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The Toyota Prius V wagon, BMW X3, Land Rover Range Rover Evoque, a Volkswagen Tiguan update, and the Jeep Wrangler. Ratings page 56

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

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

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

Ratings We rate products using these symbols:
• Excellent • Very good • Good • Fair • Poor
• CR Best Buy Products with this icon offer the best combination of performance and price.
• Recommended product Models with this designation perform well and stand out for reasons we note.
• Recommended car These tested well, are reliable, and performed adequately if crash-tested or included in a federal rollover test.
• Don’t Buy We label products with this icon when we judge them to be safety risks or to have serious performance problems.

This issue by the numbers

What you’ll save
$2,370 Buy a BMW X3 luxury SUV and save this much over a Range Rover Evoque.
$780 Buy a Hoover Tempo Widepath upright vacuum for $100 and save this much over a Miele S7580 Bolero.
$150 Get a JVC 42-inch LCD TV and save this much over a Vizio model.

Best & worst scores
Costco online store SCORE 88 Costco
Jeep Wrangler SCORE 20

Coming in April
Annual Auto Issue, with profiles of more than 200 vehicles, best and worst cars, safety ratings, and used-car reliability.
Artsic in juice
As the father of two young boys, I am shocked, appalled, and frightened by your great exposé “Arsenic in Your Juice” (January 2012). Any parent in their right mind would not even consider giving apple or grape juice to their children anymore.

Steven Campiglia
Belmore, NY

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

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

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

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

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

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

John Jacobs
Mystic, CT

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

Send your letters to www.ConsumerReports.org/askourexperts.
No hiding the hazards

It has been one year since a veil began to be lifted. In March 2011 the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission launched a consumer-friendly database, at www.saferproducts.gov, that lets people report product-safety issues and makes the reports public and easily searchable. Before then, complaints to the CPSC were largely hidden while they were investigated. The new database lets you check for safety issues before you buy, file a safety complaint about a product you own, and learn whether others have had the same problem. A strong consumer law enacted in 2006 created the database, setting the stage for a change to the old system.

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

We see a pattern

Safety groups, including Consumer Reports, are digging into the database. It was one of the first sources our reporters turned to for an investigative article in this issue on appliance fires (see page 22). The database had more than 850 reports of fires or fire hazards involving a dozen types of common appliances. SaferProducts.gov also helps us understand which products present serious hazards to our children. Kids In Danger, a nonprofit that works to make children’s products safer, analyzed the database at the four-month mark. It found that some 20 percent of the entries involved kids’ products or injuries to kids. Among them were complaints about already recalled toys and children’s products with loose screws and breaking parts. Getting those out of homes quickly can literally save life and limb.

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

FROM OUR PRESIDENT

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Detergent doses: ‘Ultra’ confusing

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

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

That’s easy to do. Some of the caps’ fill lines are hard to decipher, and the line for the largest load may be only halfway up the cap (see box). Many people use twice the recommended amount, says Brian Sansoni, spokesman for the American Cleaning Institute, a trade group that includes detergent manufacturers. That could be due to poor cap design, a “more is better” philosophy, misreading the caps’ lines, or simply not reading the directions. Using too much detergent not only wastes money but also can prolong the rinse cycle. Some washers keep going when the water is too sudsy.

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

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

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

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

Several very good, somewhat cheaper alternatives are listed in the Ratings. Like top-rated Land O Lakes, they have a clean flavor (no off-tastes) and a sharp melt (after a slight delay they melt suddenly, sharply, and smoothly). The rest of the butter stand-ins have a slower melt and slight flaws: Some taste stale; some leave an oily residue or fatty feeling in the mouth. The lower-rated products are mostly sticks, not tubs.

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

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

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

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

---

**DID YOU KNOW?**

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

---

**CLAIM CHECK**

**Burger King’s new fries**

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

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

Bottom line. The new fries are appealing,
ucts, but its tub is 45 ounces compared with 15 ounces for most others. Benecol is prici-
est but doesn’t taste very good.

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

### Ratings

**Butter substitutes**

In order of taste.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Per serving (1 tbsp.)</th>
<th>Comments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rec.</td>
<td>Cost</td>
<td>Calories</td>
<td>Total fat (g)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>EXCELLENT</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ Land O Lakes Spreadable Butter with Canola Oil tub</td>
<td>13¢</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>VERY GOOD</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ Smart Balance Buttery Spread Original tub</td>
<td>$1</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter Light Spread tub</td>
<td>$1</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ Brummel &amp; Brown 35% Vegetable Oil Spread tub</td>
<td>$1</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ I Can’t Believe It’s Not Butter Original Spread tub</td>
<td>$1</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ Shedd’s Spread Country Crock Original tub</td>
<td>$8</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>☑ Olivio Original Spread tub</td>
<td>$8</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>GOOD</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shedd’s Spread Country Crock Churn Style tub</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promise Buttery Spread stick</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Imperial 35% Vegetable Oil Spread stick</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benecol 55% Vegetable Oil Spread tub</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land O Lakes Margarine stick</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fleischmann’s Original Spread stick</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parkay 60% Vegetable Oil Spread stick</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue Bonnet 53% Vegetable Oil Spread stick</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Movie-theater food: A scary story

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

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

It turns out that a large tub of buttered popcorn and a large Coke can supply all the calories the average adult is supposed to eat in a day. OK, maybe you’d share that popcorn, but even one serving of pretzel pieces with cheese can provide up to half a day’s calories, almost half a day’s fat, and more than a day’s sodium.

The table below lists nutrient ranges for each food. Amounts for a given size (and nutrition) varied, even within a chain. AMC gave us 18 to 23 cups of unbuttered popcorn in a “large” tub; National Amusements, 14 to 16 cups; Regal, 20 to 25 cups. At AMC, the buttered popcorn’s fat ranged from 69 to 113 grams (the equivalent of 17 to 28 pats of butter). You could blame an individual worker’s heavy hand with butter topping, but even unbuttered popcorn varied in fat content: 49 to 81 grams at AMC, for instance.

A snack-by-snack summary

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

By our estimates, even medium and small tubs of popcorn with butter would have had as much as 118 percent of the daily fat limit, and 318 to 1,080 calories. Skipping butter lowered fat and calories by roughly 20 percent on average. Fiber is no reason to eat that much pop-

### Nutrition nightmare

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

**Safety worries: Distracted driving tops the list**

When we asked 1,000 Americans recently about a range of safety issues, they said that distracted driving is their biggest worry. Eighty-seven percent are highly concerned about drivers who, for example, talk or text on cell phones or drive while drunk. On the other hand, 40 percent of Americans said that the nation’s autos are much safer than they were 25 years ago. Here, more findings from a nationally representative survey conducted by the Consumer Reports National Testing Center.
corn, but at least it’s there: Our large tubs with butter had 18 to 34 grams, up to 121 percent of the recommended daily value.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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**Match the drug to its side effects**

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

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

**Drug**

A. **Advair Diskus 250/50** (salmeterol/fluticasone): asthma, COPD

B. **Chantix** (varenicline): smoking cessation

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

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

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

F. **Lipitor** (atorvastatin): high cholesterol

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

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

I. **Reclast** (zoledronic acid): osteoporosis

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

K. **Toviaz** (fesoterodine): overactive bladder

L. **Uloric** (febuxostat): gout

**Possible side effects**

1. Severe fungal infections, tuberculosis, cancer

2. Burping, change in sense of taste, possible increase in LDL (bad) cholesterol

3. Severe or fatal worsening of asthma symptoms, reduced adrenal function, decline in bone density, weakened immunity, slowing of growth in children

4. Muscle pain or weakness, liver damage, kidney problems and/or kidney failure

5. Strange or vivid dreams, increased risk of heart problems, increase in hostility, agitation, depressed mood, suicidal thoughts

6. Mental confusion, blurred vision, trouble emptying bladder

7. Severe kidney problems; loss of bone in jaw; extreme pain in bones, joints, or muscles

8. Back pain, muscle aches, sudden decrease or loss of vision or hearing

9. Dizziness, liver problems, low blood pressure and fainting, higher blood pressure, problems with urine flow, suicidal thoughts in young people

10. Weight gain, rise in blood sugar and cholesterol, higher death risk in older people with dementia, possible increase in suicidal thoughts in young people

11. Weight gain, swelling in the hands and feet, severe allergic reactions, suicidal thoughts or actions

12. Liver problems, joint pain, rash

**Answers:** A: three, B: five, C: eight, D: nine, E: one, F: four, G: two, H: one, I: zero, J: six, K: one, L: two
Don’t be starstruck by supplements

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

“We’ve had more than 400 recalls of spiked products since 2008,” says Daniel Fabricant, Ph.D., director of the FDA’s division of dietary-supplement programs. The FDA’s crackdown on spiked products.

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

**Bodybuilding**

**Who:** Michael Vick, quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles.
**Product:** MusclePharm, a line of supplements the company claims can enhance performance and mental function, boost endurance, build muscle, speed recovery, fuel fat loss, improve sleep, or enhance libido.
**Pitch:** “Our sport is our life,” says an ad featuring Vick in a MusclePharm T-shirt.
**Does he use it?** I take MuscleGels and the Armor-V every day,” Vick said in an e-mail message from his rep. His three-year, $15 million endorsement deal includes performance bonuses.

