of the contract. The consumer warranty protections described here make service contracts even less worthwhile.

What you should do. Self-insure by placing the money you would otherwise spend on service contracts into a savings account. Use that when you have to repair or replace a product at your own expense.

TALK THE TALK

How to sound like a lawyer

Or at least here's how to understand what the jargon used in warranties really means:

❑ **Express warranty** is a written or spoken promise from a manufacturer or retailer. Federal law requires that written warranties that come with products costing more than \$10 be labeled "full" or "limited." **Full warranties** are transferable, don't limit implied warranties or require the consumer to pay any fees to obtain service (such as shipping charges), and give customers the option of a replacement or full refund after a reasonable number of failed repair attempts. **Limited warranties** don't have to meet all those requirements.

❑ **Implied warranty** is an unwritten, automatic protection granted by state law.

❑ **Lifetime warranty** doesn't necessarily mean your lifetime, but can refer to how long a company carries a product or how long it's available from the manufacturer. Check the fine print and whether your state law defines lifetime warranty.

❑ **Consequential or incidental damages** are losses caused by a defective product. One example would be the cost of food that

was ruined because of a defective refrigerator. You might be able to claim these, especially in states with strong consumer protection laws.

❑ **Tie-in sales provisions** require customers to buy products or services from a particular company to maintain warranty coverage. They're generally prohibited.





THE WILD SIDE Replacing some of the lawn with a mixture of low-maintenance plantings transformed the look of this front yard.

Shifting landscapes

Five ways the American yard is changing shape

America's love for lawns is alive and well, but more of us are letting other features into the yard. In a nationally representative CONSUMER REPORTS survey, almost a third of homeowners who made changes to their lawn in the last year reduced its size in some way, for example, replacing grass with patio space, ground cover, flower beds, or even artificial turf. We spoke with lawn and garden pros from around the country, plus major retailers and manufacturers, to learn exactly how residential landscapes are being reimaged.

▣ Less lawn

Grass needs a lot of water and fertilizer to stay thick and verdant. Plus there's all that mowing. So reducing your lawn's size saves work, time, and money, especially with rising water costs and rebates that some municipalities offer homeowners who trade their lawns for a low-water alternative. In Glendale, Ariz., for example, residents can earn \$150 to \$750, depending on how much grass they remove.

Shrinking your lawn can also solve problems. To manage cut-through foot traffic on a corner lot in Springfield, Ill., and improve curb appeal, Adam Woodruff, a landscape designer, replaced part of a lawn with a border of low-maintenance perennials, shrubs, and ornamental grasses (shown above).

▣ Going native

Plants that are used to the local climate and soil conditions can survive without lots of water and fertilizer. "Nurseries are getting on board with this trend by making native species more readily available," says Lorayne Black, a landscape architect in Groton, Mass.

You can also contact your local cooperative extension service (www.csrees.usda.gov) to get ideas about climate-appropriate species. Or go to the Environmental Protection Agency's WaterSense website, at epa.gov/watersense, for a state-by-state plant selector. Those sources might lead you to hardy ornamental grasses that change with the season; shade-loving ground cover, such as hostas or autumn fern; or species that withstand foot traffic, such as ornamental thyme.

Saving water

Cut your water needs by 20 to 50 percent, depending on where you live, by switching from an all-lawn yard to one that's 40 percent lawn and 60 percent trees, shrubs, ground cover, and hardscape. In a typical yard, that leaves 2,500 square feet of lawn for kids to play.

Source: Environmental Protection Agency.

See more yard makeovers

Check out our iPad app for more before-and-after photos.

Garden coaches

Not willing to commit to a landscape architect or full-time gardener? For about \$150, garden coaches will come to your home and help you identify existing plants, recommend plants that should stay or go, suggest new ones, and answer any questions. Some coaches will also help with the plantings and maintenance for additional fees.

The website at gardencoachdirectory.wetpaint.com can direct you to coaches in your area. To get the best advice, make sure the coach is accredited by an industry group, such as the American Society of Landscape Architects or the Association of Professional Landscape Designers, or has training from a local botanic garden or cooperative extension service.

Edible gardens

Growing your own vegetables is cost-effective and easier than ever. Home centers now carry large assortments of packaged seeds and starter plants of herbs and vegetables. "Our customers see edible gardening as an enjoyable hobby," says Freddy Lange, Home Depot's lawn and garden merchant. "But it's also driven by the local-food movement and the desire to know where their food is coming from."

It's a good idea to have your soil tested before cultivating vegetables at home, especially if you live in an urban area where lead may be a concern. Container gardening, in pots or raised planters, allows you to control the soil if testing turns up a problem. Vertical gardening, wall-mounted planters in which you grow beans, strawberries, tomatoes, and more, is another option.



Outdoor rooms

Outdoor "rooms" are growing in popularity, with the lawn playing an integral role, according to Jule Eller, Lowe's director of trend strategy and communication. Consumers are looking beyond the usual folding chairs and grill, equipping their open-air gathering spaces with weather-resistant furnishings, fire pits, and even TVs and other media. Retailers are making such projects easier by selling modular kits for fire pits, benches, and more.

Backyard water elements—a simple fountain, for example, or a man-made brook or pond—are also hot. "In stressed-out economic times, it's relaxing to listen to the sound of water flowing while you're cooking on the grill," says Shayne Newman, an industry-certified landscape professional in New Milford, Conn. Locally sourced stone is popular for patios, and better-looking composites are coming on strong for decks.

Sustainable practices

About half of the homeowners in our survey mulched when mowing, depositing clippings on the lawn instead of bagging them. That deposits nutrients back into the soil, reducing fertilizing needs by as much as 30 percent. When buying fertilizer, almost 40 percent considered the environmental friendliness of the ingredients, though ease of application and price were more important to most.

When changing their lawn, our survey respondents favored seed over sod by more than 4 to 1. Seeding is cheaper, and it lets you tailor the mix to your yard conditions and choose from a wide variety of species, including less-thirsty ones, such as tall fescue.

Garden pros suggest more alternate practices. Jennifer Horn, a landscape architect and garden coach in Washington, D.C., persuades clients to fight lace bugs with horticultural oils rather than chemicals. And in Chicago, industry-certified landscaper Ed Furner releases lady beetles into aphid-plagued gardens.

Drip irrigation systems, which put water directly onto root systems, are also catching on. So are weather-based sprinkler controls, which use climate sensors, Wi-Fi communication, and other technologies to monitor local conditions and irrigate more efficiently by, for example, turning off when rain is due. "Items that used to be special-order have gone mainstream," says Lang at Home Depot. That includes rain barrels and compost bins.

BY THE NUMBERS

7 billion

That's how many gallons of water are used every day in the U.S. to irrigate lawns and outdoor plants.

Source: Environmental Protection Agency.

Essential tools every shed should contain



Gloves

LOOK FOR durable yet pliable materials, like nylon or leather, that protect hands while still letting you maneuver. Silicon dots or fingertips enhance grip. Water-resistance is a plus.



Trowel

LOOK FOR a sharp blade for digging, weeding, and dividing plants, and a fully welded, not spot-welded, joint between the handle and blade. Stainless steel resists rust.



Pruner

LOOK FOR sharp bypass blades with a scissorlike action for clean cuts when removing small or thin branches from shrubs and trees.



Shovel

LOOK FOR a round head with a pointed tip, which is good for scooping earth and cutting through thick roots.



Loppers

LOOK FOR sharp blades and longer handles, which provide more leverage when cutting branches that are too thick for a pruner.



CLOSELY CROPPED Tester Peter Sawchuk puts one of two top-scoring Troy-Bilt zero-turn-radius mowers through its paces at our Florida test site.

Mowers & tractors

40 recommendations include 18 CR Best Buys

OUR LATEST MOWER tests show that Honda is on a roll for performance and value. We also found 10 bargain-priced riders, including two new models from Troy-Bilt that turn on a dime and are as close as your nearest Lowe's.

Honda took four of the five top spots among the multi-speed, self-propelled mowers most people buy. But you don't have to buy the \$600 HRX217VKA to get a stellar machine; the brand's new HRR2169VKA costs \$200 less and scored just 2 points lower overall. A well-placed bump beneath the deck helped it ace our mulching tests by sending clippings back into the blade. And like the other new Hondas, it toggles between mulching and bagging with a flip of a lever.

Two new CR Best Buy mowers from Troy-Bilt did almost as well for even less. The TB-280ES 12AGA26G has electric starting for just \$340. And Ariens' new Razor 911179, \$400, held the most clippings of any walk-behind mower we tested, thanks in part to an extra-deep deck that helped it suck up and route clippings.

Got a half-acre or more to mow? Zero-

turn-radius riders combine the wide-cutting decks of a lawn tractor with rear-steering wheels that let them trim tightly around trees and posts. But be-

cause most we've tested offer less control than tractors on hills, we recommend them only for relatively flat properties with slopes less than 10 degrees.

■ DID YOU KNOW?

Engines and ethanol: A dubious mix

The Environmental Protection Agency bans gasoline with 15 percent ethanol from mowers and other power equipment. A Department of Energy study found that E15 caused hotter operating temperatures and engine-part failure. But even gas with the usual 10 percent ethanol could help destroy small engines.

"Ethanol has inherent properties that can cause corrosion of metal parts, including carburetors, degradation of plastic and rubber components, harder starting, and reduced engine life," says Marv Klowak, global vice president of research and development for Briggs & Stratton, the largest manufacturer of small engines. "The higher the ethanol content, the more acute the effects." Servicing dealers are reporting similar problems, even with E10, according to the Outdoor Power Equipment Institute, the industry's trade group.

Fuel additives such as Sta-Bil are now claimed to protect engines from ethanol by

preventing it from settling out of the gasoline, attracting moisture, and concentrating its corrosive effects; we have not yet tested those products. Here are other ways to protect your equipment:

- For smaller trimmer and blower engines, consider using ethanol-free fuel. Sears, home centers, marinas, and some equipment dealers sell it for about \$5 to \$8 a quart—cheaper than a new carburetor or engine.
- Use mowers and riders often during the mowing season to help burn the fuel before the ethanol can attract water and draw it into the fuel system. Also be sure to treat fuel with a stabilizer and run mowers and other larger equipment dry before winter storage.



This year's tests include a pricey cordless-electric mower from Stihl, the chain-saw brand, and a \$3,000 hybrid gas/electric tractor that speeds back to the shed in record time and doubles as a generator. (See "Raven Hybrid Tractor Has Launch Problems," on page 34.) But during weeks we spent mowing, bagging, and dodging fire ants at our Florida test site, we found that you can also get clipped by some lower-priced mowers and get surprisingly little mowing from some cordless models. Here are the details:

High tech that works. Gas mowers with electric-starting systems usually need a periodic recharge for the battery that provides the power. Honda's HRR216K9VLA, \$500, charges itself as you mow. And though most lawn tractors make you lean over the side and peer into a narrow cutout to check the fuel level, the 46-inch Snapper NXT2346, a CR Best Buy at \$2,800, includes a digital gas gauge that's clearly visible right on the dash.

When features outshine performance. Husqvarna's \$500 HU800AWD is the first walk-behind mower with all-wheel drive for better traction uphill. But it left clumps when mulching and side-discharging. Choose Stihl's \$690 RMA 370 cordless mower, and you get a battery and charger that can also run a blower, hedge trimmer, and chain saw. But mowing was only middling and run time was just 17 minutes, even with the larger battery. The smaller battery will save you \$70—and slice run time to 10 minutes.

When it pays to pay more. Among single-speed gas mowers, the Craftsman 37440, Murray 12A-A04Z, and Yard Machines 12A-A13K delivered impressive mulching and side-discharging for just \$250 each. But paying \$30 more for the Toro 20370 buys you better mulching and bagging and a more capable engine. And though Ariens' new 960460053 tractor may seem like a bargain at \$950, it's just 30 inches wide, handles clumsily, and doesn't mulch or bag. A better bet: Craftsman's 28885, which boasts a 46-inch swath and strong mowing in all three modes for an additional \$350.

How to choose

You'll probably want a self-propelled gas mower for most lawns or a tractor or riding mower if you have a half-acre or more. Powered push mowers are fine if you have a flatter lawn that's less than a quarter acre and you like more exercise. Here's what else to think about before you buy:

Consider your mowing. Many mowers and riders handle some mowing modes better than others. For example, Honda's new self-propelled mowers were superb at mulching and bagging but dropped clippings directly behind them when discharging. With tractors and riders, mulching and bagging kits can cost \$500 or more and take an hour to install, which might explain why most people simply send clippings out the side and onto the lawn.

Look for a reliable brand. Snapper was among our top performers for self-propelled mowers. But like Cub Cadet, Husqvarna, and John Deere, the brand has been repair-prone in our reliability surveys. As of 2013, Snapper mowers are

built in the same place and are similar to the ones made for the more-reliable Troy-Bilt and Craftsman brands. Time will tell whether reliability for Snapper self-propelled mowers improves.

Consider weights for two Deeres. Even without the bag attachment, the John Deere Z235, \$2,500, and Z255, \$3,000, zero-turn-radius riders tended to tip up if you take off abruptly. Whether or not you expect to bag, consider spending \$60 each for the 42-pound weights Deere sells with the bag kit to get rid of the lift.

Don't buy just by the numbers. Mower brands often tout larger or higher-torque gas engines. But as with horsepower for riders, neither ensures better mowing.

Features that count: Gas and electric mowers

Easy starting. Most gas mowers need no priming or choking. Exceptions: Bolens (C13), Craftsman (B5), Husqvarna (A24, A26), Murray (B6, C6, C14), Toro (B2), Troy-Bilt (C9), Yard Machines (B7, C12), and Yard-Man (B4).

Blade-brake clutch. Stops only the blade when you release the handle so that you don't need to restart the engine when clearing debris. On Craftsman (A22), Honda (A4), Husqvarna (A20), and Toro (A6).

Premium engine. These have overhead valves for added efficiency. On all self-propelled gas models except Craftsman (A19, A23, B8, B12), Murray (B6), Snapper (A11, B3), Toro (A6, A8), Troy-Bilt (A7, A10, A25, B11), and Lawn-Boy (B9). On all push models except Bolens (C13), Craftsman (C8), Murray (C11, C14), and Yard Machines (C3, C12).

One-lever height adjustment. Raises and lowers all four wheels at once. On the gas Ariens (A12, C4), Craftsman (A13, A22, A23), Husqvarna (A20, A21), Snapper (A9), Troy-Bilt (A10), and Yard-Man (B4), and on all electric models except Toro (D4) and Worx (D12).

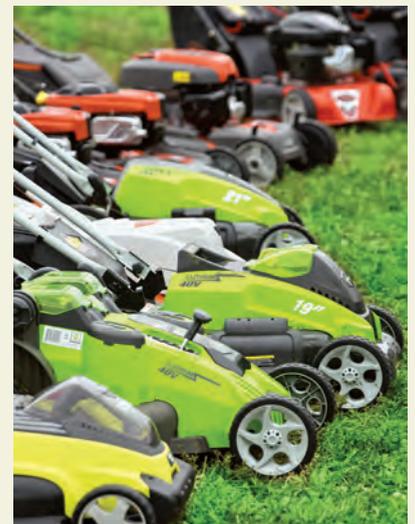
Rear-wheel drive. Adds traction over front-drive uphill and when bagging. On all self-propelled mowers except Craftsman (A19, B5, B8), Husqvarna (A24), Murray (B6), Snapper (A11, B3), Toro (B1, B2), Troy-Bilt (A7, A25, B11), and Yard Machines (B7).

Electric starting. A battery eliminates pull-starting gas engines. On the Ariens

(A12), Craftsman (A19), Honda (A2), Lawn-Boy (B9), Troy-Bilt (A7), and Yard-Man (B4).

Same-sized wheels. Models so equipped are easier to tip back than those with high rear wheels, which are found on Craftsman (A19, A22, A23, B8, C2, C7, C8), Cub Cadet (A15), GreenWorks (D5, D6, E4), Homelite (D14), Husqvarna (A20, A21, A24), Lawn-Boy (C10), Murray (C11, C14), Snapper (A11), Toro (B2), Troy-Bilt (A25, C9), and Yard Machines (C3).

Washout port. Accepts a hose atop the deck for cleaning built-up clippings beneath. On all self-propelled models except Ariens (A12), Craftsman (B5), Honda (A1, A2, A4, A5), Lawn-Boy (B9, B10), Murray (B6), Yard Machines (B7), and Yard-Man (B4). Among push models, only on Craftsman (C2, C8) and Cub Cadet (C1). No electric models have it.





Features that count: Tractors and riders

High-back seat.

Adds back support. On all tested lawn tractors except Ariens (A21), Bolens (A22), Cub Cadet (A8), John Deere (A5, A17, A20), and Troy-Bilt (A18), and on all zero-turn-radius riders except Husqvarna (C9). Of the rear-engine riders, only Troy-Bilt (D1) has it.

Infinite drive speeds.

Let you vary speed smoothly without the shifting needed for gear-drive systems. On all tractors and riders except Ariens (A21), Bolens (A22), John Deere (A20), Murray (D2), and Troy-Bilt (D1).

Electric power takeoff.

Engages the blades with a switch instead of a lever. On all tractors and riding machines except Ariens (A15, A21), Bolens (A22), Craftsman (A10, A11, A14), Cub Cadet (A6, A8), Husqvarna (A7), John Deere (A5, A17, A20), Murray (D2), and Troy-Bilt (A18, A19, D1).

Easy mode changes.

Most models require a blade change to mulch, and some to bag. John Deere (A3, A17, A20, C5, C11), Snapper (A2), and Troy-Bilt (C2, D1) do not. The Toro (C7) mulches without the need to change blades, but adding the mulch plate is a hassle.

Visible fuel gauge.

Lets you check fuel levels without the need to leave your seat. On Ariens (C14), Craftsman (A10, B3, B4, C6), Cub Cadet (A6, A8, B1, C4), Husqvarna (B5, C9), John Deere (A5, A17, A20, B2), Snapper (A2, A12, A13), Toro (C7, C10), and Troy-Bilt (C1, C2, D1).

Washout port.

Accepts a hose atop the deck for cleaning built-up clippings beneath. On all tractors and riders except Bolens (A22), Craftsman (A10), Husqvarna (B5), John Deere (A4, A9), Murray (D2), Snapper (A12), and Troy-Bilt (A18, D1).

▣ CLOSE-UP

Raven hybrid tractor has launch problems

The Raven MPV-710, \$3,000, made by Denver Global Products, is the first lawn tractor that blends a gas engine with a battery pack. A Lowe's exclusive, it can reach a blistering 17 mph when you're not mowing and includes a generator that claims more than 7,000 watts. We found it stable to drive. But this high-flying rider was only mediocre at the mowing that counts. The switch that shuts off the ignition when you leave the seat appeared to cause surging over bumps with this model. A potential safety concern had also halted sales as this issue went to press.

Blades that spin when they shouldn't.

Conventional tractors are powered solely by a gas engine. Though you'll need to turn the Raven's engine when mowing, you can whiz back to the shed using the battery alone. Electric motors turn the blades to mow, but they should do so only when you engage the power-takeoff switch. According to the manufacturer, a faulty connection on one of its samples allowed a blade to spin as soon as the



mower was started. Denver Global Products told us it's checking all unsold Ravens at Lowe's stores nationwide. The company also said it has notified the Consumer Product Safety Commission but is confident none of the roughly 450 machines sold since February is affected. (Each model, by protocol, is briefly test-driven before it's shipped to a store, so a problem should show up as soon as the machine is started, the manufacturer says.)

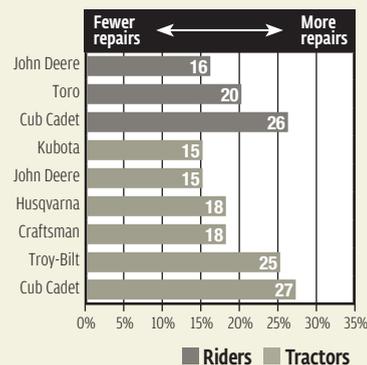
Our advice. If you own this mower, contact Lowe's (800-445-6937) and insist on the same safety check to be sure yours is safe. Meanwhile, if either blade spins when it isn't engaged, you know you have a problem.

Most and least reliable

21,000 readers sound off

Choosing a brand of lawn tractor or zero-turn-radius riding mower with a good repair history can improve your odds of getting a reliable model. So each year we survey thousands of our readers about their experiences. Cub Cadet and Troy-Bilt were the most repair-prone brands for tractors; Cub Cadet was also the most repair-prone for zero-turn-radius mowers.

TRACTORS



Source: Consumer Reports Annual Reliability Survey. Our findings are based on 18,697 lawn tractors and 2,397 zero-turn-radius mowers readers bought new from 2008 through the first half of 2012. Differences of fewer than 6 points aren't meaningful, and data are adjusted to eliminate differences linked solely to the age and use of the mower. Also note that models within a brand may vary, and changes in design or manufacture may affect future reliability.

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score for mowers, tractors, and riders is mostly mulching, bagging, side-discharging (includes evenness), handling, and ease of use. Scores for previously tested models may have changed. Display scores are rounded; models are listed by precise overall score. **Mulching** is how evenly clippings were cut and distributed. **Bagging** is filling evenness and capacity with full bag(s), including clogged chutes. **Side-discharge** is how evenly clippings were dispersed. **Handling** for self-propelled and push mowers is ease of using drive controls, pushing, pulling, U-turns, and other maneuvers; for tractors and riders, ease of drive engagement, braking, steering, turn radius, and resistance to front-wheel lift. **Ease of use** for mowers is ease of starting, using blade-stopping controls, changing speeds, and adjusting cut height; for tractors and riders, leg room, seat and steering-wheel and lever comfort, ease of blade and brake engagement, bag removal, and cut-height and mode changes. **Price** is approximate retail for mowers and attachments; attachment prices for mowers and riders are from manufacturers.



B2 John Deere

Overview

Our top picks come from reliable brands (where data are available), which is why high-scoring Cub Cadet tractors and zero-turn-radius mowers didn't make our list. We focus below on recommended models with special strengths, value, or both.

CR Best Buy These blend value and performance, and are recommended.

Recommended These offer top performance and often specific strengths.

TOP-VALUE TRACTORS

A2 Snapper \$2,800 **CR Best Buy**

A7 Husqvarna \$1,600 **CR Best Buy**

A10 Craftsman \$1,600 **CR Best Buy**

A11 Craftsman \$1,300 **CR Best Buy**

Three of these cut a wider, 46-inch swath without sacrificing performance. **A2** offers the most convenience, with push-button blade activation and an accurate electronic height adjuster and fuel gauge. **A7** has a smooth hydrostatic drive, like most; **A11** costs the least but requires shifting. Choose the 42-inch **A10** if you mostly bag clippings.

FOR EVEN WIDER MOWING

B2 John Deere \$2,000 **CR Best Buy**

B3 Craftsman \$2,800

B4 Craftsman \$2,000 **CR Best Buy**

All have wider, three-blade decks that trade some cut quality for time savings. **B2** has the smoothest mulching; the others offer better bagging, tighter turns, and wider decks. **B3** offers faster ground speed that can get you back to the garage or shed more quickly.

FOR TIGHT TURNS OR SMALLER STORAGE

C1 Troy-Bilt \$2,300 **CR Best Buy**

C2 Troy-Bilt 2,800 **CR Best Buy**

D1 Troy-Bilt \$1,000

Zero-turn-radius mowers have front casters that swivel freely and offer less control than tractors on slopes of 10 to 15 degrees. Pick **C1** if you want all three mowing modes, **C2** for its 50-inch cut. The top Cub Cadets have steerable front wheels for better control on hills, but the brand has been repair-prone in our surveys. Consider **D1** if you want a smaller riding mower that takes up less space.

HOW TO BUY A LAWN TRACTOR

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



Ratings Tractors & riders

All tested models In performance order, within types.

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

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model.	Price		Specs		Overall score	Test results						
			Machine	Bag/mulch kit	Deck size (in.)	Engine power (hp)		Side-discharge	Mulching	Bagging	Handling	Ease of use		
							0	P	F	G	V	G	E	
A LAWN TRACTORS Best for most large lawns; models with tight turning are footnoted.														
	1	Cub Cadet GT 2042	\$3,600	\$570/\$75	42	20	77	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✔	2	Snapper NXT2346	2,800	430/80	46	23	76	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✔	3	John Deere X310	4,000	520/90	42	19	75	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✔	4	John Deere X304 [†]	3,600	520/90	42	17	75	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✔	5	John Deere D110 D120, D130	1,700	340/30	42	20	74	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	6	Cub Cadet LTX1045 13RX91AT	1,700	380/50	46	20	74	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
✔	7	Husqvarna YTH21K46	1,600	370/50	46	21	73	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	8	Cub Cadet LTX1040 13RX90AR LTX1040 13WX90AS	1,500	550/50	42	19	73	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✔	9	John Deere X300	3,000	520/90	42	17	73	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✔	10	Craftsman 28856 [†]	1,600	310/53	42	24	72	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✔	11	Craftsman 28885	1,300	410/53	46	21	70	●	●	●	●	●	●	○
	12	Snapper SPX 2042	1,800	400/80	42	20	68	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	13	Snapper SPX 2246	2,000	430/80	46	22	68	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	14	Craftsman 28852 [†]	1,500	350/53	46	21	66	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	15	Ariens A20H46 960460056	1,300	310/50	46	20	65	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	16	Craftsman 25005	4,000	500/80	46	22	65	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	17	John Deere D105	1,500	350/100	42	18	65	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
	18	Troy-Bilt Bronco 13WX78KS	1,200	300/50	42	20	64	●	●	●	●	●	●	○
	19	Troy-Bilt Horse 13AX79KT	1,400	400/50	46	22	62	●	●	●	●	●	●	○
	20	John Deere D100	1,500	420/90	42	17.5	62	●	●	○	●	●	●	○
	21	Ariens 960460053	950	NA/NA	30	12.5	52	●	●	○	○	○	○	○
	22	Bolens 13W1762F ^{3†}	900	270/35	38	13.5	46	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

B LAWN TRACTORS (WIDE DECK) These offer wider cuts; models with tight turning are footnoted.

✔	1	Cub Cadet LGTX1050 13WS92AP [†]	2,700	550/50	50	25	73	○	●	●	●	●	●	●
✔	2	John Deere D140 D150, D160	2,000	350/35	48	22	69	○	●	●	●	●	●	●
✔	3	Craftsman 28861 [†]	2,800	410/53	54	26	68	○	○	●	●	●	●	●
✔	4	Craftsman 28858 [†]	2,000	410/53	54	26	68	○	○	●	●	●	●	●
	5	Husqvarna YTH2348 YTH23V48	1,800	370/50	48	23	64	○	○	●	●	●	●	●
	6	Cub Cadet LT1050 13RQ11CP LTX1050 13WQ91AP, LTX1050 13W191AP	2,000	400/75	50	25	64	○	○	●	●	●	●	●

C ZERO-TURN-RADIUS RIDERS All turn tightly, but most can be hard to control on hills.

✔	1	Troy-Bilt Mustang 42" 17WFCACS	2,300	500/50	42	22	82	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
✔	2	Troy-Bilt Mustang 50" 17WFCACP	2,800	NA/50	50	25	79	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
	3	Cub Cadet Z Force 546 17AF5BHH	3,600	400/50	46	20	76	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
	4	Cub Cadet RZT-S 46 17WF2BDT	3,000	400/50	42	22	75	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
✔	5	John Deere Z235	2,500	400/100	42	20	73	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
✔	6	Craftsman 25001	2,300	200/40	42	24	72	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
✔	7	Toro TimeCutter SS4235 74627 SS4235 74624	2,600	500/140	42	20	71	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
	8	Cub Cadet RZT42 17WF2ACS	2,500	400/75	42	22	71	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
✔	9	Husqvarna RZ4623	2,600	430/50	46	23	70	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
	10	Toro TimeCutter SS5000	3,300	500/140	50	23	68	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
	11	John Deere Z255	3,000	400/100	48	22	68	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
	12	Cub Cadet Z Force 548 17AF5BHB	4,000	350/200	48	22	64	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
	13	Cub Cadet RZT50 17A12ACP	3,000	500/50	50	22	63	○	●	○	●	●	●	●
	14	Ariens Zoom 42 915159	2,500	400/50	42	20	63	○	●	○	●	●	●	●
	15	Snapper 200Z 22/46	3,000	400/80	46	22	57	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

D REAR-ENGINE RIDERS These are compact alternatives to tractors but give up some performance.

✔	1	Troy-Bilt TB30R 13BC26JD	1,000	200/30	30	11.5	58	○	○	○	○	○	○	○
	2	Murray 13A326J	800	NA/NA	24	190 ⁴	46	○	○	○	○	○	○	○

[†] Tighter turning than most tractors. ² Side-discharging only. ³ Side-discharging and mulching only. ⁴ Cubic centimeters.

The Hot List

A monthly guide to the top products our testers recommend

These pages feature the top recommended models in many categories, updated every month. (We'll typically feature 10 products per category, not as many if fewer models are recommended.) So no matter when you're buying appliances or electronics, you'll find good choices in every issue.