**Who:** Pro running back Ray Rice of the Baltimore Ravens.
**Product:** RipFire Xcelerate, a supplement marketed to enhance overall workout performance and maximize results.
**Pitch:** “With Ripfire you’ll feel increased energy and endurance with every workout,” says a TV commercial that features Rice.
**Does he use it?** Rice was not available for an interview, a representative said.

**Who:** Hockey legend Wayne Gretzky.
**Product:** MYO-T12, which the company says inhibits the body’s production of myostatin, a protein that restricts muscle growth.
**Pitch:** “Keeping in shape is tough work,” says Gretzky in a national magazine ad. “It gets tougher as we get older.”
**Does he use it?** Gretzky takes the product every morning, his agent said. His one-year, $150,000 deal includes company stock.

**Weight loss**

**Who:** Kim, Khloé, and Kourtney Kardashian of the E! reality show “Keeping Up With the Kardashians.”
**Product:** QuickTrim, a line that includes supplements with the claim that they help burn calories and boost metabolism.
**Pitch:** “Create the body you deserve!” Kourtney says, wearing a purple bikini in an online ad. “I’ve reached my goal!” Kim says in another.

**Sexual enhancement**

**Who:** Jimmy Johnson, two-time Super Bowl-winning coach and Fox Sports analyst.
**Product:** ExtenZe, a sexual-enhancement supplement for men.
**Pitch:** “If you’re like me and want maximum performance, give ExtenZe a try,” Johnson says in a TV commercial that ran last year.
**Does he use it?** Multiple attempts to reach Johnson were unsuccessful.

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

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

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

**Endorsements endorsement: Who’s selling what**

- **Bodybuilding**
  - **Who:** Michael Vick, quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles.
  - **Product:** MusclePharm, a line of supplements the company claims can enhance performance and mental function, boost endurance, build muscle, speed recovery, fuel fat loss, improve sleep, or enhance libido.
  - **Pitch:** “Our sport is our life,” says an ad featuring Vick in a MusclePharm T-shirt.
  - **Does he use it?** I take MuscleGels and the Armor-V every day,” Vick said in an e-mail message from his rep. His three-year, $15 million endorsement deal includes performance bonuses.
  - **Who:** Pro running back Ray Rice of the Baltimore Ravens.
  - **Product:** RipFire Xcelerate, a supplement marketed to enhance overall workout performance and maximize results.
  - **Pitch:** “With Ripfire you’ll feel increased energy and endurance with every workout,” says a TV commercial that features Rice.
  - **Does he use it?** Rice was not available for an interview, a representative said.
  - **Who:** Hockey legend Wayne Gretzky.
  - **Product:** MYO-T12, which the company says inhibits the body’s production of myostatin, a protein that restricts muscle growth.
  - **Pitch:** “Keeping in shape is tough work,” says Gretzky in a national magazine ad. “It gets tougher as we get older.”
  - **Does he use it?** Gretzky takes the product every morning, his agent said. His one-year, $150,000 deal includes company stock.

- **Weight loss**
  - **Who:** Kim, Khloé, and Kourtney Kardashian of the E! reality show “Keeping Up With the Kardashians.”
  - **Product:** QuickTrim, a line that includes supplements with the claim that they help burn calories and boost metabolism.
  - **Pitch:** “Create the body you deserve!” Kourtney says, wearing a purple bikini in an online ad. “I’ve reached my goal!” Kim says in another.

- **Sexual enhancement**
  - **Who:** Jimmy Johnson, two-time Super Bowl-winning coach and Fox Sports analyst.
  - **Product:** ExtenZe, a sexual-enhancement supplement for men.
  - **Pitch:** “If you’re like me and want maximum performance, give ExtenZe a try,” Johnson says in a TV commercial that ran last year.
  - **Does he use it?** Multiple attempts to reach Johnson were unsuccessful.

**GAME TIME**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2. **Investing too conservatively**

   Retirees who characterized their overall investment style as conservative reported median savings of $478,000, compared with $617,000 for their aggressive counterparts. Readers who considered themselves moderate risk takers fell between those two groups, with $563,000.

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

3. **Not diversifying enough**

   We asked readers who said they planned to retire by 2015 what investment vehicles and asset classes they had used to save. Their choices included 401(k) and 403(b) plans; their homes; IRAs; saving accounts and CDs; stocks, bonds, and mutual funds held outside a retirement plan; and half a dozen other options. Adjusting for the effects of other variables, readers with three or fewer types of investments reported median retirement savings of $246,000, compared with $339,000 for those with seven or more types.

   Of course, people who have more money might be expected to have it in more places. But the finding held true across income levels, and people with lower incomes who diversified widely often accumulated more than those with higher incomes who didn’t. For example, people with incomes under $85,000 who used seven or more investment types reported median savings of $368,000; those with incomes of $125,000 to $199,999 and money in three or fewer places had $315,000.

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

### How to take a pension

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of payout</th>
<th>Readers who did it that way</th>
<th>Those very or completely satisfied</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lump sum</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly annuity</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combination of the two</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>71%</td>
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</table>
SAFETY ALERTS

**Bolt of trouble**

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

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

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

**Lighting hazard**

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

**ON THE RECORD**

**Tainted meat pulled**

Hannaford, a Maine-based grocery chain, is recalling an undetermined amount of ground beef that may contain salmonella. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said that 19 illnesses have been reported that might be associated with the contamination and that the illnesses have been reported in seven states. The salmonella strain is resistant to multiple common antibiotics. Tyson Fresh Meats, of Dakota City, Neb., is recalling almost 41,000 pounds of ground beef that could be contaminated with E. coli 0157:H7. The beef was sent to stores in 16 states. No illnesses have been reported.

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

**$550,000**

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

CONSUMER NOTES

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RECALLS

HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTS

Rayovac NI-CD cordless tool battery packs
Replacement pack can explode unexpectedly, with risk of serious injury.
PRODUCTS: 111,800 battery packs sold at BatteriesPlus stores and online at www.batteriesplus.com between June 2008 and October 2011 for $60. Packs were sold in voltages between 2.4 and 18 volts. There have been five reports of exploding batteries.
WHAT TO DO: Remove the pack from tools. Call BatteriesPlus at 877-856-3232 or go to www.batteriesplus.com for instructions on how to return product for store credit.

Hamilton Beach chrome two-slice toasters
When toasters are first plugged in, heating element can be energized although toast lifter is in up or off position, which poses a risk of fire.
PRODUCTS: 14,000 toasters model 22602 sold nationwide from August 2011 through November 2011 for $19 to $34. Some of the toasters were sent as replacements for toaster model 22600, which was recalled in June 2011 for a fire hazard.
WHAT TO DO: Do not use the toaster. Call Hamilton Beach at 800-576-6600 or go to www.hamiltonbeach.com for instructions on how to get a free replacement toaster.

Sterno 5-Hour Tea Lights
The wax in these tea lights can overheat, with the wax catching fire and causing a hazard.
PRODUCTS: 10,000 cases of wax candles clad in an aluminum cup, item numbers S05TL and S055 with codes 11060 to 11151. The lights were sold in bulk, with 500 to a case, through food distributors and restaurant supply stores from April 2011 through October 2011 for $36 to $50 per case.
WHAT TO DO: Stop using these candles immediately and return unused candles to the place of purchase for a full refund. For more information, you can call Sterno at 877-478-3766 or go to the company website at www.sterno.com.

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Where to buy almost anything

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

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

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

To help you decide, the Consumer Reports National Research Center surveyed subscribers who told us about their shopping experiences at Costco, JCPenney, Kmart, Kohl’s, Macy’s, Meijer (pronounced MY-er), Sam’s Club, Sears, Target, and Walmart. For the first time, some shoppers also told us about their experiences at many of those retailers’ online stores.

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

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

“Smart merchants not only make it easy to find products on their websites, they also provide help by phone, e-mail, or online chats,” says Will Ander, a senior partner at McMillanDoolittle, a Chicago retail consulting company. All the stores in our Ratings have customer service available by phone. Sears and Kmart offer website links to online customer-service chats; Macy’s offers a chat link at checkout.

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

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

**The best ... and worst**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Walmart was the only chain to earn below-average scores for the quality of its men’s, women’s, and children’s clothing. (Kmart received below-average scores for men’s and women’s clothing.) Walmart shoppers were especially likely to complain about long checkout lines and inadequate customer service. In addition, 23 percent of the Walmart shoppers who returned an item to one of its stores the previous year reported at least one problem, significantly more than at any other retailer. (The problem was usually that they were offered only store credit.)

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

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

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

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**Why Costco’s website works**

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

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

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

We also found a broader selection of some smaller goods than you’d typically find in Costco’s stores, such as 918 ink and toner cartridges, 91 video games, and 444 rings (including 198 proposal-ready diamond solitaires). Costco gives shoppers breaks on luxury-quality goods,” says Will Ander, a senior partner at the consulting firm McMillanDoolittle.

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

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

In order of reader score.