Your cheat sheet to the best models



Panasonic Viera TC-P65VT50

Big TVs

MODEL	SCORE
60-INCH AND LARGER PLASMA	
Panasonic Viera TC-P65VT50, \$3,300	81
Samsung PN60E8000, \$2,200	79
Samsung PN60E550, \$1,300	78
Panasonic Viera TC-P60GT50, \$2,200	77
Panasonic Viera TC-P60ST50, \$1,700	77
Samsung PN64E550, \$2,000	71
LG 60PM6700, \$1,100	70
LG 60PM9700, \$1,600	69
LG 60-PA6500, \$1,000	67
60-INCH AND LARGER LCD	
Sharp Aquos LC-60LE745U, \$1,500	66
Samsung UN60ES6100, \$1,500	65



Friedrich CP06F10

Air conditioners

MODEL	SCORE
SMALL	
Friedrich CP06F10, \$250	80
Kenmore 70051, \$150	78
Frigidaire LRA074AT7, \$165	78
Friedrich Chill CP05G10, \$250	77
MIDSIZED	
Friedrich Kuhl SS08M10, \$800	82
Friedrich Chill CP08G10, \$400	78
Sharp AF-S85RX (Costco), \$180 (and similar AF-S80RX)	76

Large laptops

MODEL	SCORE
14-INCH	
HP Envy 14-3010NR Spectre Ultrabook, \$850	70
Toshiba Satellite U845W-S400 Ultrabook, \$550	69
Lenovo ThinkPad X1 Carbon Touch Ultrabook, \$1,500	69
Lenovo ThinkPad X1 Carbon Ultrabook, \$1,250	68
15- TO 16-INCH	
Apple MacBook Pro with Retina display MC975LL/A, \$2,200	76
Samsung NP900X4C-A01US Ultrabook, \$1,200	76
Acer M5-581T-6807 Ultrabook, \$600	68
Vizio CN15-A5, \$1,000	67
Apple MacBook Pro 15-inch MD103LL/A, \$1,800	66
17- TO 18-INCH	
Samsung NP700G7C-S02US, \$1,600	65



Apple MacBook Pro with Retina display MC975LL/A



Samsung NP700G7C-S02US

Washers & dryers

MODEL SCORE

FRONT-LOADING WASHERS

Samsung WF457ARGS[GR], \$1,550 (and similar WF455ARGSWR, \$1,400) **89**

LG WM8000H[V]A, \$1,350 **89**

LG WM3470H[W]A, \$1,100 **88**

Whirlpool Duet WFW96HEA[W], \$1,300 **87**

Samsung WF435ATGJ[WR], \$1,300 (and similar WF433BTGJ, \$1,000) **87**

Whirlpool Duet WFW94HEX[W], \$1,100 (and similar WFW95HEX, \$1,200, and WFW97HEX, \$1,500) **87**

Kenmore Elite 4147[2], \$1,100 **87**

ELECTRIC DRYERS

LG DLEX3470[W], \$1,000 **79**

Samsung DV456EWH[WR], \$900 **78**

Samsung DV5451AE[W], \$900 **78**

Whirlpool Duet WED96HEAW, \$1,300 **78**

Kenmore Elite 6152[2], \$1,000 **78**



Samsung WF457ARGS



LG WM8000H



LG DLEX3470

Smart phones

MODEL SCORE

AT&T

LG Optimus G (Android, 32GB), \$100 **79**

Samsung Galaxy S III (Android, 16GB), \$200 **78**

Apple iPhone 5 (16GB), \$200 (and similar 32GB, \$300 and 64GB, \$400) **77**

SPRINT

LG Optimus G (Android, 32GB), \$200 **77**

Samsung Galaxy S III (Android, 16GB), \$200 (and similar 32GB, \$250) **76**

Apple iPhone 5 (16GB), \$200 (and similar 32GB, \$300, and 64GB, \$400) **75**

T-MOBILE

Samsung Galaxy S III (Android, 16GB), \$230 (and similar 32GB, \$280) **78**

HTC One S (Android, 16GB), \$150 **77**

Samsung Galaxy Note II (Android, 16GB), \$370 **76**

VERIZON

Motorola Droid Razr Maxx HD (Android, 32GB), \$250 **79**

Motorola Droid Razr HD (Android, 16GB), \$150 **77**

Samsung Galaxy S III (Android, 32GB), \$250 (and similar 16GB, \$200) **76**



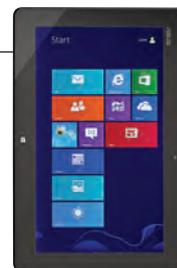
Motorola Droid Razr Maxx HD



Google Nexus 10



Apple iPad



Asus VivoTab RT TF600T

Tablets

MODEL SCORE

9- TO 10-INCH, WI-FI ONLY

Google Nexus 10 (16GB), \$400 (and similar 32GB, \$500) **84**

Apple iPad (16GB, 4th gen.), \$500 (and similar 32GB, \$600, and 64GB, \$700) **83**

Asus VivoTab RT TF600T (32GB), \$550 (and similar 64GB, \$600) **83**

Samsung Galaxy Note 10.1 (16GB), \$550 (and similar 32GB, \$600) **81**

Microsoft Surface with Windows RT (32GB), \$500 (and similar 64GB, \$600) **81**

Samsung Galaxy Tab 2 10.1 (16GB), \$400 **81**

Asus EeePad Transformer Prime TF201 (32GB), \$500 (and similar 64GB, \$600) **80**

Sony Xperia Tablet S (16GB), \$400 (and similar 32GB, \$500) **79**

Asus Transformer Pad Infinity TF700T (64GB), \$600 **79**

Apple iPad 2 (16GB), \$400 **77**

Acer Iconia Tab A700 (32GB), \$450 **77**

Asus Transformer Pad TF 300T (16GB), \$350 (and similar 32GB, \$400) **77**

Lenovo IdeaTab S2109 (16GB), \$250 **77**

Toshiba Excite 10 (16GB), \$400 (and similar 32GB, \$530, and 64GB, \$650) **77**

Toshiba Excite 10LE (16GB), \$530 (and similar 32GB, \$600) **77**



LG Kompressor LcV900B



Kenmore Intuition 28014

Vacuums

MODEL SCORE

BAGGED CANISTER

Kenmore Intuition 28014, \$500 **72**

Kenmore Progressive 21714, \$400 **72**

Miele S 5281 Callisto, \$990 **71**

Kenmore Progressive 21614, \$300 **70**

Kenmore Progressive 21514, \$250 **68**

Panasonic MC-CG902, \$250 **65**

BAGLESS CANISTER

LG Kompressor LcV900B, \$400 **69**

Reports

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Lab tests

New pizzazz from an icon

▶ BlackBerry Z10 smart phone (\$200, AT&T, T-Mobile, Verizon)

BlackBerry's latest entry is sleek and brims with intriguing features, including what may be the smartest phone keyboard ever.

An early press sample of the Z10 (for which we are writing a check) displayed promise as an appealing alternative to Android, Apple, and Windows phones. We will have full test results in a future issue.

The Z10 has a 4.2-inch high-definition display, support for 4G data networks, an 8-megapixel camera, and 16GB of storage. But in an effort to create a more virtual BlackBerry experience, the company may have gone too far in eliminating even a home button on the phone.

Z10 deftly employs such tools as gestures and swipes to enhance e-mail and messaging, the key functions for many

BlackBerry fans. It has only two physical controls: a power button at the center top of the phone and a volume/pause rocker switch on the phone's upper-right side.

The other controls found on past BlackBerrys—a physical keyboard, a dedicated trackball/pad, and menu, back, home, and phone buttons—are all gone. (A physical keyboard will be on the BlackBerry Q10, available later in the year.)

Go with the flow. The phone employs a control system called BlackBerry Flow that relies entirely on finger sweeps and other gestures on the touch screen. For example, sliding your thumb up from the bottom of the screen and then pulling to the right will always take you to the BlackBerry Hub, a list of calls, messages, and calendar notifications received by the Z10. But getting to the desktop's main app screen often requires two swipes: one up and another to the left. And that's not as easy or intuitive as pressing a dedicated "home" key, as you can on Android and iPhone models.

The keyboard's Flick feature is an advanced predictive-text function, suggesting words it thinks will be next, based on what's already in the sentence. The keyboard also handled more traditional predictive-text tasks easily.

Voice control and dictation. The Voice Control app is BlackBerry's Siri-like voice-



BlackBerry Z10

activated assistant. Voice Control executed fairly complex phone-related commands, such as sending messages, posting updates on social networks, creating appointments, and performing searches.

Bottom line. The Z10's advanced multimedia features, smart keyboard, and intuitive design attuned to messaging offer hope to BlackBerry fans who want to stay with the brand. But we miss the "home" button.

▶ DID YOU KNOW?

If you use your personal phone for business, too, an IT department could access its personal contents, such as music and photos. But BlackBerry's OS lets it be separated into two "worlds."

Mixed signals for a Wi-Fi phone

How about a phone that doesn't rely on cell-phone service? That's the premise of Republic Wireless, a no-contract cell service that offers unlimited calls, texts, and data for only \$19 a month. But you have to be willing to put up with limitations for the low price.

Republic Wireless service is inexpensive because whenever possible it uses Wi-Fi. When there's no accessible Wi-Fi network, Republic uses the Sprint phone network.

We tried out the service around the New York City area using the only device that works with the service: the decent but basic **Motorola Defy XT** smart phone (\$249) that uses slower 3G connections. The service and phone functioned acceptably on smaller, less-crowded Wi-Fi networks but were less reliable in larger, more-congested Wi-Fi networks.

Hand-off hassles. If you initiate a call on a

Wi-Fi network and then move out of that network's range, the phone handles the transition by automatically placing a second call over Sprint's cellular network. But the person at the other end of the call must hit the flash button to maintain the conversation. You can avoid that problem altogether by beginning your call on the Sprint network and staying there by turning off the phone's Wi-Fi connection. But the service tracks your cellular and Wi-Fi usage and reserves the right to cut you off if you spend too much time on the Sprint network. It's not clear what the limit is, but the company said it has never "fired" a customer.

Bottom line. For many smart-phone users, Republic's low pricing may not offset its 3G connection and phone limitations. But it might be an acceptable budget option for people with good access to Wi-Fi reception.



Motorola Defy XT

High chair poses a hazard

CONSUMER REPORTS has designated the Babyhome Eat high chair as Don't Buy: Safety Risk because it lacks a key safety feature designed to prevent an unharnessed child from sliding out of the seat or possibly being caught and strangled during a fall. We know of no deaths or injuries associated with this high chair model.



Don't Buy: Safety Risk
Babyhome Eat high chair

The Babyhome Eat, a folding metal-framed high chair made in China for Babyhome USA, of Chester, N.J., fails to meet key criteria in our tests, which are based in part on the voluntary ASTM International safety standards for high chairs. ASTM International, formerly known as the American Society for Testing and Materials, develops voluntary standards that are referenced worldwide.

The biggest problem is that the Babyhome Eat lacks a fixed post that sits between the child's legs to prevent him from slipping under the tray and either falling or getting his head caught between the tray and seat, which can result in strangulation if he is not harnessed. The Babyhome Eat has a five-point harness that can, and should, always be buckled to hold a child in place, but it doesn't have the fixed post that the standard specifies.

Under investigation

CONSUMER REPORTS notified Babyhome and the Consumer Product Safety Commission of our findings. CPSC spokesman Scott Wolfson wrote in an e-mail that the "CPSC is currently investigating the Babyhome Eat high chair to determine if there is a strangulation hazard to young children, due to the lack of a vertical restraint bar."

Stellario D'Urso, Babyhome's vice president of sales and marketing, said that the company was "caught by surprise" because the Eat high chair passed when tested to the voluntary ASTM standards by an independent laboratory in China. However, D'Urso said, Babyhome has concluded that our findings are correct.

D'Urso said that if the CPSC approves, Babyhome will supply current owners with a crotch post that can be affixed to the Eat's food tray. If the CPSC does not approve of that remedy, the company will provide current owners with a replacement tray that includes a post. In the meantime, we recommend that current owners stop using the chair.

Appliance reliability

More than 82,000 readers sound off

Considering a new refrigerator? Our latest Annual Product Reliability Survey will give you advice on one that can keep its cool over the long haul.

No top-freezer or bottom-freezer brand stood out as the most or least reliable in 2012. But LG has been the most repair-prone brand of side-by-side refrigerators with icemakers.

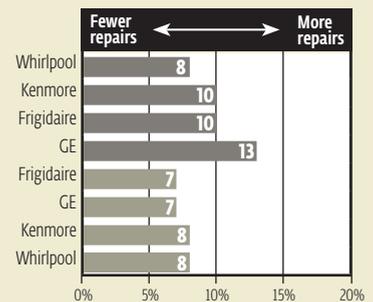
The graphs are based on more than 82,000 subscribers' experiences and show the percentage of models from each brand

that were repaired or had a serious problem. Differences of less than 4 points aren't meaningful, and we've adjusted the data to eliminate differences linked solely to the age of the refrigerators. All refrigerators represented in the graphs are freestanding models. Models within a brand may vary, and design or manufacturing changes may affect future reliability. Still, choosing a brand with a good repair history can improve your odds of getting a reliable model.

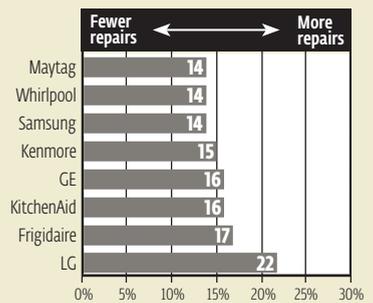


CHILL CHOICES Maytag MSD2559XE[W], top, and Kenmore 7160, bottom, are recommended fridges from reliable brands.

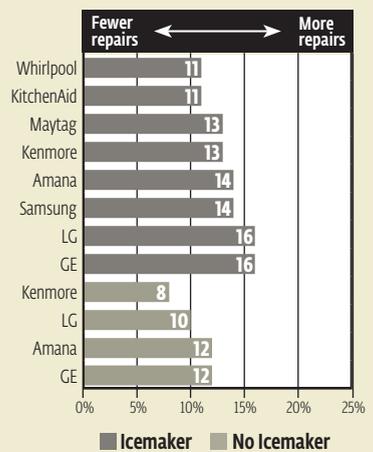
TOP-FREEZERS



SIDE-BY-SIDES



BOTTOM-FREEZERS



■ Icemaker ■ No Icemaker

Source: Consumer Reports Annual Product Reliability Survey. Data are based on 82,054 readers who bought a refrigerator between 2008 and 2012.

Best irons

Steam releases wrinkles from fabric.

The more steam, the better because it makes ironing easier and faster. Our tests of 51 irons found that most models that cost \$30 or less were no bargain, producing far less steam than the recommended models. We ironed basket after basket of dry, wrinkled linen tablecloths; the fewer the passes needed, the better the iron scored.

The **1 Panasonic**, \$220, emits plenty of steam and has a large reservoir so that you can do lots of ironing before needing to refill it. Our experts didn't find that its unusual shape, curved and pointed at both ends, offered any obvious advantages. The iron is big—so big that testers nicknamed it Sputnik. Testers with large hands found it comfortable to use.

You don't have to spend that much. The **3 Singer**, \$60, **5 Rowenta**, \$50, and **6 Rowenta**, \$75, aced our ironing and steaming tests, and the Singer was the lightest of the recommended models. The **2 Kenmore**, \$75, also produced lots of steam, but it wasn't quite as adept at ironing fabrics and is the heaviest of the group. All of the recommended irons have auto shut-off. That safety feature might prevent a fire, but stored heat can still scorch fabrics if the iron is left facedown.

Rowenta's Eco Intelligence DW6080, \$120, is claimed to use 25 percent less electricity, and it did that in our tests, compared with another Rowenta with the same wattage. But the Eco iron produced less steam, keeping it off our Recommended list, though it was excellent at ironing fabrics. The Maytag Premium Analog M800, \$80, is claimed to heat up in 55 seconds, compared with the 1½ to 2 minutes a regular iron takes. It did heat up in a whisker more than 55 seconds but produced a paltry amount of steam, also keeping it off our list.

No matter which iron you choose, check to make sure it fits comfortably in your hand.

Features that count

Vertical steam lets you steam hanging garments or drapes. A burst-of-steam button delivers an extra burst of steam for stubborn wrinkles.

Soleplates that are stainless steel or ceramic glide better than nonstick or aluminum ones.

Steam-off control is handy when steam isn't needed, such as for sewing or some craft projects, or when ironing silk.

Auto shut-off turns off the iron if it's left motionless while laid flat or upright. Some also shut off if left on their side.

Rowenta Effective Comfort DW2070



and one that doesn't

Steam holes The number of holes or their pattern haven't made a significant difference in our tests.

Ratings

Recommended models only From 51 tested.

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor
- ✓ CR Best Buy
- ✓ Recommended

Rec. Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results			Features			
				Ironing fabrics	Steaming rate	Ease of use	Weight (lb.)	Burst-of-steam	Vertical steam	Steam-off
1	Panasonic NI-W950A	\$220	93	●	●	○	3.3	●	●	●
2	Kenmore 80598	75	88	○	●	○	4.1	●	●	●
3	Singer Expert Finish EF	60	86	●	●	○	2.8	●	●	●
4	DeLonghi Easy Turbo Steam Professional FXN18AG	100	86	○	●	○	3.7	●	●	●
5	Rowenta Effective Comfort DW2070	50	85	●	●	○	3	●	●	●
6	Rowenta Focus DZ5080	75	84	●	●	○	3.5	●	●	●
7	Rowenta Pro Master DW8080	90	83	○	●	○	3.5	●	●	●
8	Rowenta Steamium DW9080	125	81	○	●	○	3.8	●	●	●

Iron like a pro

Most irons work fine with tap water; if your water is very hard, then use what the manual indicates. It also has advice on cleaning the soleplate and steam holes. Here's what else our experts suggest.

❑ **Prevent dribbles.** Leaking may occur when you iron at lower temperatures. To prevent it, press delicate fabrics before you add water. After ironing items requiring steam, empty the water chamber. That will reduce the chance of drips the next time and gives you another benefit: The heat will evaporate remaining moisture.

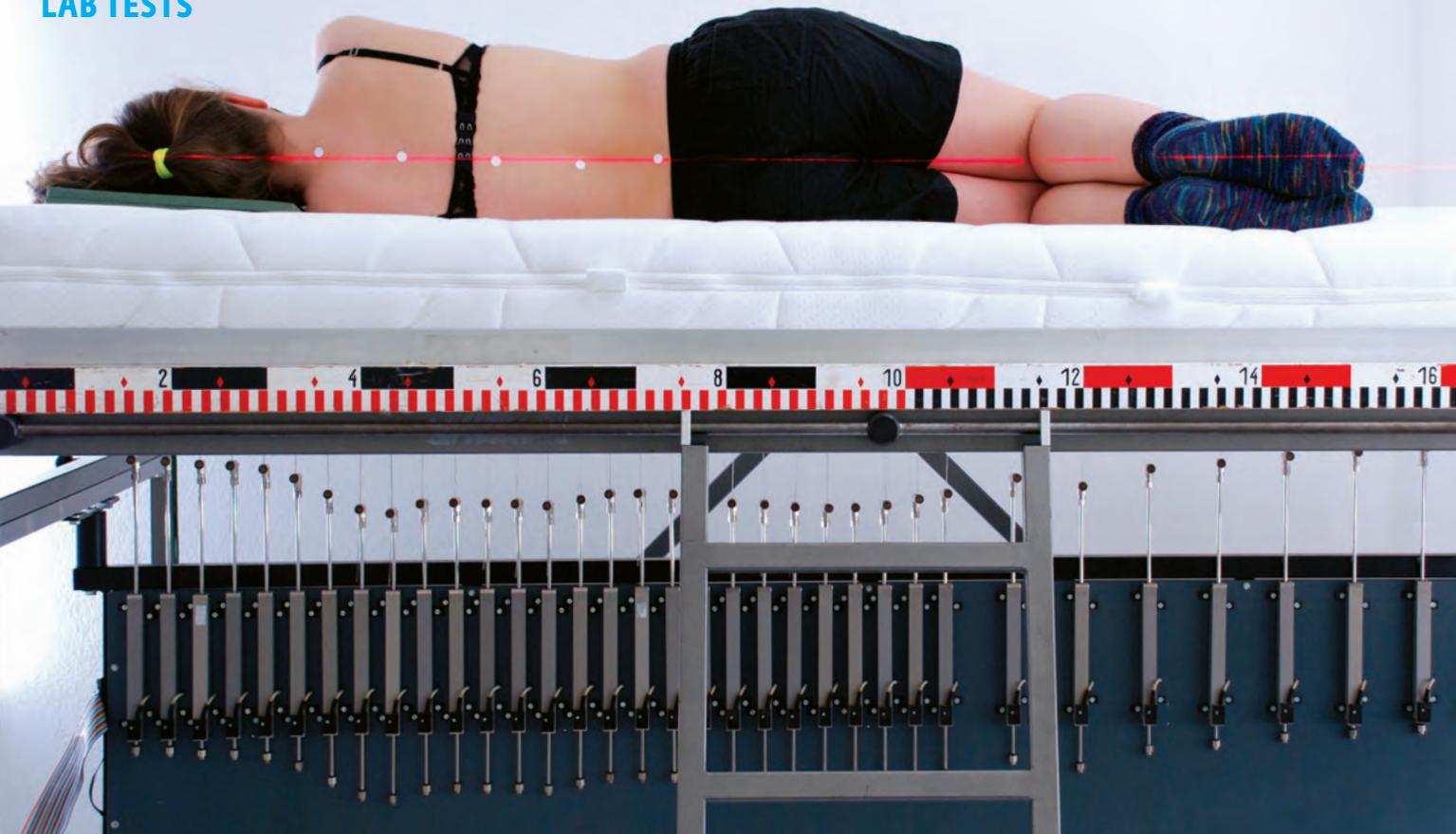
❑ **Start cool.** It's faster and easier to heat an iron than to cool it down, so start with synthetics and other fabrics that require a cooler iron, then wools at medium, and finish with cottons and linens on high.

Allow a minute or so between changes for the iron to heat up.

❑ **Add the final touch.** Immediately hang or fold freshly ironed items. If you don't want fold lines on your tablecloths, either hang them on hangers or store them on empty wrapping-paper tubes.

❑ **Clean the surface occasionally.** To remove residue, clean the iron's soleplate every once in a while, especially if you use starch, following the manual's advice.

❑ **Wrap it up.** Though it's easy to leave the iron on the ironing board, it's also easy for it to be knocked over there. So put the iron on a solid surface instead.



TESTING BACKBONE Sensors measure each mattress at dozens of points to gauge spine support for side and back sleepers.

Mattresses

New full-performance Ratings yield six top picks

OUR FIRST COMPREHENSIVE mattress tests show that you don't have to pay an arm and a leg for the back and side support that can help you get a good night's sleep. Three of our recommended mattresses cost well under \$1,000, while a high-priced Simmons model scored lowest overall. And if you think buying a memory-foam mattress guarantees better support, think again.

We focused on 12 innerspring and foam models in the best-selling queen size for our tests, which include measuring how well each mattress supports the spine—job No. 1 for any mattress, according to sleep experts.

Along with Simmons, we gathered top-selling models from Costco, Ikea, Sealy, Serta, Stearns & Foster, and Tempur-Pedic. Then we enlisted men, women, and machines to see which does best, whether you sleep mostly on your back or side.

Weeks of pushing and pounding with

an arsenal of gadgets and weights showed that the same mattress can be much less supportive depending on how you sleep. One innerspring mattress from Sealy might keep you up if your sleep partner tosses and turns all night. And three memory-foam models could make changing positions a challenge.

Our test results don't come a moment too soon: About 40 percent of subscribers in our latest survey said they had buyer's remorse about the last mattress they bought. Those readers, plus a nationwide team of secret shoppers, confirm that relying solely on salespeople could leave you lying awake at night. (See "Mattress Shopping: How to Come Out on Top," page 45.) Here's what else we found in our tests:

Some are better for back sleepers. Back strain is one reason you might wake up stiff and sore after a night on the mattress you own. Our body-support tests graph the spine's natural curves for a range of adults. Then we record how thor-

oughly each mattress maintains that curve for back sleeping. We also check how well each mattress keeps the spine relatively horizontal when lying on one's side. The best in those tests provided good or better support for both. That's important, since sleepers typically change positions several times a night. Serta's innerspring Perfect Sleeper Elite Pastel Firm Pillowtop, \$835, a CR Best Buy, offers the most support if you sleep on your back. But two Simmons models, a Sealy, and the Ikea lost points there.

▣ DID YOU KNOW?

75 years ago

Our first mattress report, in April 1938, warned of subpar manufacturing standards and suspect contents, including old clothes.



You can do better than foam. Memory-foam mattresses are designed to mold to the shape of your body and return to their original shape when you get up. Sealy says its \$1,775 Posturepedic Optimum Inspiration will make you feel that your mattress was “made just for you.” Simmons says its \$1,920 ComforPedic has “hundreds of sculpted cushions” that respond independently to your shape and movement. But both scored lowest overall. And like the tested Serta iComfort

About 40 percent of buyers had regrets about their purchase.

Sleep System Genius, they lack the resilience that makes moving and shifting positions easier.

Gel made little difference. Five of our tested mattresses include a layer of foam infused with gel. That’s supposed to help a mattress make you feel cooler, especially with memory foam. But those without gel “breathed” about as well.

A few go bump in the night. Some innerspring mattresses can be too resilient, potentially letting a restless sleeper on one side of a bed disturb a sound sleeper on the other. Sealy’s Posturepedic Cloveridge LTD Firm, \$440, transmitted the most bounce in this test bunch.

How to choose

Our new mattress tests confirm our earlier buying advice: More coils, fancier fabric, and other frills you’ll typically find on pricier models don’t guarantee a better mattress. What’s more, the best one for you isn’t necessarily the firmest, even if you suffer from pain.

“Any mattress, whether firm or soft, that supports your body as fully as possible without creating pressure points should do for most people,” says Todd J. Swick, M.D., medical director of Apnix Sleep Diagnostics in Houston, which has treated more than 20,000 patients. None of the

10 ways to get more shut-eye

Too little sleep can lead to heart problems, high blood pressure, obesity, type 2 diabetes and other conditions. It also seems to be on the rise, with about 400 percent more accredited sleep centers in the U.S. than a decade ago. Here are ways to nod off without counting sheep:

1 Keep a consistent schedule.

Wake-up time and bedtime shouldn’t vary by more than an hour each day, including weekends. “People get the Monday-morning blues because they sleep in on weekends,” says Todd J. Swick, M.D., medical director of Apnix Sleep Diagnostics in Houston. “It shifts the internal clock.”

2 Exercise—but not too late. Working out increases levels of stress hormones such as cortisol and epinephrine. That’s good for revving up your heart rate when you’re doing aerobics, but those same chemicals can keep you up if you work out less than 4 hours before bedtime.

3 Curb late-night snacking. Eating after dinner diverts blood from the brain—needed for proper sleep—to digesting food. Nighttime digestion can also disrupt sleep, especially if you suffer from acid reflux. A rule of thumb: Other than perhaps a bit of cheese or milk, eat no later than 3 hours before hitting the sack, especially large meals.

4 Wean yourself off sleep meds. Sleep aids, especially over-the-counter versions, are meant to be used no more than three to four weeks. Besides being psychologically addictive, they can upset normal sleep patterns. “They change the relative percentage of different sleep stages your body needs,” Swick says.

5 Adjust your temperature. A hot bath or shower followed by time spent in a cool room preps the body for sleep better than thick pajamas and heavy covers. As for room temperature, the ideal range for sleeping is roughly 68° F to 70° F.

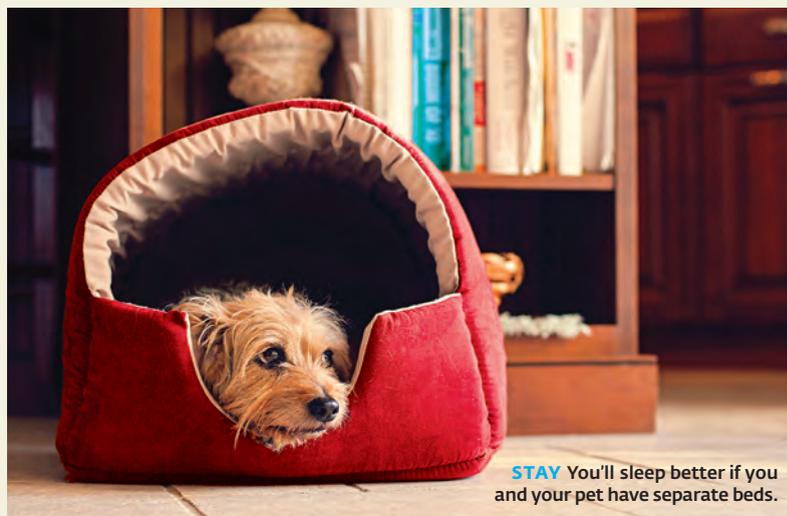
6 Lay off the sauce. Like a nightcap to help you unwind? That late-night nip can cause you to wake early, since alcohol becomes a stimulant as it’s metabolized. Alcohol also worsens sleep apnea and causes louder, deeper snoring. Take that last drink 3 to 4 hours before bed if you have no major sleep problems—and at least 6 hours if you do.

7 Turn off the tube. Watching TV or using computers and mobile devices right before bedtime may seem like a great way to relax, but it can make the brain think it’s morning. Like to read in bed? Consider features and apps that display white text on a black background, which is less likely to trigger the daylight effect.

8 Decaffeinate your evenings. Sleep experts advise people to avoid caffeine in all forms after 6 p.m. You may even want to consider switching to decaf hours earlier if you have trouble sleeping.

9 Banish pets. Some people would sooner kick their spouse or partner out of bed than their pet. But pets can disturb sleep by snoring, getting on and off the bed, and taking up space.

10 Kick it down a notch. Help tune out your anxieties by writing your worries on index cards in the early evening. “We call them worry cards,” Swick says. “We’ve found that most fears don’t look nearly as serious once you’ve written them out.”



STAY You'll sleep better if you and your pet have separate beds.

WATCH OUR FREE BUYING-GUIDE VIDEO

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





SINKING FEELING? This machine applies increasing force to a mattress to measure its firmness.

mattresses we tested created notable pressure points. Here's what else to think about before you begin shopping:

Try before buying. Our tests show that you can't necessarily believe manufacturers' softness and firmness claims; almost half of these mattresses we tested proved to be softer than promised.

But even the most supportive mattress might not be what you find most comfortable. To gauge comfort yourself, lie on any mattress you're considering. Spend at least 10 minutes on each side and on your back, and on your stomach if that's how you sleep. You can't try Costco's Novaform mattress at the store; it's delivered to your door in a box. But if you don't like it, pickup and return are free.

Win the name game. Mattress makers offer some lines nationally. But those you'll see at such major retailers as Macy's, Sears, and Sleepy's are typically exclusive to those chains. And retailers often change model names, making it even

harder to compare models store to store. All of that makes it extremely hard to shop wisely, which is why we've decided to test mattresses on a regular basis. Our advice: Use our performance Ratings as a guide. And insist on the precise makes and models that scored well in our tests.

Consider the winter months. Three innerspring and three memory-foam mattresses were better at retaining body heat in our temperature-controlled chamber. That should help you keep warm when the weather turns cold without feeling too warm when it's hot.