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. **JCPenney**
   **THE FACTS.** About 1,400 stores nationwide. Brands include Cindy Crawford Style and Joe by Joseph Abboud; Sephora boutiques are in many stores. The chain will begin selling Martha Stewart wares next year. “They recently hired Ron Johnson to run the company, who was formerly in charge of Apple stores,” says Bob Phibbs, author of “The Retail Doctor’s Guide to Growing Your Business.” Johnson has said the chain will start a new pricing strategy this spring.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

ONLINE READER SCORE 80
Quality ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Selection ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Value ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Checkout ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Service ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Layout ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Macy’s

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

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

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

ONLINE READER SCORE 82
Quality ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Selection ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Value ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Checkout ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Service ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Layout ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Kmart

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

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

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

INSUFFICIENT ONLINE DATA

Walmart

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

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

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

ONLINE READER SCORE 77
Quality ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Selection ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Value ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Checkout ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Service ○ ○ ○ ○ ○
Layout ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

Guide to the Ratings

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

MARCH 2012 WWW.CONSUMERREPORTS.ORG 19
More ways to save

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

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

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

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

Ratings Store products

In order of reader score.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Store</th>
<th>Clothing Men</th>
<th>Clothing Women</th>
<th>Clothing Kids</th>
<th>Watches, Jewelry</th>
<th>Personal care</th>
<th>Hardware</th>
<th>Home décor</th>
<th>Kitchenware</th>
<th>Electronic entertainment</th>
<th>Sporting goods, toys</th>
<th>Readers with complaints</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Costco</td>
<td>★★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★★●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kohl's</td>
<td>★★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCPenney</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
<td>★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macy's</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meijer</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>★</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam's Club</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sears</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kmart</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walmart</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
<td>●</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Better ➔ Worse

8% 3% 7%
11 5 3
8 5 3
10 6 1
9 5 3
13 10 2
15 5 5
14 4 1
18 13 2
23 13 2
Get free shipping. If you order online, shop on sites that offer free shipping with no minimum purchase, including L.L. Bean, Nordstrom, and Zappos.com. Target’s super-discounted Daily Deals ship free, as do most orders over $50 and Target REDcard purchases. Other chains will ship most purchases to any local store free. Find more free-shipping offers at—where else?—www.freeshipping.org.

Why readers shopped where they did

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Store</th>
<th>Top reason for going</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Costco</td>
<td>Low prices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JCPenney</td>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kmart</td>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kohl’s</td>
<td>Low prices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macy’s</td>
<td>High-quality products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meijer</td>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam’s Club</td>
<td>Low prices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sears</td>
<td>High-quality products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Target</td>
<td>Location</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walmart</td>
<td>Low prices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Date(s) of Birth _______________________________________________
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or e-mail to rdrucker@consumer.org or fax to: 202-719-8939

Because of his generous gift, Phil Millner receives lifetime income payments while supporting our mission.
Appliance fires: Is your home safe?

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

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

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

AFTERMATH The Nicols moved to a new home, left, after their kitchen was destroyed in a fire that officials say started in a microwave oven that was not in use.
“It was not the kind of fireworks you want to see on the Fourth of July,” says Ron Nicol, whose lingering sense of anger and loss is fueled by the unusual circumstances of the fire. Though the couple hadn’t cooked that morning and were just back from a 10-day vacation, the official cause of the fire, according to fire department and county sheriff reports, was their over-the-range GE microwave oven.

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

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

Human error certainly plays a role, especially in fires involving cooking appliances and clothes dryers. But when Consumer Reports conducted an in-depth analysis of federal fire data, we found that only about half of appliance fires could be blamed on human mistakes, such as unattended cooking, or natural causes such as storms or animals. Much of the rest appear to be due to problems with the appliances themselves, according to our review of safety records, fire reports, and court documents. Among the findings:

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

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

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

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

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

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**8 ways to protect yourself**

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

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

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

• **Check your home’s wiring.** The electrical wiring in older homes can’t always handle the demands of modern appliances. Have your system inspected by a qualified electrician. They might recommend arc-fault circuit interrupters, which detect dangerous arcing of electrical currents caused by damaged wires, faulty appliances, and other problems. The upgrade might cost several hundred dollars, but considering that 30,000 fires are caused each year by arcing faults, it may be worth the expense.

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

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

• **Keep dryer vents clear.** Clean your dryer’s lint screen regularly to avoid lint buildup, which was listed as a factor in many fires. Use rigid metal dryer ducts instead of flexible ducts made of foil or plastic, which can sag and let lint build. And check them regularly to remove any lint buildup.
some appliances, such as clothes dryers, which had 13,723 fires in our analysis of NFIRS data. Lint buildup was cited as a factor in 2,609 of those cases.

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

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

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

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

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

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

In fact, in one of the biggest appliance recalls in our review, 1.6 million Maytag refrigerators were recalled in March 2009 because of an electrical failure in the relay, the component that turns on the compressor. The biggest recall in our analysis was for 2.5 million GE dishwashers in May 2007, with 191 reports of overheated wiring because of a short circuit. In 12 cases, fire spread beyond the dishwasher.

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

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

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

By the numbers: Fires and their causes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Products</th>
<th>Total fires 2002-09</th>
<th>Fires linked to electrical or other problems*</th>
<th>SafeProducts.gov complaints related to fires in 2011</th>
<th>Recalled units 2007-11</th>
<th>Common problems reported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ranges</td>
<td>44,708</td>
<td>16,824</td>
<td>299</td>
<td>176,600</td>
<td>• Stove left unattended.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Self-starting controls.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothes dryers</td>
<td>13,723</td>
<td>8,717</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>5,200</td>
<td>• Lint blockage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Gas leaks.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microwave ovens</td>
<td>2,308</td>
<td>1,705</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>135,000</td>
<td>• Running without food inside.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Refrigerators</td>
<td>1,514</td>
<td>1,514</td>
<td>149</td>
<td>1.6 million</td>
<td>• Relay switch short-circuit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Light bulb stays on when door is shut.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toasters and toaster ovens</td>
<td>1,335</td>
<td>902</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>1.2 million</td>
<td>• Toaster can turn on by itself.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Mechanism jams while toasting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dishwashers</td>
<td>1,015</td>
<td>1,015</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>73,000</td>
<td>• Control-panel problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Liquid rinse-aid leaks into circuitry.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing machines</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>657</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>632,000</td>
<td>• Water leakage can cause a circuit-board fire.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

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

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

DID YOU KNOW?

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

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

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

**Who’s watching the store?**

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wolfson says the CPSC has not yet engaged directly with Chinese manufacturers and importers in the appliance sector the way it has with factories that make toys and fireworks. Instead, the commission is working with trade associations and foreign government quality-control entities.

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

**Consumers voice concerns**

SaferProducts.gov, a website run by the CPSC, provides vivid detail about what consumers are experiencing. Launched in March 2011, it posts consumer complaints...
within 20 days after notifying the manufacturers involved and giving them a chance to respond. Several thousand complaints have been posted to the website, including more than 850 related to appliance fires, our analysis discovered. For example, we found that consumers reported at least 149 refrigerator-related fires, involving at least 16 injuries.

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

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

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

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

The tactics of secrecy

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

Like the Nicols, Timothy Hennigan of Rochester Hills, Mich., says he had a problem with a GE microwave that started up on its own, causing smoke and sparks. He filed a class-action suit in U.S. District Court in Eastern Michigan, alleging that GE has known that its microwaves were defective since at least 2002. The case hinges in part on a series of presentations made to GE’s Microwave Safety Council between 2005 and 2009, allegedly containing reports of specific problems involving microwave ovens and opinions regarding the cause of self-starts and fires, according to the federal court papers.

But the presentation documents themselves are sealed under a protective court order. Companies often use that stratagem, claiming trade secrets or competitive injury, according to legal experts. “Protective orders were designed for sensitive information like medical records and financial information,” says Lucy Dalglish, executive director of the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. “But in an effort to speed along cases, judges rubber-stamp the requests without doing the careful analysis needed to determine what is sealable and what is not.”

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

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

Kermit Moreau of Lumberton, Texas, had a similar experience with a GE microwave. He was home one afternoon in June 2010 when he heard a strange noise in the kitchen. “Our GE microwave had turned on and the electric arcing was so violent that the turntable had cracked and the bottom of the unit was scorched,” he says. GE came to pick up the unit, he says, but
he has not heard from the company since. Settling cases out of court is another way to keep potentially compromising information from reaching the public. Take the class action filed against LG in 2010, alleging that certain French-door refrigerators contain a defect that causes their interior light to stay on, presenting a fire hazard to consumers. LG submitted an October 2011 settlement in which it agreed to reimburse consumers’ out-of-pocket expenses for repairs related to the interior light. But the settlement has not resulted in a product recall, nor does LG “concede any infirmity or weakness in its defenses or its products.” But complaints about LG refrigerators continue to pile up online, including several SaferProducts.gov postings involving models covered in the settlement.

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

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

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

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

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From the Experts at Consumer Reports

Test Your HEART SMARTS

True or False: (Check your answers below)

1. Everyone should have an exercise stress test for their heart

2. Avocados are one of the best fruits for your heart

3. A simple test on your legs can help prevent a heart attack

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1. No, most people can do without an exercise stress test. Experts say that it yields too many false-positive results, resulting in unnecessary treatments and anxiety.