Weigh latex concerns. Some makers of latex-foam mattresses say their processing removes the proteins that cause latex allergy. Still, we've highlighted in our Ratings those mattresses that contain latex in case you're worried.

Keep your old box spring if possible. Replacing the box spring that goes beneath a mattress can cost \$150 to more than \$300. Unless your old one is sagging

New tricks for old mattresses

People typically keep their mattresses roughly 10 years before replacing them. But we suggest tossing any mattress that shows sags or lumps. If yours looks serviceable—and you still wake up feeling achy, stiff, or numb—try these quick fixes before buying a new one:

Flip or rotate it. You may be able to do both with some innerspring mattresses, though models with an obvious top layer are limited to rotating only. Mattresses with different firmness levels for each sleep partner, including some memory-foam models, can't be flipped or rotated.

Check the pillow. A firmer or softer one may be what it takes to nod off. Check firmness yourself by putting pillows on a flat surface and compressing them to about half of their original thickness; the more pressure needed, the firmer the pillow. Also be sure that the pillow positions your head and neck as high or low—relative to your shoulders and spine—as it would if you were standing straight with proper posture. And as with mattresses, pricier pillows aren't necessarily better. Our earlier tests with more than 70 staffers found little difference in comfort and quality between high- and low-priced models.

Top it off. A mattress topper can help a too-hard bed. Past tests with foam- and feather-filled toppers found that paying more didn't guarantee more comfort. No topper is best for everyone. Check return policies, since you can't try them out at the store. And be sure that fitted sheets are loose enough to use with a topper.

or damaged, you might be able to save by keeping it even if you're replacing your innerspring mattress. About 80 percent of subscribers who responded to our recent survey were satisfied with their new mattress without replacing the box spring. But some brands require you to buy their box spring to receive full warranty coverage.

Don't forget to haggle. Most mattresses have huge markups, which allow retailers to run frequent "sales" of up to 50 percent off. But you don't have to wait for special promotions to save. About one-third of subscribers in our last mattress survey who haggled slashed \$150 or more off the price. And consider using a smart phone or tablet to check prices online or at other stores for added bargaining power.

▣ CLOSE-UP

What to ask before you buy

Even a mattress that feels comfortable at a store could prove to be less comfy at home. Here's what to ask up front:

- Is there a return period, and can I get a full refund or credit toward another mattress? Ikea gives you 90 days to exchange a mattress. (You must take it back to the store or pay for pickup.) The return period is 60 days for most mattresses at Macy's and 30 days at Sears. And both hit you for shipping costs and a 15 percent restocking fee.
- How long is the warranty? Those for the mattresses we tested ranged from 10 to 25

years and covered only manufacturing defects. Coverage is frequently prorated, meaning that it decreases over time.

- Is there free pickup if I want a refund or exchange? Otherwise, you'll have to pay for it—or cart the mattress to the store. And you'll be responsible for damage.

Don't accept delivery without inspecting the mattress for stains and other damage (and the box spring, if you buy one). Also be sure that the mattress has a label that states "all-new material" before you send the driver on his way. If it's not there, refuse delivery.



A1 Ninja



A2 Vitamix

vs.

Blenders

Our tests find 13 winners—and a few duds

A **TOP-NOTCH** blender is a versatile kitchen appliance, good for making smoothies and frozen drinks, plus less obvious dishes, such as hummus, churn-free ice cream, and even hot soup.

Our tests of 65 blenders, including conventional stand models and the handheld immersion kind, tapped 13 winners and several high-profile duds.

Ninja tops the list. The Ninja Master Prep Professional, a \$60 CR Best Buy, was

slightly ahead of the Vitamix 5200, \$450, atop our Ratings. Both machines purée, make a superb smoothie or frozen drink, and crush ice cubes into fluffy snow. Those are the most common tasks that more than 1,200 readers told us they routinely perform with a blender.

The Ninja features a unique top-mounted motor that you press down to operate. It comes with a 48-ounce pitcher, a 40-ounce processing bowl, and a 16-ounce chopping bowl. The Ninja is also the only blender we

tested that was very good at chopping, puréeing, and grating Parmesan cheese in our chopper tests.

Its brandmate, the Ninja Professional, \$100, a conventional blender with the motor on the bottom, was superb, apart from its fairly noisy operation.

Claims heat up. Vitamix and Blendtec say the friction from their fast-spinning blades can heat up soups, coffees, and other recipes. We put the claim to the test in the Vitamix Professional Series 750, \$650, and Blendtec Total Blender, \$460, following a recipe for tortilla soup. Both models puréed the ingredients and warmed them to roughly 140° F in about 5 minutes using their high settings. To see if any highly rated blender could make hot soup, we tried the recipe in the Ninja Professional. It puréed the ingredients with ease, but they remained tepid.

All three models made a tasty, churn-free strawberry ice cream in seconds. Blenders that score very good or better in our icy-drinks and ice-crush tests should be able to do the same.

Specialty brands fizzle. The Sandra Lee Dispensing Blender, from the Food Network's "semi-homemade" celebrity chef, is supposed to have you "serving blended drinks like a pro." But the \$45 device, which was dismal at making icy drinks and crushing ice in our tests and only slightly better at puréeing, got the lowest overall score in our Ratings.

Then there's the Bon Appétit BAPBL010 blender, \$130, which was "rigorously tested and approved by the magazine's trained chefs." The result is supposedly "so powerful that you might just find yourself wanting to make frozen margaritas all the time." But the blender was, shall we say, *comme ci comme ça* at making icy drinks. If you make your margarita strong enough,

Play it safe

Blenders caused about 7,250 injuries in 2011, most of them involving cut fingers, based on emergency-room-treated injuries reported to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. That was up from about 2,300 injuries in 2001, reflecting the growing popularity yet potential dangers of these devices. Here's how to keep yourself safe:

- Never put your hand inside a blender, especially if it's plugged in. Unlike food

processors, most blenders don't have safety interlocks, so you could accidentally turn the unit on with your hand inside.

- Avoid sticking utensils into a running blender. If you need to scrape the sides with a spatula, turn the blender off before doing so.
- Instead of washing your blender by hand, add soapy water and run the blender until the container and blades are clean. Then unplug it and rinse it under the faucet.



- Use a utensil, not your fingers, to dislodge food from the blade or blade guard of an immersion blender, making sure to first unplug the device.

- To reduce the risk of electrical shock, never submerge the power cord, power plug, or motor of any blender in water or other liquid.
- Unplug the blender when not in use, and keep the power cord out of reach of young children, because some accidents occur when blenders are pulled off the edge of a counter.

you might not notice that it's a tad runny, with chunks of floating ice. What's more, the Bon Appétit failed our durability test, in which we see whether a blender still functions after 45 ice-crush tests in a row.

Other newly tested models that scored less than 30: Bodum Bistro 11303, \$130; NutriBullet NBR-12, \$100; Hamilton Beach Power Elite Multi-Function 58148, \$40; Frigidaire Professional FPJB56B7MS, \$130;

and Big Boss Multi Blender, \$50.

Breville leads immersions. An immersion blender is ideal for puréeing soups and sauces in the pot. The Breville Control Grip, \$100, was the only tested model that excelled in our soup-purée and yogurt-blend tests. Its ergonomic trigger is supposed to ensure comfortable control, though you should try it in the store before buying.

Ratings

Recommended models only From 59 tested.

Rec. Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results						
				Icy drinks (smoothies)	Convenience	Purée	Ice crush	Noise	Durability	
			0 100							
			P F G V E							

- Excellent
 - Very good
 - Good
 - Fair
 - Poor
- CR Best Buy
 Recommended



A3 Ninja



A7 KitchenAid

Overview

These blenders are all very good or better at every blending task, so they should be able to handle a wide array of recipes, including hummus, dressings, ice cream, and more.

- CR Best Buy** These offer the best combination of price and performance.
- Recommended** These are fine performers that stand out for the reasons below.

BEST VALUE

A1 Ninja \$60 **CR Best Buy**

A3 Ninja \$100

A7 KitchenAid \$100

B2 Miallegro \$50 **CR Best Buy**

A1 delivers superb icy drinks, purées, and crushed ice, plus its additional containers are handy for chopping nuts and herbs. **A3** offers superb blending in a conventional blender. **A7** has a glass container, which is more stable and easier to keep clean than plastic ones, though heavier. **B2** excelled at soup purées and costs half as much as other immersion blenders.

BEST FOR HEATING

A2 Vitamix \$450

A4 Vitamix \$650

A10 Blendtec \$460

All three are claimed to make soups, coffees, and other hot dishes, though we tested heating on only **A4** and **A10**. **A4** is several inches shorter than **A2**, so it will fit under most upper cabinets. **A10** has touchpad controls with icons for its various cycles.

BEST IMMERSION BLENDER

B1 Breville \$100

This is the only immersion blender that aced both our soup-purée and yogurt-blend tests.

A BLENDERS

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Ninja Master Prep Professional QB1004	\$ 60	91	●	○	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Vitamix 5200 ¹ ²	450	91	●	○	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Ninja Professional NJ600	100	87	●	○	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Vitamix Professional Series 750 Vitamix 7500 Vitamix Professional Series 300 ¹	650	81	○	○	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	Breville Ikon BBL600XL ³	200	78	○	○	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	Hamilton Beach Commercial Tempest HBH650	450	77	○	○	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	KitchenAid KSB565 ³	100	74	○	○	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8	Ninja Kitchen System 1100 NJ602	160	73	○	○	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9	Breville Juice & Blend BJB840XL ³	450	70	○	○	●	●	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	10	Blendtec Total Blender Designer Series WildSide ¹	460	70	○	○	●	●	○	●

¹ Cooks soup. ² Color and logo have changed since testing. ³ Has a glass jar.

Ratings

Recommended models only From six tested.

Rec. Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results		
				Yogurt blend	Purée	Maximum RPM
			0 100			
			P F G V E			

B IMMERSION BLENDERS

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Breville Control Grip BSB510XL*	\$100	91	●	●	13,200
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Miallegro Professional MiTutto 9090*	50	83	○	●	17,200
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	DeLonghi DHB723*	100	81	○	●	13,500

*Comes with chopper and whisk attachments and a beaker.

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is based on performance and convenience. **Icy drinks (smoothies)** is based on the smoothness and thickness of nonalcoholic piña coladas as judged by sensory panelists. Blenders that do well for icy drinks also do well for smoothies. Ease of cleaning and replacing blade, clarity of controls and jar markings, pouring ease, and jar balance make up the **convenience** score. **Purée** shows how well each model puréed soup. **Ice crush** is how well the blender was able to crush ice without water. **Durability** is whether the blender still worked after 45 successive ice-crush tests. **Yogurt blend** shows how well each immersion blender turned frozen fruit and yogurt into smoothies. **Price** is approximate retail.

B1 Breville



Watts up?

Manufacturers' claims that higher wattage translates into better performance have not held true in our tests of standard blenders.

Vitamin D

How 32 supplements really measure up

OUR LATEST TESTS yield good news for the many people who take a daily vitamin D or calcium/D pill: All of the 32 products met or exceeded their claimed levels of the vitamin, disintegrated or dissolved properly where applicable, and were well below the safe upper limit set by the Institute of Medicine.

But we found levels of lead that exceeded a limit for reproductive risk set by California Proposition 65 in nine out of 12 products that combined vitamin D with calcium. That's a common supplement pairing because vitamin D helps the body absorb calcium. We think there are better choices than those nine, which are listed in a separate section in the Ratings.

We also found that costs can vary widely, as shown in the chart. So choose by price and preference of pill type, and consider whether you want a product that also contains calcium.

People who get enough midday sun in warmer months probably don't need extra vitamin D, which the body makes from exposure to sunlight. But you might need vitamin D if you have osteoporosis or a condition such as celiac disease that impairs the body's ability to absorb fat-soluble vitamins, including D.

▶ DID YOU KNOW?

Few foods naturally contain vitamin D. Fatty fish and cod-liver oils have the highest levels. Smaller amounts are available in beef liver, cheese, and egg yolks. Most of the vitamin D consumed in the U.S. diet comes from fortified foods, such as milk.

For our tests, at least three samples of each product were analyzed for their level of vitamin D3 (the form of the vitamin most were claimed to contain) and, in the case of the combined products, their level of calcium. The supplements with calcium were also tested for the presence of arsenic, cadmium, lead, and mercury.

Average vitamin D3 levels ranged from 105 percent to 141 percent of the labeled amount in the adult and children's vitamin D-only products (1,000 international units, or IU, and 400 IU, respectively). But even the higher levels were

Ratings

In cost order, within groups.



Trader Joe's

Sundown

Carlson Laboratories

Product	Type	Package count	Cost/year ¹
ADULT VITAMIN D All met our quality criteria, which includes meeting label claims of 1,000 IU vitamin D and passing U.S. Pharmacopeia (USP) disintegration test.			
Trader Joe's Vitamin D	softgel	180	\$ 10.15
Now Vitamin D3	softgel	180	13.60
Nature Made D3 Liquid Softgels 1,000 IU	softgel	300	13.75
The Vitamin Shoppe Vitamin D3 1,000 IU	softgel	200	14.25
Whole Foods Market Vitamin D3 1,000 IU	softgel	250	15.05
GNC Vitamin D-3 1000	tablet	180	15.20
Rite Aid Vitamin D-3 1,000 IU	tablet	240	15.20
Walgreens D3	softgel	400	16.35
CVS D3 1,000 IU	softgel	300	17.05
Country Life Vitamin D3 1,000 IU	softgel	200	17.60
Nature Made D3 1,000 IU	tablet	300	19.55
Blue Bonnet D3 1,000 IU	capsule	180	26.15
Nature's Bounty High Potency D3-1,000 IU	softgel	350	35.05
Solgar Vitamin D3 1,000 IU	softgel	250	36.50
Shaklee Vita-D3	tablet	90	38.10
Sundown High Potency Vitamin D3 1,000 IU	softgel	100	47.10
ADULT CALCIUM PLUS VITAMIN D All met our quality criteria, which includes meeting label claims of calcium and vitamin D and not exceeding USP and California Proposition 65 limits for heavy metals.			
Sundown Liquid-Filled Calcium (600 mg calcium, 500 IU vitamin D per pill)	softgel	170	60.55
Nature's Bounty Calcium 1,200 mg (600 mg calcium, 500 IU vitamin D per pill)	softgel	120	63.90
Oscal Chewable D3 (500 mg calcium, 600 IU vitamin D per pill)	chewable	120	101.00
CHILDREN'S VITAMIN D All met our quality criteria, which includes meeting label claims of 400 IU vitamin D.			
Carlson Laboratories For Kids 400 IU Liquid Drops ²	liquid	365	13.20
Nature Made Kids Chewable D3 400 IU ²	chewable	320	14.20
Natural Factors Vitamin D3 For Kids	chewable	100	18.60
CVS Children's Chewable Vitamin D 400 IU ²	chewable	150	20.45
EXCEEDED CALIFORNIA PROPOSITION 65 LEAD LIMIT FOR REPRODUCTIVE RISK ³			
Caltrate 600 + D	tablet	200	68.60
Citracal Maximum	tablet	240	91.25
Citracal Petites Calcium Citrate + D3	tablet	200	96.00
CVS Calcium 600 + D	tablet	600	21.60
Equate Calcium Citrate + D (Walmart)	caplet	200	58.05
Kirkland Signature Calcium 600 mg + D3 (Costco)	tablet	500	17.30
Oscal Calcium Supplement Extra D3	caplet	120	93.70
Schiff Super Calcium	softgel	120	68.45
Walgreens Calcium 600 + D	tablet	400	26.90

¹ Based on average paid for tested samples and maximum daily dose recommended on label. Prices are rounded to the nearest 5 cents. ² For children older than 2. ³ All samples fell within the permissible limit for lead as a carcinogen (cancer-causing substance) as defined under Proposition 65, which requires manufacturers to list ingredients known to cause cancer or reproductive risk that exceed "safe harbor levels."

well below the Institute of Medicine's maximum safe daily level of 4,000 IU.