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

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

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

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

Because litigation is pending in the Chambers case, Whirlpool said it could not comment on specifics, but spokeswoman Kristine Vernier says, “Whirlpool, for example, and the anti-jamming features, components that turn off power among many other state-of-the-art safety features, that could be done to improve appliance safety. Here are three areas:

**Drieders.** Approximately 7,000 fires, 200 injuries, and 10 deaths are attributed each year to dryer fires, according to CPSC estimates. A new voluntary standard that takes effect in March 2013 will require that fires starting inside the tumbler or base of the chassis be contained within the dryer. Industry should now address one of the biggest causes of dryer fires: the ignition of accumulated lint. A 2011 study by the CPSC concluded that status indicators, akin to the “check engine” lights on automobiles, could be a reminder to empty lint filters and alert consumers to mechanical failures. Although the results of our tests with standard-equipment lint-detectors were inconsistent, an aftermarket system we reported on in 2011 worked.

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

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

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

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

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**Do you own a recalled appliance?**

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Company</th>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Units recalled</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5/16/07</td>
<td>GE Consumer &amp; Industrial</td>
<td>GE, Eterna, Hotpoint, and Kenmore dishwashers</td>
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<tr>
<td>2/1/07</td>
<td>Maytag</td>
<td>Maytag and Jenn-Air dishwashers</td>
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<td>Maytag dishwashers</td>
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<td>Maytag</td>
<td>Maytag, Jenn-Air, Amana, Admiral, Magic Chef, Performa by Maytag, and Crosley refrigerators</td>
<td>1,600,000</td>
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<td>5/20/10</td>
<td>Walmart</td>
<td>GE 12-cup digital coffee makers</td>
<td>900,000</td>
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<td>4/24/08</td>
<td>Waxcessories</td>
<td>Simmer pots</td>
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<td>Carrier</td>
<td>Carrier air conditioners and heat pumps</td>
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Source: Consumer Product Safety Commission
The industry itself says it’s using techniques to identify other hot spots in the home. “What really drives a product recall isn’t actual incidences,” says Larry Latack, Whirlpool’s director of global products safety. “We’ve had recalls where there weren’t any incidences, but our engineering analysis said we could expect them down the line.”

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

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

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

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

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FEATURE

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

Legal but inadequate

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

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

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

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

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

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

Junk health insurance

Stingy plans may be worse than none at all

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sometimes, however, the sheriff catch-
es up. Here are examples drawn from recent regulatory actions:

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

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

- In September 2010, Missouri regulators issued more than $1 million in fines against 13 companies and individuals that sold discount plans misrepresented as comprehensive health insurance. Regulators said many were promoted through faxes advertising “AFFORDABLE HEALTHCARE PLANS!” and consumers were told, “This is not a discount plan!” One woman bought a plan to get the advertised free flu shot. A year and a half later, all she had to show for her $1,717 in payments was one denied claim ... for the flu shot.

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

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

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

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

**Are there alternatives?**

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

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

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

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

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

**Largest mini-med sellers**

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

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

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

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

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

High-tech features are transforming viewing

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

There’s much more to come. Over the next few months, new technologies—such as super-wide screens, a new type of TV designed to combine the best of LCD and plasma displays, and screens with ultra-high resolution—should start showing up. Here are more details on those developments, along with the latest news from our tests of 142 TVs.

Bigger and better TVs abound

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

The vast majority of the tested LCD and plasma models have 1080p resolution, and most LCD sets 42 inches and larger have 120Hz or higher refresh rates designed to reduce motion blur. Both features can enhance picture quality when they’re implemented well.

Very good or excellent HD picture quality is almost a given, with 135 of the 142 tested TVs achieving that level. We found a number of sets from secondary brands that delivered commendable picture quality at relatively low prices. They might not...
have all the newest features, but they’re worth considering if you want a basic TV.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And watching isn’t all you can do: Many Web-connected TVs let you update your Facebook page, send tweets via Twitter, follow eBay auctions, and share photos on Flickr and Picasa. With some Internet-capable TVs, you can place Skype video calls by connecting an optional web-camera to your set. Seeing your far-flung friends and family on a big-screen TV rather than on a small laptop can make a huge difference.

Most Internet-capable TVs limit you to specific sites and content partners, but the growing number of “smart TVs” add full browsers that let you go anywhere on the Web. Google TV, which uses the Chrome browser, hasn’t made much headway since its introduction more than a year ago, but recently added access to the Android apps market could spark interest. Sony has a few TVs that use the Google platform, and LG, Samsung, and Vizio recently announced Google-powered TVs. LG and Samsung also have TVs with proprietary browsers and app markets, and other brands could follow suit.

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

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

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

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

Plasma TVs, which come in 42-inch and larger sizes, give you more screen for the money and an unlimited viewing angle, which means the color and brightness will look the same from any viewing position. They also offer blur-free motion, along with a more movielike picture. Contrary to what you might have heard, plasma TVs aren’t disappearing, and you can expect years of good service from one, as with an LCD. Newer models don’t suffer from permanent image burn-in during normal viewing, and they use about the same energy as many LCD sets.

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

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

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

“Active-shutter” 3D glasses used with all plasma and many LCD TVs have gotten lighter than early models, and some now use Bluetooth instead of less-reliable wireless connections to sync up with the TV. Prices start at about $30. A number of LCD sets use “passive” 3D technology, with lightweight, low-cost glasses like the ones you get in theaters. You often get four pairs with a TV; extras cost $10 to $30.

Currently, you’ll probably be watching regular HD most of the time, but more 3D content is steadily rolling out. At least 100 or so 3D Blu-ray discs are available (which require a 3D-capable player) as is a growing selection of broadcast programming from cable, satellite, and telecommunication service providers.

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

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

Coming this year: TVs with ultra-high definition.

7 steps to the best picture quality

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

1. The first time you use a TV, choose the Home setting in the startup menu.
2. Connect the TV to a Blu-ray player or HD cable/satellite DVR with an HDMI cable. Freeze on an image with faces and detail, such as a news or talk show.
3. Press the menu button on the TV remote and find “picture settings” in the onscreen menu. Find picture modes and switch among them to see how the image changes. Try that with various images, such as darker, brighter, or more colorful scenes. If a THX mode is available, that might be the best choice. If not, try a mode such as Movie, Cinema, or Pro; those generally provide an accurate, natural-looking picture. Other modes such as Natural or Standard might trade off color accuracy for more brightness, so see how they look to you. Avoid modes called Vivid or Dynamic (names vary by brand), which are overly bright and harsh.
4. You can usually fine-tune specific attributes within the chosen picture mode, though some TVs will let you do that only within the Custom mode. Turn sharpness down to zero and raise it slightly only if the image looks soft or edges are indistinct. Turn off noise-reduction and enhancement controls, which tend to reduce image detail. Turn off dynamic and power-saving controls, which can create brightness fluctuations in the image, along with “motion smoothing” features, which give film-based movies a soap opera look.
5. Next, get the shadows right. Freeze on a dark scene from a movie. Raise the brightness control (black level) to expose those shadow details. Now incrementally lower the same brightness control so that you get the deepest black without obscuring detail in the darkest areas.
6. After that, freeze on a scene or image that contains bright, near-white shadows, such as a wedding dress. With the contrast (white level) set to middle, raise the contrast to the setting that gives you a comfortably bright image that still reveals subtle details, such as the buttons or folds in the wedding gown.
7. Now get the colors right. Find “color temperature” in the menu and select warm or low. Find the tint/hue and color controls and set them at the middle of their range. Adjust tint so that flesh tones look natural, neither too red nor too greenish-yellow, and color level so that colors don’t appear too hyped up.

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

Keep an eye on the horizon

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

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

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

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

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

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Overview

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

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

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

52- to 55-inch LCD:
B1 Vizio $1,300 CR Best Buy
B1 has a wider viewing angle than many LCDs and full-array LED backlighting with local dimming that enhances black levels and contrast. Built-in Wi-Fi makes it easy to access Internet content, and the remote control has a Bluetooth-enabled, slide-out QWERTY keyboard.

46- to 47-inch LCDs:
C1 LG $1,100
C2 Samsung $1,150
C3 Samsung $1,100
C4 Bose $5,500

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

40- to 42-inch LCDs:
D1 Samsung $200
D2 Panasonic $1,000
D3 LG $480

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Recommendations</th>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
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<th>Test results Features</th>
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<tr>
<td>B1 Vizio</td>
<td>Sharp Aquos LC-70LE730U $3,000</td>
<td>60</td>
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<tr>
<td>B2 Westinghouse VR-6052 $950</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>37</td>
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A 60-INCH AND LARGER Both have 1080p resolution.

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

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

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

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FROM THE EXPERTS AT CONSUMER REPORTS ON HEALTH

The new do’s and don’ts for your good health


Consumer Reports on Health brings you a unique kind of health advice: UNBIASED! You get simple do’s and don’ts about nutrition, backaches, pain relief, heart health, fitness, and more. It's exactly what you need to be healthier. Happier, too!