Most adults up to age 70 need no more than about 600 IU of vitamin D a day; older people, 800 IU. Avoid exceeding 4,000 IU

daily unless your doctor has prescribed a higher dose to treat a deficiency. Too much vitamin D can cause kidney damage. Other symptoms of toxic amounts of D include confusion, nausea, and weakness.

Cars

Road tests, auto products, hot topics



Motorola Roadster 2

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Affordable hands-free calling

We check out the pros and cons of add-on Bluetooth kits

I F YOU HAVE to make a phone call from behind the wheel, go hands-free. It's not only less distracting than trying to juggle a phone while steering but it's also the only legal way to do it in many states. Most new car models offer Bluetooth technology, which frees your hands by wirelessly connecting your phone to the car's audio system. But if your vehicle doesn't have it, you can still take advantage of the technology without spending a lot of money.

We recently bought four Bluetooth kits from Belkin, GoGroove, Jabra, and Motorola, which ran about \$35 to \$60. Many others are also available. Each can be paired with a cell phone or portable music player so that you can carry on hands-free phone conversations and listen to music. They're powered by plugging into a 12-volt socket or USB port. But their different designs affect how easy they are to use.

The Jabra and Motorola simply clip onto the sun visor, which makes them simple to install and places the microphone close to your face, right where you want it. Because they have rechargeable batteries, they can even be used unplugged. And both have an internal speaker, so they can be used in any car. The Motorola can also send sound through the car's audio system via FM

modulation (transmitting the signal to an unused FM frequency).

The Belkin and GoGroove can be used only when connected to a car's audio system. Our Belkin plugs into an auxiliary jack, although an FM version is also available. The GoGroove links through an AUX jack or FM modulator. We've found using an AUX jack provides the best sound.

The Belkin can be mounted on any flat surface with a small adhesive disc. That gives you flexibility in its placement but

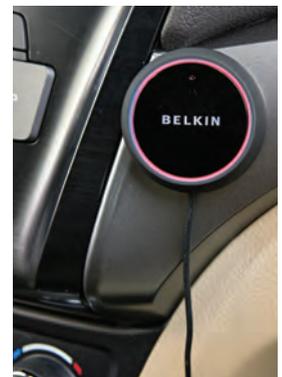
can make it hard to move it between cars.

The GoGroove has a 5.5-inch gooseneck that plugs directly into a car's 12-volt socket. But that design moves the microphone farther from the driver, which can affect sound quality. And the gooseneck makes it hard to tuck out of the way.

Before you buy, make sure your phone is compatible with the device. Prices vary, so shop around. And remember, hands-free or not, the safest way to make a call is when the car is parked.

Kits for wirelessly connecting your phone or music player

Product	Cost	Features
Belkin CarAudio Connect AUX	\$36	Connects with car's audio system through an auxiliary jack. But adhesive-backed mount can be hard to remove.
GoGroove FlexSmart X2	\$37	Connects to car's audio system via AUX jack or FM modulator. But gooseneck mount can vibrate; hard to tuck out of the way.
Jabra Journey	\$40	Clips to visor; rechargeable battery. But can't connect to car's audio system.
Motorola Roadster 2	\$59	Clips to visor; rechargeable battery; connects to car's audio system through FM modulator.



SPEAK EASY Bluetooth kits let you keep both hands on the wheel during calls.

COMPACT SEDANS

Honda Civic vs. Nissan Sentra

With a quick update, the Civic wins back its recommendation

AFTER DECADES of churning out hits, Honda hit a sour note with the 2012 Civic redesign. We gave it kudos for its good fuel economy and decent rear-seat room. But we panned its choppy ride, vague steering, cheap interior, and raucous road noise, among other faults. Overall its road-test score slid from a very good 78 to a mediocre 62, pushing it off our recommended list. After a quick remix Honda has now released a fresh version of the Civic for 2013 that remedied most of our previous complaints.

The updated car rides a lot better and has a quieter cabin and improved steering, and the interior looks much nicer. The Civic now scores a 71 in our testing, enough to regain our recommendation. Moreover, it's now a solid competitor in the compact-sedan class and benefits from traditionally strong resale value and a track record of good reliability.

The Nissan Sentra was once a worthy choice in this class. But with its 2013 redesign it seems to be following in the tracks of the 2012 Civic. The latest edition scores just a 64—10 points

below its predecessor and too low to be recommended. The Sentra looks good on paper, with lots of features and one of the roomiest rear seats in the class. But on the road its deficiencies, including a jumpy ride, clumsy handling, and constant engine drone, become apparent. This version is too new for us to have reliability data.

The Civic is the clear choice between the two revamped models. But in our Ratings both still trail the class leaders: the roomy all-wheel-drive Subaru Impreza, value-packed Hyundai Elantra, and engaging-to-drive Mazda3.

On the road

Though the 2012 Civic was almost devoid of sportiness, steering and handling were recalibrated for the update. It's still not as agile as the Ford Focus or Mazda3—or even some previous Civics—but it's responsive, well-balanced, and predictable, with decent steering feedback.

Unlike many small cars, the Sentra's handling borders on klutzy. The body leans

early in turns, and it takes a good deal of wheel winding to get around a corner. The steering provides very little driver feedback.

Both cars were secure and predictable when pushed at our track, understeering benignly at their handling limits. And drivers felt confident while negotiating our accident-avoidance maneuver. Overall, we found the Civic's handling more rewarding.

The Civic's update cured the previously unsettled ride. Now it provides laudable isolation and ranks as one of the better riding compact sedans. Though the Sentra's ride has a cushy veneer, it quickly firms up when encountering bumps. Even moderate ones transmit rubbery kicks into the cabin, and the ride is jittery at highway speed.

Honda mostly tamed the offensive road noise that plagued last year's model, but with some engine hum and wind rush entering the cabin, you still can't call it quiet. But it's much better than the Sentra, which suffers from boomy engine noise as the continuously variable transmission causes the engine to rev high.

Continued on page 52

The redesigned Sentra scores way below its predecessor.



Honda Civic

ROAD-TEST
SCORE
71



✓ Recommended



Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Fuel economy, powertrain, ride, roomy interior, reliability, standard rear camera
LOWS	Noise, fussy onboard computer
TRIM LINE	EX
DRIVETRAIN	140-hp, 1.8-liter four-cylinder engine; five-speed automatic transmission; front-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	None
TESTED PRICE	\$21,605

More test findings

BRAKING	Short stops with good pedal modulation.
HEADLIGHTS	Good low beams; very good high beams.
ACCESS	Wide doors make it easy, but the wheel well and sloping roofline intrude a little in the rear.
VISIBILITY	Big windows and a deep dashboard make it difficult to tell where the hood ends. Having a standard backup camera is terrific for a car at this price.
CABIN STORAGE	Generous, but the large cubby in front of the shifter is blocked with the shifter in Park.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	The center-rear restraint must be raised to provide adequate protection.
CHILD SEATS	Safety belts should provide a secure fit. LATCH anchors are awkward to access, and tightening some top seat tethers can be difficult.



SEEING CLEARLY A rear-view camera is standard in all Civics.



DECKED OUT Softer trim panels, chrome accents, and stitching details improve the interior.



Scan for video.

Nissan Sentra

ROAD-TEST
SCORE
64



Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Fuel economy, braking, spacious rear seat, reasonably priced options
LOWS	Noise, ride, agility, front-seat comfort
TRIM LINE	SV
DRIVETRAIN	130-hp, 1.8-liter four-cylinder engine; continuously variable transmission; front-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	Push-button ignition, Bluetooth, USB port, automatic headlights, navigation, rear camera
TESTED PRICE	\$20,570

More test findings

BRAKING	Excellent, with short stops overall.
HEADLIGHTS	Low beams provide good overall visibility and smooth transitions between light and darkness at the top of the beam. High beams shine a very good distance with more intensity.
ACCESS	Easy overall, with large, tall doors.
VISIBILITY	OK, despite thick roof pillars and the high rear deck that's typical in today's sedans. The optional rear camera aids backup maneuvers.
CABIN STORAGE	Moderate, with a large, two-tier glove box.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	The center-rear position has no restraint.
CHILD SEATS	Forward- and rear-facing child seats can be securely installed using the safety belts alone. LATCH anchors in outboard rear positions are awkward to access.



UNEXPECTED PLEASURE The roomy rear seat is surprising in a small sedan.



SCREEN DEAL You can add navigation and a rear camera to the Sentra for \$650.



Scan for video.



CARS TO CONSIDER The fun-to-drive Mazda3, left, and the roomy, comfortable Subaru Impreza are among the best models in this class.

Under the hoods

With 130 hp, the Sentra has 10 hp fewer than the Civic. But sometimes that deficit feels like more. Acceleration times at our track aren't bad, but real-world-driving feels lethargic, and the Sentra's 1.8-liter, four-cylinder engine seems overworked. Though we have often praised Nissan's CVTs, the Sentra's doesn't live up to that standard. Not only does the CVT hold the engine revs high to wring out power, but it's also sometimes slow to respond and there's too much engine braking when descending hills.

The Civic EX makes better use of its own 1.8-liter four, which is coupled with a smooth five-speed automatic transmission that works well. But it has larger steps between gear ratios than the six-speed transmissions in most other compact cars. You can get an optional five-speed manual with the Civic or the base version of the Sentra.

Well put together

Both interiors are well trimmed, with soft-touch surfaces and nicely assembled components. Gone are the oddly grained hard-plastic panels of last year's Civic, though the molded stitching across the dashboard looks fake. The Sentra has extremely squishy door armrests, which we liked.

Drivers of these cars will appreciate the abundant head and knee room, as well as the tilt-and-telescopic steering wheel, although we'd like to see the Sentra's extend further.

With its wide, supportive seats, the Civic gets the nod for front-seat comfort. By contrast, the uneven support in the Sentra has garnered lots of complaints. The Civic's rear seat is pretty good; it's more supportive and roomier than in the typical cramped small sedan. But it can't match the Sentra's roomy rear seat, which is even more spacious than in some mid-sized sedans and has better seating posture. Still, seating a trio in back might be a bit tight in either car.

Controls and gauges are mostly simple. The Civic has a dual-tier dashboard with a digital

speedometer atop a lower tachometer. But some drivers might prefer the Sentra's larger traditional gauges.

The Sentra's optional \$650 touch-screen navigation and audio system is simple to use and has a dedicated tuning knob, but some buttons are small and tightly clustered. The Civic's single knob for radio tuning and volume requires you to switch back and forth between its modes frequently.

It's simple to pair a Bluetooth phone in either car. The Civic will alert you of incoming text messages and read them to you, but that

feature doesn't work with all phones. The Sentra's system can use a phone's data connection to download weather forecasts and send Google search results to the navigation system.

Opting for the Civic's EX trim level brings standard automatic climate control, a nice convenience at this price.

The Sentra's trunk fits more luggage than the Civic's, and both cars have a 60/40-split folding seatback to create more room. But the trunk hinges in both cars could damage items below them when you shut the lid.

Ratings Compact sedans

All tested models In performance order.

Recommended

- Excellent
- Very good
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

Rec.	Rank	Make & model	Price as tested	In this issue	Overall road-test score	Predicted reliability	Overall mpg
					0		
					100		
					P F G V E		
✓	1	Subaru Impreza Premium	\$21,345		82	●	27
✓	2	Hyundai Elantra GLS	18,445		80	●	29
✓	3	Mazda3 i Touring (Skyactiv)	20,145		78	○	32
	4	Ford Focus SE SFE	21,650		77	●	31
✓	5	Chevrolet Cruze Eco	21,775		72	○	27
	6	Ford Focus SE	20,280		71	●	28
✓	7	Honda Civic EX	21,605	●	71	●	29
✓	8	Toyota Corolla LE	18,404		71	●	32
✓	9	Chevrolet Cruze 1LT (1.4T)	20,530		70	○	26
✓	10	Chevrolet Cruze LS (1.8)	18,375		68	○	26
✓	11	Volkswagen Jetta TDI	25,100		68	○	34
	12	Dodge Dart SXT (2.0L)	20,680		64	new	27
	13	Nissan Sentra SV	20,570	●	64	new	29
	14	Dodge Dart Rallye (1.4T)	24,490		61	new	29
	15	Volkswagen Jetta SE (2.5)	20,300		60	●	25

Why some cars are not recommended. The Ford Focus has below-average reliability. The Dodge Dart and Nissan Sentra scored too low in our tests. The Volkswagen Jetta SE scored too low and has below-average reliability.

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TIGHT QUARTERS
The cramped rear seat is fit only for small people.

Cadillac ATS

ROAD-TEST SCORE
76

The ATS, Cadillac's new compact sports sedan, is like a star athlete who's hard to live with. Its sharp handling, eager performance, and responsive steering give up nothing to the best European sports sedans. The ride is taut and controlled without being harsh. And braking performance is outstanding. On a track or twisty road, the ATS gets a solid thumbs-up.

But living with it every day can become really annoying. The backseat is extremely cramped, and the trunk is tiny, even by the modest standards of this class. The 2.0-liter, turbocharged four-cylinder engine in our car sounds wheezy and got only 23 mpg overall on premium fuel, a far cry from the BMW 328i's 28 mpg. Worse, Cadillac's Cue infotainment system is complicated, difficult to use, and distracting.

OK, when you buy an ATS with Cue you get a free iPad, which comes with a tutorial on the system. Still, despite being a joy to drive, the ATS has demerits that drag its road-test score down to 76, well short of the best-in-class 328i (86) and Mercedes-Benz C250 (85). Its test score is high enough, but we can't recommend the ATS yet because it's too new for us to have reliability data.

The agile American

The ATS will make you forget any preconceived notions you have about the Cadillac brand. It hugs the pavement while cornering, has quick and precise steering, and feels light and playful while tackling the turns of our track. Overall, the ATS even handles better than the 328i—our Top Pick in sports sedans—which is an eye-opener.

The 272-hp engine helped the ATS post quick acceleration times at our track, but the uneven power delivery makes the car feel slower on the street. Of the other engines, the 321-hp, 3.6-liter V6 is the way to go; the 202-hp, 2.5-liter four is nothing special.

The six-speed automatic transmission is smooth most of the time, but it sometimes slams into gear in stop-and-go traffic. A six-speed manual with so-so shift quality is optional with the turbo engine. All-wheel drive is also optional but not with the base engine or manual transmission.

Road noise is well-controlled, but engine noise can become noticeable, which dilutes some of the car's luxury ambience.

Finesse and frustration

The impeccable fit and finish is among the best we've seen from GM. Major controls fall easily to hand, and the ATS has plenty of foot and leg room. The front seats are comfortable and supportive. But rear-seat room is very tight, with little thigh support; forget wedging three adults in there.

Voice commands work well, and it's simple to pair a phone via Bluetooth. But the car has no tuning or volume knobs. Instead, Cue has finicky touch-sensitive buttons and a large but confounding touch screen. Steering-wheel controls help some. Basic

Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Handling, braking, fit and finish, front-seat comfort
LOWS	Cue controls, tight interior, small trunk, unrefined turbo engine, fuel economy
TRIM LINE	Luxury
DRIVETRAIN	272-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine; six-speed automatic transmission; rear-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	Navigation, Bose stereo, heated seats, heated steering wheel, sunroof
TESTED PRICE	\$43,295

More test findings

BRAKING	Outstanding, with short stops and great pedal feel.
HEADLIGHTS	Halogen low beams don't reach far enough. High beams are subpar for this class.
ACCESS	Low-slung, with small doors; very tight in back.
VISIBILITY	Good to the front and sides but limited to the rear because of small windows and a high package shelf. The backup camera works well.
CABIN STORAGE	Mostly small compartments.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	Center-rear position has no restraint.
CHILD SEATS	LATCH anchors are difficult to access; rear-facing seats are difficult to secure with belts.



Scan for video.

How they compare

Rec.	LUXURY COMPACT SEDANS	0	100
		P	F G V6 E
✓	BMW 328i	86	
✓	Mercedes-Benz C250	85	
✓	Audi A4 Premium Quattro	76	
	Cadillac ATS Luxury (turbo)	76	

versions of the ATS lack Cue and gain radio knobs, but their tiny touch screen is no prize.

Trunk space can be expanded with 60/40 folding rear seatbacks or a narrow pass-through. There's no room for a spare tire; run-flat tires are standard on our ATS.

BMW X1

ROAD-TEST SCORE
74

BMW's least-expensive offering is a small sport-utility vehicle that puts the accent on "sport."

Acceleration is quick from the 2.0-liter, turbocharged four-cylinder engine, and handling is very nimble, thanks to sharp steering and minimal body lean.

But the X1 is focused on fun instead of practicality. Its modest dimensions create a tight backseat and small cargo hold. The ride is very firm. The heavy steering effort can be annoying when parking. And the controls are complicated, with or without the optional iDrive system.

Quick and sporty

The 240-hp engine in our xDrive28i version is mated to a responsive eight-speed automatic transmission that shifts very smoothly. That combo returns a good 23 mpg overall on premium fuel. A start/stop system turns off the engine at stops to save fuel but reboots with a shudder when power is needed again. Our vehicle has all-wheel drive, but the X1 is also available with rear-wheel drive. The xDrive35i version has a stronger 300-hp, 3.0-liter turbocharged inline-six-cylinder engine, but our turbo four doesn't disappoint.

How they compare

Rec.	LUXURY COMPACT SUVs	0	100				
		P	I	F	G	V	E
✓	Audi Allroad 2.0T Premium	79					
✓	Volkswagen Tiguan SEL	76					
	BMW X1 xDrive28i (2.0T)	74					
	Mini Cooper Countryman S	66					

Handling is agile and sporty. With quick turn-in response and good grip, the X1 was secure when we pushed it to its handling limits at our track. It posted a decent speed while negotiating our avoidance maneuver.

Abrupt motions at low speeds on uneven pavement mar the ride, but it smoothes out a bit on the highway. The interior is pretty quiet, although some engine noise escapes into the cabin.

A cabin of compromises

Interior materials include some nice padded pieces alternating with cheaper-looking bits. Drivers have generous leg and head room, but the wide center console pushes in from the right. The sporty steering wheel is nice to grip, but it doesn't telescope outward enough. Front seats are firm and supportive but flat; seats with larger bolsters are optional. Two adults fit in the rear, but a low and short seat cushion hurts thigh support. Three is a tight squeeze.

Skipping the navigation system omits BMW's complicated iDrive multifunction controller. But it forces other compromises. Without navigation, you can't get a backup camera, needed to help the X1's tight rear visibility. The omission of iDrive also leaves you with basic phone connectivity and no streaming audio. Moreover, the radio you get in return is still complicated.

The electronic shifter takes some getting used to. At least the dual-zone climate system has simple controls and works well. We like the heated steering wheel.

Cargo room is modest. The rear seatbacks split and fold 40/20/40 for more space and versatility. Run-flat tires are standard, so no spare is included. Reliability is unknown.



THIN RING
A flimsy but removable cup holder intrudes into the passenger space.

Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Acceleration, agility, steering feedback, transmission, fuel economy
LOWS	Ride, steering effort, rear visibility, modest cabin room
TRIM LINE	xDrive28i
DRIVETRAIN	240-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine; eight-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	Leather, power seats, heated seats, heated steering wheel, moonroof, Bluetooth, Valencia paint, satellite radio
TESTED PRICE	\$38,795

More test findings

BRAKING	Very good overall.
HEADLIGHTS	The low beams have good intensity but don't reach far enough. A sharp upper cutoff reduces visibility over undulations. The high beams shine far forward with more intensity.
ACCESS	Super-easy entry height but tight getting into rear seat.
VISIBILITY	A small rear window and thick rear pillars obscure the view. A backup camera is sorely needed but comes only with expensive option packages.
CABIN STORAGE	Moderate, with a deep bin in front of the shifter.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	The rear-center restraint does not adjust and is not tall enough to provide protection.
CHILD SEATS	It's difficult to secure forward-facing seats using the belts. The center-rear head restraint prevents some forward-facing seats from sitting flush against the seatback. A long buckle stalk makes some installations difficult.



Scan for video.





Nissan Pathfinder

ROAD-TEST SCORE
69

With its 2013 redesign, the Pathfinder was transformed from a rugged, truck-based SUV capable of venturing off-road and towing hefty loads into a softer, gentler car-based SUV that's more family friendly. It now provides easier access and a larger interior, which still holds three rows of seats and up to seven people. But the new model doesn't stand out from the crowd.

It handles most of the basics of everyday driving pretty well. The ride is fairly comfortable; the 260-hp, 3.5-liter V6 engine provides ample power and a competitive 18 mpg overall; and the cabin has easy-to-use, straightforward controls. The second-row seat can slide forward to clear a path to the third row, even when a child seat is installed in it—a handy feature.

But handling is disappointing. The Pathfinder lumbers through corners like a large truck. And the small back window inhibits the view straight back.

Overall this new model manages to be competent enough but uninspiring. It's too new for us to have reliability data to recommend it.

Plainly practical

The Pathfinder is no joy to drive. It responds unenthusiastically, and the steering is devoid of feedback. Still, when pushed to its modest handling limits, the stability-control system intervened early and kept it secure.

The cabin is quiet, and the ride is generally compliant, except on uneven pavement, where it becomes a bit unsettled.

Acceleration is OK, but it takes a bit of time to build up steam. Most competitors have 20 to 40 more horsepower. The continuously variable transmission operates smoothly, but there's no manual-shift override. Towing capacity is a class-average 5,000 pounds.

The optional all-wheel drive sends power mostly to the front wheels and is slow to respond when more rear assistance is needed. That results in wheel spin, which activates the traction-control system, at times dropping power just when you need it.

Cabin ambience is plain for an SUV at this price. Seats are well-tailored, but dashboard plastics are hard. A tilt-and-telescoping steering wheel and generous room make it easy for drivers to get well situated.

The large front seats are well-padded and supportive. Though the second-row seat has plenty of leg room, the low cushion hurts thigh support and seating posture. The low third-row seat is best left to kids.

A controller and surrounding buttons let you move through the dash screen fairly easily, but other controls make them mostly redundant. Opting for the navigation system gets you a touch screen. Wirelessly pairing a phone via Bluetooth is clunky.

Cargo space is generous. The third row splits 50/50 and folds into the floor. The second row splits 60/40. A powered liftgate is standard on SL and higher trims.

BACK DRAFT The standard three-zone climate system provides basic controls for passengers in the rear seat.

Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Roominess, controls, access
LOWS	Handling, rear visibility, second-row thigh support
TRIM LINE	SL
DRIVETRAIN	260-hp, 3.5-liter V6 engine; continuously variable transmission; all-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	Bose audio system, dual panoramic sunroof, tow hitch and wiring
TESTED PRICE	\$40,470

More test findings

BRAKING	Very good overall.
HEADLIGHTS	Halogen low beams provide good visibility. High beams reach a very good distance.
ACCESS	Easy, with a modest step-in height, large door openings, and a flush sill. The second-row passenger seat can slide forward with a LATCH-installed child seat in place, aiding third-row access.
VISIBILITY	Head restraints obscure the small rear window, and rear roof pillars are wide. A backup camera is standard on all but the base model.
CABIN STORAGE	Generous overall.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	The second-row center restraint is not tall enough for protection, even when raised.
CHILD SEATS	It's difficult to secure seats using safety belts. The second-row outboard LATCH anchors are tough to access. Securing a rear-facing seat in the third row is difficult.

How they compare

Rec.	3-ROW MIDSIZED SUVs	0	100
		P	F G V6 E
✓	Toyota Highlander Limited (V6)	81	
✓	Chevrolet Traverse LT	80	
✓	Mazda CX-9 Grand Touring	76	
✓	Honda Pilot EX-L	73	
	Nissan Pathfinder SL	69	
	Ford Explorer XLT (V6)	65	



Scan for video.

✓ Recommended

Compare



VERSION	Honda Civic	Nissan Sentra	Cadillac ATS	BMW X1	Nissan Pathfinder
TRIM LINE	EX	SV	Luxury	xDrive28i	SL
PRICE: BASE/TESTED ⁽¹⁾	\$20,815/\$21,605	\$17,970/\$20,570	\$39,395/\$43,295	\$32,350/\$38,795	\$36,070/\$40,470
DRIVETRAIN					
Engine	1.8-liter 4-cyl. (140 hp)	1.8-liter 4-cyl. (130 hp)	2.0-liter 4-cyl. (272 hp) turbo	2.0-liter 4-cyl. (240 hp) turbo	3.5-liter V6 (260 hp)
Transmission	5-speed automatic	CVT	6-speed automatic	8-speed automatic	CVT
Drive wheels	Front	Front	Rear	AWD	4WD
TIRES TESTED					
Model & size	Continental ContiProContact, size P205/55R16 89H	Continental ContiProContact, size P205/55R16 89H	Michelin Primacy MXM4 2P, size P225/45R17 90V	Goodyear Eagle LS 2 RunOnFlat, size 225/50R17 94H	Continental Cross Contact LX, size 235/65R18 106T
RATINGS					
PERFORMANCE					
Acceleration	○	○	●	●	●
0 to 60 mph, sec.	9.7	9.7	6.5	6.8	7.7
45 to 65 mph, sec.	6.0	6.6	4.6	4.3	5.2
Quarter-mile, sec.	17.5	17.5	14.9	15.3	16.0
Transmission	●	●	●	●	●
Routine handling	●	○	●	●	●
Emergency handling	●	○	●	●	●
Avoid. maneuver, speed, mph	53.0	55.5	57.5	52.5	47.0
Braking	●	●	●	●	●
From 60 mph, dry/wet, ft.	136/146	129/138	125/133	133/144	137/145
Headlights	○	○	●	●	○
COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE					
Ride	●	○	●	○	●
Noise	○	○	●	●	●
Driving position	●	●	●	●	●
Front-seat comfort	●	○	●	●	●
Rear-seat comfort/third-row seat	○	●	●	○	●
Access	○	●	○	●	●
Controls and displays	●	●	●	○	●
Interior fit and finish	○	○	●	●	●
Trunk/cargo area	○	●	●	●	○
PREDICTED RELIABILITY	●	New	New	New	New
FUEL					
Overall mpg	29	29	23	23	18
City/highway mpg	20/40	21/38	15/33	16/32	13/25
Type	regular	regular	premium	premium	regular
Capacity, gal./Cruising range, mi.	13.2/385	13.3/385	16.5/380	16.6/390	19.5/360
Annual cost, 12K mi. at \$3.50/gal.	\$1,445	\$1,440	\$1,925 @ \$3.70/gallon	\$1,900 @ \$3.70/gallon	\$2,270
SAFETY					
CRASH TESTS					
IIHS frontal offset	Good	NA	NA	NA	Good
IIHS side	Good	NA	NA	NA	Good
IIHS rear	Good	NA	NA	NA	NA
IIHS roof strength	Good	NA	NA	NA	NA
NHTSA front, driver/pass.	NA/NA	●/○	●/●	NA/NA	●/○
NHTSA side, driver/rear	NA/NA	●/●	●/●	NA/NA	●/●
NHTSA rollover 2WD/4WD	●/NA	●/NA	●/●	NA/NA	●/●
AIR BAGS					
Side, front/rear	std./no	std./no	std./no	std./no	std./no
Head protection	standard	standard	standard	standard	std. w/rollover
SPECIFICATIONS					
DIMENSIONS AND WEIGHT					
Length/width/height, in.	177/69/57	182/69/59	183/71/56	175/71/61	192/73/72
Wheelbase, in.	105	106	109	104	112
Turning circle, ft.	38	37	37	40	40
Ground clearance, in.	4.5	5.5	5.0	6.5	6.5
Curb weight, lb. (% front/rear)	2,845 (61/39)	2,835 (60/40)	3,420 (51/49)	3,780 (51/49)	4,505 (54/46)
Maximum load, lb.	850	860	870	905	1,150
Luggage, suitcases+duffels/cargo volume, cu. ft.	2+3	3+2	2+1	26.0	39.5
Towing capacity, lb.	1,000	NR	NR	NR	5,000
INTERIOR ROOM					
Front shoulder room, in.	56.0	54.5	55.0	55.0	60.0
Front leg room, in.	41.0	41.0	43.0	42.5	42.0
Front head room, in. ⁽²⁾	3.0	5.0	3.5	4.0	4.5
Rear-row shoulder room, in.	52.5	53.0	53.0	54.5	60.0
Rear-row leg room, in.	27.0	30.0	27.5	26.0	29.5
Rear-row head room, in. ⁽²⁾	2.0	2.0	2.0	3.5	3.0
Third-row shoulder room, in.	—	—	—	—	56.0
Third-row leg room, in.	—	—	—	—	25.5
Third-row head room, in. ⁽²⁾	—	—	—	—	2.0

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

2011 Yamaha Sport
Touring FJR1300A

Most reliable motorcycles

Japanese bikes have fewer problems than BMW and Harley models

YES, THE ARTFULLY sculpted lines of a BMW motorcycle and the throaty rumble of a Harley V-twin motor can stir your senses. But they're often accompanied by more problems than Japanese motorcycles from Honda, Kawasaki, and Yamaha. Those are the findings from our first motorcycle reliability survey, conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center, in which we asked subscribers to tell us about any serious problems or repairs they had experienced with their bikes in the previous four years.

As more people take up motorcycle riding, whether to save gas or simply pursue a new or rekindled passion, those new findings can help you avoid problems when you shop for one.

Overall, about one-fifth of the 4,680 bikes for which we received data experienced a major problem in that time period, with the odds varying significantly among brands. The chances for a problem ranged from about 1 in 10 for Yamaha motorcycles

to almost 1 in 3 for BMWs and about 1 in 4 for Harley-Davidsons.