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Remote controls improve

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

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

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

**Gesture and voice controls**

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

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

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**Table: TV Remote Control Test Results**

<table>
<thead>
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### Ratings LCD TVs

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| **E 37-INCH All have 1080p resolution.** | | | | | |
| 1 | Panasonic Viera TC-L37E3 | 650 | | | |
| 2 | JVC LC-37B3000 | 470 | | | |
| 3 | Vizio E370VP | 530 | | | |
| 4 | LG 37LV3500 | 650 | | | |
| 5 | Vizio XVT373SV | 600 | | | |
| 6 | Westinghouse VR-3730 | 330 | | | |

| **F 32-INCH F1, F2, F4, F5, F7, and F14 have 1080p resolution. The rest have 720p.** | | | | | |
| 1 | LG 32LK450 | 450 | | | |
| 2 | Samsung UN32D550 | 480 | | | |
| 3 | Sony Bravia KDL-32BX300 | 380 | | | |
| 4 | Panasonic Viera TC-L32C13 | 400 | | | |
| 5 | Vizio M320MV | 400 | | | |
| 6 | Sanyo DP32671 | 350 | | | |
| 7 | Vizio E321MV | 400 | | | |

**Most and least reliable**

Every year, we gather repair experiences from thousands of readers who own TVs to determine which brands have been more—or less—reliable. Our latest survey, which covers 209,000 LCD and plasma TVs bought between 2007 and 2011, shows that only 4 percent of TVs, on average, were repaired or had a serious problem during the first three to four years of use. Most major brands of LCDs were generally reliable, including (in alphabetical order) Insignia, JVC, LG, Magnavox, Panasonic, Philips, Samsung, Sanyo, Sharp, Sony, Sylvania, Toshiba, Vizio, and Westinghouse. Mitsubishi and Polaroid have been among the more repair-prone brands of LCD TV. In the plasma category, LG, Panasonic, and Samsung were generally reliable. Keep in mind that our data are historical and can’t predict future reliability. Still, we think that picking a brand that has been more reliable in the past decreases the likelihood of your having repair trouble in the future.
FEATURE LCD & PLASMA TVs

32-inch LCDs:
F1 LG $540
F2 Samsung $480
F3 Sony $380

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

22- to 27-inch LCD:
G1 Insignia $340

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

3D LCD sets:
H1 Sony $3,290
H2 LG $1,100
H3 LG $1,900
H4 Vizio $340

All of the recommended 3D sets have excellent or very good HD picture quality, streaming video, and standard Wi-Fi. All except H4 have OS LED backlighting and a 120Hz or higher refresh rate to reduce motion blur. H1 is a 55-inch that uses battery-powered active-shutter 3D glasses. It has a full-array LED backlight with local dimming that improved black levels and contrast and a very fast refresh rate that effectively minimized motion blur. But its viewing angle is narrow. H2, a 47-inch model, and H3, a 55-inch sibling, stand out for very good 3D performance and wide viewing angles, and they come with four pairs of passive 3D glasses. They are “smart” TVS with full Web browsers and a “magic wand” remote that you point at the screen to move a cursor. The 32-inch H6 is one of the smallest 3D sets we’ve seen. Though its 3D performance was below that of the best sets, it provides a reasonably good 3D experience.

Ratings LCD TVs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
<th>Test results</th>
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| **G 22- TO 27-INCH** | | | | |
| Insignia NS-24E730A12 | 240 | 89 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 60 |
| Sanyo DP2667U | 280 | 83 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 60 |
| Dynex DX-24L230A12 | 250 | 80 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 60 |
| Sanyo DP26640 | 240 | 88 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 60 |
| Vizio E260VA | 290 | 87 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 60 |
| ViewSonic VT2730 | 300 | 83 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 60 |
| Vizio M261VP | 350 | 85 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 60 |
| Philips 22PFL3505D | 230 | 85 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 60 |

| **H 3D MODELS, 32- TO 65-INCH** | | | | |
| Sony Bravia XBR-55HX929 | 2,900 | 77 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • "960" • | 65, 55, 46 |
| LG 47LW6500 | 1,100 | 76 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 55, 47 |
| LG 55LM6500 | 1,900 | 76 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 240 |
| LG 55LW9800 | 2,800 | 75 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 480 |
| Sony Bravia KDL-55HX279 | 1,900 | 72 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 65, 55, 46 |
| Vizio E3D320VX | 450 | 71 | ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ • | 60 |

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is based mostly on picture quality but also considers sound quality, ease of use, and viewing angle. On 3D sets, 3D performance is factored in as well. Displayed scores are rounded; models are listed in order of precise overall score. Picture quality scores reflect clarity, detail, and color accuracy of high-definition 1080i signals and standard-definition 480i signals routed via HDMI. Viewing angle is our evaluation of picture quality from various horizontal and vertical points off-center. All plasma TVs in the Ratings were judged excellent for...
viewing angle. **Sound quality** combines objective measurements and subjective listening by trained panelists. **Ease of use** assesses the remote control and onscreen menus. For LCDs, **highest frame rate** is how many times per second the picture refreshes. **Available screen sizes** indicates additional sizes in the same series as the tested model, whose size is bolded. **Price** is approximate retail.

### Best and worst brands

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

✔ CR Best Buy
These recommended models offer the best combination of performance and price.

✔ Recommended
These are high-performance models that stand out for the reasons noted.

60-inch plasma:
A1 Panasonic $1,400 CR Best Buy
This 60-inch set in Panasonic's lowest-priced 1080p series delivers a lot of screen and great picture quality for the price.

50- and 51-inch plasmas:
B1 LG $750 CR Best Buy
B2 Samsung $650 CR Best Buy
B4 LG $600 CR Best Buy
B1 has excellent picture quality and many features, including optional Wi-Fi and access to online content. B2, a more basic set, is one of the few tested TVs with very good sound. B2, B3, and B4 are all CR Best Buys.

42- and 46-inch plasmas:
C1 Panasonic $830
C2 Panasonic $500
C3 Panasonic $600
C4 LG $500
C1 is a 1080p model with excellent picture quality and access to online content. C2, C3, and C4 are 720p sets with very good picture quality. C2 and C3 are different-sized siblings with more features, including optional Wi-Fi and access to online content. C4 is part of LG's entry-level plasma series.

Top plasmas with 3D capability:
D1 Samsung $2,250
D2 Panasonic $2,150
D3 LG $900
D12 Panasonic $1,500
D14 Panasonic $700
D15 LG $550
All the 3D plasmas in our Ratings, except one, are recommended. D1, 59 inches, and D2, 55 inches, have a lot of features, including access to online content. D3, a 50-inch set, is well priced for a full-featured model with access to online content; it's also only one of a few tested TVs with very good sound. D12, a 60-inch model in Panasonic's entry-level 1080p 3D series, is well priced for a full-featured set of this size. D14, 42 inches, is the lowest-priced 3D set with Internet access and optional Wi-Fi. D15, a more basic 42-inch TV, delivers very good HD and 3D at a very low price.

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

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<thead>
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<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
<th>Test results</th>
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<td>A 60-INCH AND LARGER Has 1080p resolution.</td>
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<td>✔ 1</td>
<td>Panasonic Viera TC-P60G30</td>
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<td>60, 50, 46, 42</td>
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</table>

B 50- AND 51-INCH B1, B2, and B7 have 1080p resolution. The rest have 720p. |

| ✔ 1 | Panasonic Viera TC-P50S30 | 800 | 21 |    | | 60, 50, 46, 42 |
| 2 | LG LP0V450 | 750 | 17 |    | | 60, 50 |
| 3 | Samsung PN51D450 | 650 | 12 |    | | 51, 43 |
| 4 | LG LP0T350 | 600 | 18 |    | | 50, 42 |
| 5 | Sony DPF5704 | 570 | 8 |    | | 50 |
| 6 | Insignia NS-40PG50A11 | 500 | 16 |    | | 50, 42 |
| 7 | Panasonic PN51D50 | 600 | 13 |    | | 51, 51 |

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

| ✔ 1 | Panasonic Viera TC-P42S30 | 630 | 28 |    | | 60, 50, 46, 42 |
| 2 | Panasonic Viera TC-P42X3 | 500 | 33 |    | | 60, 46, 42 |
| 3 | Panasonic Viera TC-P46X3 | 600 | 20 |    | | 50, 46, 42 |
| 4 | LG 42PT350 | 500 | 19 |    | | 50, 42 |
| 5 | Samsung PN45D450 | 500 | 16 |    | | 51, 43 |
| 6 | Insignia NS-42PG50A11 | 400 | 11 |    | | 50, 42 |
| 7 | Samsung DPP2740 | 400 | 6 |    | | 50, 42 |

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

| ✔ 1 | Samsung PN50D7000 | 2,250 | 14 |    | | 64, 59, 51 |
| 2 | Panasonic Viera TC-P55VT30 | 2,150 | 12 |    | | 65, 55 |
| 3 | LG LP0S250 | 900 | 12 |    | | 60, 50 |
| 4 | Panasonic Viera TC-P50T30 | 1,000 | 11 |    | | 65, 60, 55, 50, 46, 42 |
| 5 | LG 60P29S0 | 2,000 | 10 |    | | 60, 50 |
| 6 | Samsung PN51D8000 | 1,800 | 9 |    | | 64, 59, 51 |
| 7 | Samsung PN51D6500 | 1,300 | 8 |    | | 59, 51 |
| 8 | Panasonic Viera TC-P60G730 | 2,000 | 7 |    | | 65, 60, 55, 50 |
| 9 | LG LP0S750 | 1,100 | 6 |    | | 60, 50 |
| 10 | Samsung PN50D8000 | 2,300 | 5 |    | | 64, 59, 51 |
| 11 | Panasonic Viera TC-P55GT30 | 1,600 | 5 |    | | 65, 60, 55, 50 |
| 12 | Panasonic Viera TC-P50GT30 | 1,500 | 5 |    | | 65, 60, 55, 50, 46, 42 |
| 13 | Samsung PN50D550 | 900 | 5 |    | | 64, 59, 51 |
| 14 | Panasonic Viera TC-P42GT30 | 700 | 5 |    | | 65, 60, 55, 50, 46, 42 |
| 15 | LG 42PW350 | 500 | 4 |    | | 50, 42 |
| 16 | Samsung PN42D490 | 550 | 3 |    | | 51, 43 |

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

Light & lively laptops

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

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

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

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

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

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

Select Ratings

Best choices from our tests of 18 models.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Recommendation</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
<th>Price</th>
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<th>Specs</th>
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</table>

A: Nonremovable battery. B: 1GB video memory.
Pro-style ranges

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

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

Most of the 30-inch models were a step down in performance, although a couple came close to making our recommended list. The dual-fuel B1 Wolf, $5,200, was fine at baking, broiling, and simmering, but a smaller capacity and unimpressive self-cleaning kept it off our recommended list. The all-gas B2 GE, $5,500, was better at simmering and has a larger oven, but broiling was only mediocre. At $3,400, B3 Kenmore dual-fuel was a relative bargain, out-cooking similar style ranges costing thousands more.

### Ratings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
<th>Range type</th>
<th>Test results</th>
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<td>1 KitchenAid</td>
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</table>

*Does not have self-cleaning feature.

The dirt on air purifiers

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

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

No air purifier alone will relieve asthma or allergy symptoms. That’s why we suggest you first take basic steps that could be more effective—such as banning indoor smoking, banishing pets from bedrooms, and opening windows when possible. We also advise against using models that produce even small amounts of ozone, a respiratory irritant that can aggravate asthma, even if they are effective cleaners. You can get similar or better air cleaning using filter-based products, which don’t produce any ozone. Two CR Best Buys, the Whirlpool APS1030K, $300, and the Hunter 30547, $260, were effective at removing dust and smoke even at the lower, quieter speeds you might want to use while snoozing or having a quiet conversation.

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

**WATCH OUR VIDEO**

Using your smartphone, download the ShopSavvy or the RedLaser app, then scan the code at right.
Best toasters & toaster ovens

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

1 A1 Cuisinart, $70, was only a shade better overall than the 2 A2 Hamilton Beach, $35. Both have bagel settings (which toast just one side of the bread) and shiny metal exteriors that are easy to clean. The Cuisinart has a countdown timer, which is nice if you’re trying to make sure your toast won’t be ready before your eggs are cooked. 3 A3 Magimix, $250, turns making toast into entertainment: Its thick clear glass sides let you watch your bread toasting. 4 A4 Breville, $130, 5 A8 Krups, $60, and 6 A12 Hamilton Beach, $30, are all fine whether you want just one slice of toast or multiple batches, but they weren’t as great at providing a wide range of toast shades.

A6 DeLonghi, $75, and 7 A9 Cloer, $40, have warming racks. 8 A7 Proctor Silex, $15, doesn’t skimp on toasting, though it has few extras and a white plastic exterior. 9 A11 Hamilton Beach, $25, comes with tongs to remove toast and a built-in slot to store them. Any of our four-slice toaster picks would please larger families or toast devotees who don’t want to have to wait for seconds.

Toaster ovens do more

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

INTERIOR PAINT

A new winner tops our tests

T’S OFFICIAL: Benjamin Moore beats Behr by a nose as our top-performing interior paint in two of our three major categories. But when it comes to value, Behr remains several lengths ahead.

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

DID YOU KNOW?

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

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

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

More paints save you some hassle.

Don’t buy strictly by brand. Even within a brand, performance often varies widely among finishes and lines. Some paints we tested have hidden costs. You might have to buy as little as three versions of the Glidden-made paints for as little as $8. But so-so results put all three versions of the Glidden-made at the bottom of our Ratings. And because many inexpensive paints require more coats for hiding, you might have to buy more than you bargained for. Two better low-priced bets: Glidden’s Premium Flat, $19 per gallon, and Satin, $23 per gallon, plus our other CR Best Buys.

How to choose

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

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

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

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Overview

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

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

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

Best for most; less work, low VOCs:
A1 Benjamin Moore $66
A2 Behr $33
B1 Benjamin Moore $50
C1 Benjamin Moore $50
C2 Behr $34

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

Almost as good for less:
A3 Kilz $32 CR Best Buy
A4 Glidden $22 CR Best Buy
A5 Behr $25 CR Best Buy
B3 Behr $20 CR Best Buy
B5 Glidden $19 CR Best Buy
C4 Royal Interiors $20 CR Best Buy

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

For sunny areas:
A6 Benjamin Moore $50
B4 Benjamin Moore $55
B6 Valspar $38
C5 Glidden $27 CR Best Buy

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

WATCH OUR VIDEO
Using your smartphone, download the ShopSavvy or the RedLaser app, then scan the code at right.

BY THE NUMBERS 57

Paints tested 5,000 Square feet painted $8,000 Spent on paint

Ratings

Interior paints

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Price (per gal.)</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
<th>Test results</th>
<th>VOCs</th>
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<td>Recommendation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>A SATIN AND EGGSHELL Balanced strengths make these best for most areas.</td>
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<tr>
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B FLAT AND MATTE
Best for low-traffic areas and hiding imperfections.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Product</th>
<th>Price (per gal.)</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
<th>Test results</th>
<th>VOCs</th>
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### Ratings

**Interior paints**

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**B FLAT AND MATTE continued**

| 12 | Sears Easy Living Ultra Flat | $29 | 43 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 53 |
| 13 | TrueValue Easy Care Ultra Premium Flat | 23 | 65 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 14 | Royal Interiors by Ace Flat | 24 | 60 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 100 |
| 15 | Sherwin Williams Duration Home | 37 | 60 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 41 |
| 16 | Olympic Premium Flat (Lowe’s) | 19 | 58 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| 17 | Better Homes and Gardens Flat (Walmart) | 17 | 58 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| 18 | Glidden Brilliance Flat (Walmart) | 25 | 57 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| 19 | Color Place Flat (Walmart) | 8 | 56 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |

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

| 1 | Benjamin Moore Regal Select Semi-Gloss | 50 | 83 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 2 | Behr Premium Plus Ultra Semi-Gloss (Home Depot) | 34 | 71 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 3 | Benjamin Moore Aura Semi-Gloss | 66 | 80 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 4 | Royal Interiors by ACE Semi-Gloss | 28 | 77 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 5 | Glidden Brilliance Semi-Gloss (Walmart) | 27 | 77 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| 6 | Behr Premium Plus Semi-Gloss Enamel (Home Depot) | 25 | 76 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 7 | Glidden Premium Semi-Gloss (Home Depot) | 24 | 76 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 8 | Better Homes and Gardens Semi-Gloss (Walmart) | 23 | 76 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| 9 | Benjamin Moore Natura Semi-Gloss | 55 | 72 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| 10 | Olympic One Semi-Gloss (Lowe’s) | 27 | 78 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 11 | Kilz Casual Colors Semi-Gloss | 28 | 72 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 12 | Valspar Ultra Premium Semi-Gloss (Lowe’s) | 29 | 72 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 13 | Olympic Premium Semi-Gloss (Lowe’s) | 24 | 70 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| 14 | Valspar + Semi-Gloss (Lowe’s) | 43 | 69 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 0 |
| 15 | Valspar Signature Colors Semi-Gloss (Lowe’s) | 34 | 68 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 16 | True Value Easy Care Ultra Premium Semi-Gloss | 29 | 58 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |
| 17 | Pittsburgh Paints Manor Hall Timeless Semi-Gloss | 58 | 66 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 46 |
| 18 | Sherwin-Williams Duration Home Semi-Gloss | 51 | 62 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 40 |
| 19 | Color Place Semi-Gloss (Walmart) | 15 | 57 | - | - | - | - | - | - | 50 |

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**Guide to the Ratings**

**Overall score** is mainly hiding, surface smoothness, resistance to staining, scrubbing, gloss change, sticking, mildew, and fading. Volatile organic compounds aren’t scored. Most results reflect white, pastel, and medium-tint bases. **Hiding** is coverage of contrasting color with one and two coats (one-coat hiding weighted heaviest). **Staining** is resistance to greasy stains. **Gloss change** is change after cleaning. **Scrubbing** is ability to resist abrasive cleaner. **Smoothness** is absence of roller marks when dry. **Mildew** is inhibition of mildew growth. **Sticking** is resistance to tackiness when dry. **Fading** is resistance to lightening under UV light. **Claimed VOCs**, which are per manufacturer, are maximum grams per liter for untinted base. **Price** is approximate retail per gallon.

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**Behind the green labels**

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

**Asthma & Allergy Friendly**

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

**GreenGuard**

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

**Green Seal**

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

**GreenWise**

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

**GreenSure**

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

9 picks are under $200

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

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

Prefer a canister? Kenmore’s new Progressive 21614, $300, is among the lower-priced bagged models that ranked high in our Ratings.

The months we spent vacuuming carpets and floors and measuring the airflow critical for tools also showed us that some lighter new models are lightweight at cleaning. Here are the details:

Promises trump performance. “Never loses suction” is the claim for Eureka’s $80 bagless Endeavor NLS S4000A upright. Suction for tools was strong. But that low-priced vacuum was dead-last at the carpet cleaning that comes first in most homes. Electrolux boasts that more than 50 percent of the plastic in its JetMaxx Green EL4040 canister, $400, is recycled. But carpet cleaning and airflow were so-so.