Although we didn't receive adequate data to include Suzuki and Triumph motorcycles in our analysis, the responses we

got suggest that Suzukis provided similar reliability as the other Japanese brands and Triumphs were among the more problematic brands.

We also found that reliability can vary a

Antilock brakes: A real lifesaver

A welcome trend in motorcycle technology is the growing availability of antilock brakes. Bikes equipped with ABS are 37 percent less likely to be involved in a fatal crash, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

The reason is simple: Locking up the brakes in a panic stop robs the rider of any steering control. That can easily lead to a skid and crash, which can result in serious injury. ABS can help prevent skids and crashes by allowing the rider to retain steering control during an emergency stop, and it can be especially valuable in slippery conditions.

This critical feature is now standard on many high-end models and adds only a few hundred dollars to the price of more basic bikes—a worthwhile investment in your safety.



KEEPING CONTROL Antilock brakes can help you avoid skidding during an emergency stop, even on slippery roads.

lot by the type of bike. Looking at the five brands in our analysis, owners of touring models had the most problems, at 27 percent. That was followed by on/off-road dual-sports (23 percent), sport touring bikes (19 percent), and cruisers (16 percent). Though we didn't receive sufficient data to rate high-performance sport bikes, the information we got suggests they have been as reliable as cruisers.

What's going wrong

Among the bikes that needed repairs, respondents reported having the most trouble with accessories, such as lights, instruments, switches, and radios (21 percent); brakes (20 percent); the electrical system (16 percent); and the fuel system (15 percent). Our experts suggest that some of the fuel-system problems may be due to improper storage during the off-season.

Mechanical engine problems were relatively rare, with only 3 percent having trouble with the cylinder head or valve-train, or with the crankcase, crankshaft, or pistons. Similarly, only 3 percent needed transmission repairs, although 7 percent had clutch problems.

Fortunately, most repairs were fairly inexpensive and were performed quickly. Seventy-five percent of all repairs cost less

than \$200 out-of-pocket, and about two-thirds of the repaired bikes were back on the road within a couple of days.

Satisfying brands

Despite the higher number of problems, Harley and BMW owners were among the most satisfied with their bikes. When we asked whether, considering everything, they would buy their bike again if they had it to do over, 75 percent of Harley owners said definitely yes, closely followed by 74 percent of BMW owners and 72 percent of Honda owners. By contrast, only 63 and 60 percent of Yamaha and Kawasaki own-

ers, respectively, were as emphatic.

In our car-owner satisfaction surveys, we've seen that models that generate enthusiasm—including sports cars and fuel-scrimping hybrids—tend to do the best in this subjective measure. Perhaps sculpted lines and rumbling engines also strike the right note among motorcyclists.

SEE HOW ABS PROTECTS YOU

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



What your mechanic wants you to know

Motorcyclists could easily prevent many of the problems they encounter. That's the unvarnished message we got from motorcycle mechanics from around the country who discussed common problems they see in their shops. Here's how to prevent unnecessary expense and downtime:



1 Stay on top of maintenance.

What makes mechanics shake their heads are the regular and egregious examples of neglected maintenance: brake pads worn down to the metal, drive belts and air filters with holes from rocks worn in them, and long-overdue oil changes.

"Preventive maintenance is definitely the key to motorcycle longevity and keeping your maintenance cost down," says Joe Dane, master Harley-Davidson mechanic at Motorcycles of Manchester, in N.H. In addition to engine oil, that includes changing brake fluid, which can absorb moisture; lubing chains; aligning wheels, steering heads, and drive belts; and cleaning or changing air filters.

metal-on-metal, they make an unholy grinding noise. And yet people just continue to ride them."

4 Inspect your bike regularly.

"Really check your bike over before any long trip," Dane says. A lot of maintenance is simple stuff that you can easily see: lights, forks, or belts or chains. "Make sure you have no leaks," he adds.

Jon Roppe, chief Harley-Davidson instructor at the Motorcycle Maintenance Institute in Phoenix, says, "Everybody wants their bike to look amazing, but they tend to really lose the safety aspect."

5 Store the bike properly.

Motorcycle storage is a big issue. "It's the guys who let their bikes sit for weeks and months at a time that run into problems with failures," Roppe says. His advice: Use fuel stabilizer to keep filters, pumps, carburetors, and fuel injectors from clogging. Lift the tires off the ground to prevent cracking and flat spots. Put a tender, or trickle charger, on the battery to keep it charged. And if you can, store your bike in a garage or under a cover out of the wind.

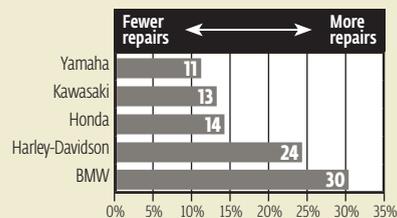
2 Keep your tires properly inflated.

Each mechanic mentioned low tire pressure as a consistent problem. When tires are underinflated, "handling gets really hard, steering gets hard, and the bike doesn't want to lean," says Mike Franklin, owner of Mike's Garage in Los Angeles. "It causes all kinds of problems." Check the tires' pressure weekly.

3 Check the brakes.

Motorcycle brake pads cost as little as \$50, says Dane, but once they've worn too far, "you have to replace the rotors and everything else, and the bill jumps up enormously." Franklin adds, "When the [brake pads] get down to

Percentage of bikes with problems



Source: Consumer Reports Annual Product Reliability Survey. Data are based on 4,424 reader responses regarding about 4,680 motorcycles bought new from 2009 to 2012. Differences of fewer than 4 percentage points are not meaningful. Data are adjusted to eliminate differences linked solely to the age and mileage of the motorcycle. Models within a brand can vary, and design or manufacture changes may affect future reliability.

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Not using their noodles

Note the boast on the older bag of Pennsylvania Dutch Egg Noodles. And how much does the newer bag weigh? There it is, in tiny print: 12 oz. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.



Chutzpah Award

Yes, the vitamin chosen for the study was Centrum Silver. But the study (published in the Journal of the American Medical Association) found that Centrum Silver didn't reduce the incidence of major cardiovascular events, heart attack, stroke, or cardiovascular disease mortality in physicians who took those vitamins for more than 10 years.



Consider the source

Drive too fast past this billboard and you might think the voters were impartial.



Topsy-turvy telephone

"I liked my new phone," a Massachusetts reader wrote, "until I tried to call my daughter, whose number ends with 6."



Fire the proofreader

Submitted by a nervous dermatologist.



Haven't we seen those symbols before?

Loyal CONSUMER REPORTS readers will recognize the solid black dots as our "Poor" score, though EdenPure means them as a compliment for its Gen3 heater, which actually did fine in our tests.

The Consumer Reports New Car Price Report includes access to the Build & Buy Service. Purchasers have saved over \$100 million vs MSRP using this program*.



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Canada **Extra**

Information from CONSUMER REPORTS® for Canadian readers

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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.

Immersion blenders

Report, page 46, and Ratings, page 47

Recommended models only, from 6 tested.

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
				0 100 P F G VG E
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Breville Control Grip BSB510XL*	\$100	91
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	DeLonghi DHB723*	100	81

*Comes with chopper and whisk attachments and a beaker.

Blenders

Report, page 46, and Ratings, page 47

Recommended models only, from 59 tested.

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
				0 100 P F G V E
✓	1	Ninja Master Prep Professional QB1004	\$ 70	91
✓	2	Vitamix TNC ①	540	91
✓	3	Ninja Professional NJ600	100	87
✓	4	Vitamix 750	750	81
✓	7	KitchenAid KSB565 ②	100	74

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
				0 100 P F G V E
✓	8	Ninja Kitchen System 1100	\$200	73
✓	9	Breville Juice & Blend ②	500	70
✓	10	Blendtec Total Blender WildSid e①	500	70

① Cooks soup. ② Has a glass jar.

Mowers

Report, page 30, and Ratings, pages 32-33

Twenty-one of the 73 tested mowers are available, including 11 of the recommended models.

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Specs		Overall score
				Deck size (in.)	Engine cc/volts/amps	
						0 100 P F G V E
A GAS SELF-PROPELLED, MULTI-SPEED Best for most lawns, these blend ease and performance.						
✓	3	Toro 20381	\$620	21	159cc	82
✓	4	Honda HRR2169VYC	660	21	160	82
✓	5	Honda HRR2169VKC	560	21	160	81
✓	6	Toro 20333C	500	22	190	75
✓	8	Toro 20332C	460	22	190	73
	19	Craftsman 36208	430	22	190	65
	25	Troy-Bilt 12A-B22Q563	450	21	190	57
B GAS SELF-PROPELLED, SINGLE-SPEED Suitable for most lawns, but they sacrifice flexibility.						
✓	1	Toro 20370	370	22	149cc	66
✓	2	Toro 20371	380	22	149	65
	9	Lawn-Boy 10634	330	20	190	52
	10	Lawn-Boy 10632	280	20	140	50
	12	Craftsman 36219	380	22	190	48

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Specs		Overall score
				Deck size (in.)	Engine cc/volts/amps	
						0 100 P F G V E
C GAS PUSH For smaller, flatter lawns and for trimming larger ones.						
	5	Troy-Bilt 11A-A22Q563	\$390	21	140cc	59
	10	Lawn-Boy 10630	240	20	140	55
D ELECTRIC BATTERY Best for lawns small enough to mow within the 15- to 45-minute run time.						
✓	1	Black & Decker SPCM1936 ④	NA	19	36V	61
✓	2	Black & Decker CM1936 CM1936ZF2	NA	19	36	59
✓	3	Black & Decker CMM1200	NA	19	24	58
	4	Toro 20360	430	20	36	56
	7	Black & Decker CM1836	NA	18	36	53
E ELECTRIC CORDED Best for smaller, more open lawns where the cord isn't an issue.						
✓	1	Black & Decker MM875	NA	19	12A	56
	2	Black & Decker MM1800	NA	18	12	49

① Mulching and side-discharging only. ② Mulching and bagging only. ③ Side-discharge only. ④ Self-propelled electric.

Tractors and riders

Report, page 30, and Ratings, page 35

Twenty-three of the 46 tested tractors and riders are available, including 8 of the recommended models.

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price		Specs		Overall score
			Machine	Bag/mulch kit	Deck size (in.)	Engine power (hp)	

A LAWN TRACTORS Best for most large lawns; models with tight turning are footnoted.

1		Cub Cadet 14W-3GE-596	\$4,950	\$570/\$75	42	20	77
✓	2	Snapper 2691025	2,700	430/80	46	23	76
✓	5	John Deere D110	1,900	340/30	42	20	74
	6	Cub Cadet 13AX91AT596	2,200	380/30	46	20	74
	8	Cub Cadet 13AX90AS596	1,950	550/50	42	19	73
✓	10	Craftsman 60226 ²	NA	310/53	42	24	72
	13	Snapper 2691021	2,000	430/80	46	22	68
	17	John Deere D105	1,700	350/100	42	18	65
	18	Yard Machines 13AN78TS500	1,450	300/50	42	20	64
	19	Yard Machines 13AJ79TS500	1,650	400/50	46	22	62

B LAWN TRACTORS (WIDE DECK) These offer wider cuts; models with tight turning are footnoted.

1		Cub Cadet 13AS92AP596 ¹	3,150	550/50	50	25	73
✓	2	John Deere D140	2,300	350/35	48	22	69

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price		Specs		Overall score
			Machine	Bag/mulch kit	Deck size (in.)	Engine power (hp)	

B LAWN TRACTORS (WIDE DECK) continued

✓	3	Craftsman 60269 ²	NA	\$410/\$53	54	26	68
✓	4	Craftsman 60268 ²	NA	410/53	54	26	68
	5	Husqvarna YTH22K48	\$2,000	370/50	48	23	64
	6	Cub Cadet 13AQ91AP596	2,500	400/75	50	25	64

C ZERO-TURN-RADIUS RIDERS All turn tightly, but most can be hard to control on hills.

	3	Cub Cadet 17AF5BHH010	4,600	400/50	46	20	76
	4	Cub Cadet 17WF2BBDT010	3,500	400/50	42	22	75
✓	7	Toro 74627	2,900	500/140	42	20	71
	8	Cub Cadet 17AF2ACS596	3,000	400/75	42	22	71
✓	9	Husqvarna RZ4621	3,200	430/50	46	23	70
	12	Cub Cadet 17AI5BHB010	5,000	350/200	48	22	64
	13	Cub Cadet 17AI2ACP596	3,500	500/50	50	22	63

¹ Volts. ² Tighter turning than most tractors.

String trimmers

Report and Ratings, page 36

Recommended models only, from 67 tested.

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Weight (lb.) ¹	Engine cc/amp/volt	Overall score
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A GAS-POWERED MODELS These offer mobility and unlimited run time but require more upkeep.

✓	2	Stihl FS 45	\$180	10.5	27cc	81
✓	3	Stihl FS 40 C-E	230	11	27	81
✓	4	Echo SRM-225 ²	290	12	21	80
✓	5	Stihl FS 56 RC-E Easy2Start ²	300	12.5	27	78

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Weight (lb.) ¹	Engine cc/amp/volt	Overall score
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A GAS-POWERED MODELS continued

✓	6	Echo GT225 ³	\$190	10	21cc	77
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C CORDED ELECTRIC MODEL This provides unlimited run time within range of a power outlet.

✓	2	Stihl FSE 60	130	8.5	5 amp	70
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¹ Weight is to the nearest half-pound. ² Straight shaft; others are curved. ³ Fixed-line head; others are automatic or bump-feed.

Autos

Report and Ratings, pages 50-57

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 SEDANS								
Honda Civic	\$15,440-\$26,190	3.8	10.2	4.1	20.1	11.8	5.9	8.1
Nissan Sentra	14,848-22,998	3.8	10.3	4.7	20.1	11.2	6.2	8.1
LUXURY COMPACT SEDAN								
Cadillac ATS	35,195-53,450	2.6	6.9	3.4	17.1	15.3	7.1	10.2
LUXURY COMPACT SUV								
BMW X1	36,900-39,900	2.8	7.1	3.2	17.5	14.7	7.3	10.1
MIDSIZED SUV								
Nissan Pathfinder	29,998-42,098	3.4	8.1	4.0	18.3	18.3	9.4	12.7

Contact info

How to reach manufacturers in Canada.

Black & Decker
800-544-6986
blackanddecker.com

Blendtec
800-253-6383
blendtec.com

Breville
855-683-3535
breville.ca

Craftsman
Contact local Sears
sears.ca

Cub Cadet
800-965-4282
cubcadet.ca

DeLonghi
888-335-6644
delonghi.ca

Echo
877-324-6660
echo.ca

Honda
888-946-6329
honda.ca

Husqvarna
800-487-5962
husqvarna.com

John Deere
Contact local dealer
johndeere.com

KitchenAid
800-541-6390
kitchenaid.com

Lawn-Boy
800-526-6937
toro.com/en-ca

Ninja
877-646-5288
ninjakitchen.com

Snapper
800-472-7606
snapper.com

Stihl
519-681-3000
stihl.ca

Toro
800-544-5364
toro.com/en-ca

Troy-Bilt
800-567-6775
troybilt.ca

Vitamix
800-848-2649
vitamix.com

Yard Machines
800-668-1238
mtdcanada.com