Forever could be short. Oreck touts a limited lifetime warranty for its Forever Series uprights, the $600 Edge and Pilot. It also says its motors should last at least 25 years. But like most warranties, it covers only defects, which usually show up in the first couple of years. And while those models did well at cleaning and were easy to handle, the Edge includes only a light-duty crevice tool, and the Pilot does not accept tools.

When light means lite. Two other new bagged uprights from Oreck—the Graphite, $350, and XL Element Professional Series, $200—weigh under 12 pounds but offer mediocre carpet cleaning. Dyson’s DC26 City Multi Floor canister, $400, is similarly wispy. But airflow, a selling point for other Dysons, was poor. And like the brand’s larger and heavier DC23 Turbinehead canister, this one was subpar at carpet cleaning.

How to choose

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

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

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

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

Lower price, more work

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

More stooping

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

An extra step

To move from floor cleaning to using tools, Eureka’s AirSpeed AS1000A, $120, requires turning a dial before removing the hose and nozzle.
### Ratings: Upright vacuums

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

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#### Overview

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

- **CR Best Buy**: These deliver the best blend of performance and price. All are recommended.
- **Recommended**: These models are fine performers and stand out for the reasons below.

#### Best uprights for most:

- **A1** Hoover $230
- **A2** Miele S745
- **A6** Hoover $300 CR Best Buy
- **A7** Hoover $380 CR Best Buy
- **A12** Eureka $160 CR Best Buy

- **A1** is self-propelled but noisy; **A3** is quieter and better on pet hair. Choose **A6** for its carpet cleaning and handling, **A7** for its brush on/off switch. **A12** is also a high-value choice.

#### If you want a bagless upright:

- **B1** Hoover $330 CR Best Buy
- **B4** Eureka $230 CR Best Buy
- **B8** Bissell $100 CR Best Buy
- **B9** Dirt Devil $50 CR Best Buy

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

#### Best canisters for most:

- **C1** Kenmore $550
- **C4** Kenmore $300 CR Best Buy
- **C7** Panasonic $250 CR Best Buy

All have bags and did well on carpets. **C1** offers superior airflow and quietness with top pet-hair pickup. **C4** performs almost as well for less. Paying even less for **C7** sacrifices some bare-floor and pet-hair performance.

#### If you want a bagless canister:

- **D1** LG $400
- **D2** Hoover $400

Quieter running and better airflow for tools put **D1** at the top of this list. But **D2** is the obvious choice for pet owners.
BY THE NUMBERS 100 Models tested 55 Pounds of sand and talc vacuumed

Most and least reliable

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

Select Ratings Canister vacuums

Best choices from our tests of 33 models.

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

1  Kenmore Intuition 28014 $550 72 26
2  Kenmore Progressive 2714 400 72 24
3  Miele S 528i Callisto 990 71 24
4  Kenmore Progressive 2614 300 70 23
5  Kenmore Progressive 2514 250 89 23
6  Hoover WindTunnel S3670 300 88 24
7  Panasonic MC-CC500 250 85 23

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

1  LG Kompressor Lv900B 400 89 23
2  Hoover Platinum Bagless Canister S3865 400 85 27

Guide to the Ratings

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

Source: Annual Product Reliability Survey, Consumer Reports National Research Center.
The New Rules of Car Buying
Save thousands of dollars on a new car. Negotiating is the secret.

Negotiating for a new car can strike fear into the heart of even the most rugged individuals. It’s not surprising. Car dealers and manufacturers have arranged pricing in a manner designed to daze and confuse the consumer. However, simply by understanding the tricks of the trade, consumers can save hundreds, even thousands of dollars on their new cars.

That’s why Consumer Reports has created The New Car Price Service. This service gives you everything you need to walk into a showroom with confidence—and walk out with a great deal.

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

**RULE #1: BREAK THE DEALER’S CODE.**

When you walk into a car showroom, you’ll see two prices:
1. The Manufacturer’s Suggested Retail Price (MSRP)
2. The Dealer Invoice Price.

Naturally, most people think it is wise to negotiate down from the MSRP to as close to the Dealer Invoice Price as you can get. And that’s exactly what the dealer wants you to think—but it won’t get you the best deal. The reason:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

**RULE #3: PLAY THE GAME.**

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

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

**RULE #4: IF YOU HAVE A TRADE IN.**

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

**THE NEW CAR PRICE SERVICE**

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

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- Year, make, model, and trim line of your trade-in, if you have one. (Example: 2004 Honda Odyssey)
- Your credit card (Visa, MasterCard, Discover or American Express)

**Call toll-free**

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Advertisement

0312NCNR1
Shine up your hazy headlights

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### What we tested

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

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- Jeep Wrangler 60

### Product Price

<table>
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<tr>
<td>Fast Brite Auto Headlight Restorer Kit</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

Listed in performance order.
Toyota Prius V

A mix of economy and utility that works

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

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

Ride, handling, and drivetrain

Overall, the Prius V delivers the best fuel economy in its class. We measured 33 mpg in city conditions and 47 on the highway. Acceleration from the 134-hp, 1.8-liter four-cylinder engine, however, is leisurely and loud. The continuously variable transmission is smooth but holds the engine revs high when accelerating and climbing hills, which increases engine noise. Also, the electronic shifter and separate Park button, same as in the Prius hatchback, take getting used to.

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

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

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

Inside the cabin

The interior is put together well but is basic. There are padded tops on the front doors and a nicely finished dash. A cheap-looking headliner and thin carpet are the main interior weaknesses.

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

Tested vehicle

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Highs</th>
<th>Fuel economy, cargo room, access, transmission, rear seat, ride, crash-test results</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Lows</td>
<td>Acceleration, steering feel, engine noise, complicated radio</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trim</td>
<td>Three</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drivetrain</td>
<td>134-hp, 1.8-liter four-cylinder engine with electric assist; continuously variable transmission; front-wheel drive</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More Test Findings

- **Braking** Stops were quite short. Regenerative brake pedal feel is smoother than in many hybrids.
- **Headlights** Very good overall. Low beams have a sharp cutoff.
- **Visibility** Big windows all around, but rear pillars are large. A standard backup camera is helpful.
- **Child seats** Taller forward-facing child seats might not sit fully back against the seatback unless head restraints are removed. Top-tether anchors are awkwardly located below the cargo floor level.

Recommended

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

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

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

The digital speedometer, fuel, and trip-computer displays are offset toward the center of the dash. Other than the shifter, controls are mostly simple. But the touchscreen audio preset buttons are tiny and are crammed close together, requiring a deft touch, and other functions make you move through multiple onscreen pages.

When the car is in reverse, the cabin is permeated by an interior beeping, which can become annoying.

Our Prius V has Toyota’s Entune infotainment system. By linking to a smartphone, it allows you to search the Internet for destinations and to access apps that provide fuel prices, traffic, and weather information. While some functionality is deactivated when the car is in motion, there’s still plenty that can be done that can distract drivers. Some voice control of phones and music players is available. Entune can also use text-to-speech capability to read text messages aloud and let you respond from a customizable menu of canned replies.

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

The V gets the best gas mileage of any wagon.
Compact luxury SUVs
The redesigned BMW X3 drubs a new, stylish Land Rover

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

Ratings

For agile handling:
1. BMW X3
2. Infiniti EX
3. Volkswagen Tiguan

Why some vehicles are not recommended
The Audi Q5 3.2 and Cadillac SRX have below-average predicted-reliability ratings. The Land Rover Range Rover Evoque is too new for us to have reliability data, and it scores too low in our tests. We do not have reliability data for the Land Rover LR2, and it scores too low in our tests.
BMW X3

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

**Ride, handling, and drivetrain**

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

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

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

**Inside the cabin**

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

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

Although the front seats are support-

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

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

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

**MORE TEST FINDINGS**

- **Braking**: Very good stops overall.
- **Headlights**: Halogen low beams generate adequate light, but there’s a sharp top cutoff.
- **Access**: Easy overall.
- **Visibility**: Windshield pillars are thin, but a small rear window is limiting when reversing.
- **Cabin storage**: Moderate.
- **Head restraints**: The center-rear restraint is too low for an adult and is not adjustable.
- **Driving with kids**: It might be hard to keep a rear-facing infant seat tightly secured in the center-rear position. Some rear-facing infant seat bases might also be too loose in the outboard seats when installed with belts. It’s hard to reach the lower LATCH anchors.
Range Rover Evoque

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

Ride, handling, and drivetrain

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

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

The suspension provides some isolation, but pavement flaws can make the ride choppy. The highway ride is steady, but some jitteriness persists. Too much road and engine noise enters the cabin. Although there’s no low-range gearing, the Evoque is capable in the dirt and mud and has electronic settings that help maximize traction. It struggled while scaling our rock-hill course but made it to the top.

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

Inside the cabin

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

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

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

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

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

MORE TEST FINDINGS

Braking Short stopping distances.

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

Access Easy in front, but it takes some effort to slide in or out of the rear.

Visibility The slitlike rear window impedes the view, but a standard rear-view camera helps somewhat.

Head restraints The center-rear head restraint must be raised to protect an adult in a rear crash.

Cabin storage Modest.

Driving with kids It might be tough to cinch up child seats using the belts alone. LATCH installation is easy and secure.

THE EVOQUE LINE

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

Tested vehicle

Highs Fit and finish, acceleration, transmission, fuel economy

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

Trim line Pure

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

Major options

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

Tested price $45,745
**Volkswagen Tiguan**

Recommended

The Tiguan is a sophisticated, fun-to-drive small SUV that has a nice, relatively roomy interior. For 2012, it got a mild freshening that improved fuel economy. But for a model without a luxury nameplate, it comes with a bit of a sticker shock. Our well-equipped SEL version cost $37,000; other versions ring in at around $31,000 when they’re typically equipped. Here we’ve included a summary review:

**The driving experience**

A 200-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine powers the Tiguan. It delivers punchy performance and relatively good fuel economy of 21 mpg overall, but on premium fuel. A smooth six-speed automatic is the only transmission available on all-wheel-drive versions. A six-speed manual is available on base, front-wheel-drive models.

The SEL trim level we bought has large low-profile tires, which results in prevalent road noise and a stiff ride. An SE model we drove, with smaller wheels and less-aggressive tires, was quieter, with a significantly better ride.

Handling agility is a high point. The Tiguan has little body lean and feels composed and surefooted even at higher speeds. Steering is quick, with good feedback. We recorded a commendable 3.5-mpg speed through the avoidance maneuver, aided by well-calibrated stability control.

The Tiguan’s stops were short on dry pavement and slightly longer in the wet.

**Inside the cabin**

The interior is well finished, with quality materials and padded surfaces. Drivers have generous seat-adjustment range and plenty of room behind the tilt-and-telescopic steering wheel. A full range of power-seat adjustments is available only in the SEL trim. Visibility is good, except for the thick rear pillars and the head restraints. A backup camera is not available.

The leather seats are firm and supportive, although some testers felt they were too firm and the bottom cushions were too short. The rear seat is comfortable for two adults, but three is a crowd.

Gauges are mostly easy to read. Though most controls were straightforward, some audio functions are controlled through a complicated touch screen.

There’s generous interior storage but modest cargo space. Rear seats can be folded in either a 60/40 or 40/20/40 configuration, and the front-passenger seatback folds flat for carrying long items.
Jeep Wrangler

The Wrangler is an iconic off-roader that’s designed to excel in rugged conditions. But it’s based on an old architecture, and its performance, refinement, and interior design don’t measure up to modern vehicles. For 2012, the Wrangler received an updated powertrain. But with a road-test score of only 20, it remains the lowest ranked vehicle in our Ratings. The Wrangler suffers from an unsettled ride, pervasive wind noise, clumsy handling, very long braking distances, and poor visibility. Reliability is average, but the Wrangler scores too low to be recommended.

Ride, handling, and drivetrain

A new 285-hp, 3.6-liter V6 provides decent acceleration for the heavy Jeep. But the five-speed automatic transmission can be slow to downshift, making it feel as though there’s a lack of oomph. We recorded a mediocre 17 mpg overall. A six-speed manual is standard.

On the road, the Wrangler jiggles constantly and snaps over bumps. Wind noise is prominent even with the hard top attached, but road noise is surprisingly low. The body leans even in low-speed cornering, and the slow steering lacks feedback. The Wrangler posted an unusually low turning circle, making it feel as though there’s a lack of oomph. We recorded a mediocre 17 mpg overall. A six-speed manual is standard.

Inside the cabin

The Wrangler’s interior can seem unfinished by modern standards. Hard plastics and exposed painted metal surfaces abound. Drivers sit upright and close to the tilt-only steering wheel. Shorter drivers found the pedals to be a reach, and there isn’t a lot of toe-and-afet seat adjustment range. The footwell is narrow, but at least there’s plenty of head room. The spare tire, rear wiper motor, and rear brake light limit rear visibility. The front seats are flat and lack support. The rear has room for three, but the seat is unsupportive. Access is difficult because of high sills and small doors that don’t stay open. Removing or installing the hard or soft top takes two people. Panels easily lift from the hard top and snap over the rear glass, a nuisance.

Tested vehicle

Major options

- Hard and soft tops, trailer tow group, side air bags, limited slip differential, automatic climate control, heated seats

Tested price $36,340

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CR Labs on Tour

Neal Myerberg, one of America’s foremost authorities on tax-and-finance-planning strategies and tax avoidance techniques, will present “Protecting Yourself in a Difficult Economy: Securing Adequate Income when Interests and Retirement Income Are at Risk” to a select group of junior CR editors who will follow with “Labs on Tour,” a look at Consumer Reports testing programs. Presentations will be held on March 14 in Philadelphia. For information and to reserve your spot, please call CR Communications at 203-224-2767 ext. 1200 or visit cfan@consumer.org or call 914-378-2273.
Cheap trick
Turn a pile of gold—jewelry, a watch, and dozens of coins—into a handful of singles? No, thanks.

Step away from the stones
Made by Me Stepping Stones are supposed to boost kids’ “creativity, focus & attention, cooperative play, self esteem.” But how will kids feel when they realize (after following two pages of directions) that they can’t, um, step on them?

Wow indeed
In their fifth year, Breck’s WOW Perennial Tulips look exactly the same as in their first.

Truth in advertising?
Seen in a Home Depot lot in Connecticut.

Do-it-yourself nose job
Who knew that a nose clip could “make your little nose ... full of happiness”? The package suggests wearing the clip while driving, watching TV, and sleeping.

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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@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.

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.

Paul Reynolds, Canada Extra editor

Canister vacuums (Select Ratings)
Report, page 49; Ratings, page 51
Best choices from our tests of 33 models.

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<tr>
<td>Kenmore Intuition 23110</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenmore Progressive 23206</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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

C

BAGGED continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kenmore Progressive 23204</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panasonic MC-CG902</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CR Best Buy
Recommended

MARCH 2012 www.ConsumerReports.org

32A
### Upright vacuums

Twenty-three of the 67 tested upright vacuums are available, including 9 of the recommended models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A BAGGED</strong> These tend to be best for cleaning carpets.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Miele S 7580 Marin</td>
<td>$475</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Kenmore Intuition 30612</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Hoover Tempo Widepath U540-900</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Hoover Platinum Bagged UHS3010COM</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Eureka Boss Smart Vac 4870M2</td>
<td>230</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Panasonic MC-UG71</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18 Riccar Supralite RSL4</td>
<td>570</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Riccar Supralite RSL3</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 Riccar Brilliance Premium</td>
<td>950</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Kenmore Progressive Glide 30608</td>
<td>200</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Plasma TVs

Twenty-two of the 31 tested plasma TVs are available, including 20 of the recommended models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A 60-INCH AND LARGER</strong> Has 1080p resolution.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Panasonic Viera TC-P60S30</td>
<td>$1,700*</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PLASMA: 50- AND 51-INCH</strong> B1, B2, and B7 have 1080p resolution. The rest have 720p.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Panasonic Viera TC-P50S30</td>
<td>1,000*</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 LG 50PV450</td>
<td>1,000*</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Samsung PN51D450</td>
<td>720*</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 LG 50PT350</td>
<td>850*</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Samsung PN51D530</td>
<td>900*</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PLASMA: 42- AND 46-INCH All have 720p resolution except C1, which has 1080p.</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Panasonic Viera TC-P42S30</td>
<td>800*</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Panasonic Viera TC-P42X3</td>
<td>650*</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Panasonic Viera TC-P46X3</td>
<td>750*</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 LG 42PT350</td>
<td>650*</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Samsung PN43D450</td>
<td>600*</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 3D MODELS, 42- TO 60-INCH All have 1080p resolution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2 Panasonic Viera TC-P55VT30</td>
<td>$3,000*</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 LG 50P2550</td>
<td>1,200*</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Panasonic Viera TC-P50ST30</td>
<td>1,200*</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Samsung PN51D8000</td>
<td>2,200*</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Samsung PN51D6500</td>
<td>1,500*</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Panasonic Viera TC-P46GT30</td>
<td>2,500*</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Samsung PN59D8000</td>
<td>3,000*</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Panasonic Viera TC-P55GT30</td>
<td>2,000*</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Panasonic Viera TC-P46ST30</td>
<td>2,000*</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Samsung PN51D5500</td>
<td>1,100*</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Panasonic Viera TC-P42ST30</td>
<td>1,000*</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Includes one pair of 3D glasses.
LCD TVs  

Forty-seven of the 99 tested LCD TVs are available, including 18 of the recommended models.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brand &amp; model</th>
<th>Price</th>
<th>Overall score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Recommended</strong></td>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>52- TO 55-INCH</strong> All have 1080p resolution.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 LG 55LK520</td>
<td>$1,400*</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Vizio E550V1-CA</td>
<td>1,150*</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Toshiba 55G310U</td>
<td>1,300*</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Dynex DX-55L150A11</td>
<td>850*</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>46- TO 47-INCH</strong> All have 1080p resolution.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Samsung UN46D6300</td>
<td>1,500*</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Samsung UN46D6000</td>
<td>1,300*</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Bose VideoWave Entertainment System</td>
<td>5,500*</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Sony Bravia KDL-46EX620</td>
<td>1,300*</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Toshiba 46G310U</td>
<td>900*</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>40- TO 42-INCH</strong> All have 1080p resolution.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Samsung LN40D630</td>
<td>730*</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Panasonic Viera TC-L42D30</td>
<td>1,000*</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 LG 42LK520</td>
<td>800*</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Samsung LN40D650</td>
<td>680*</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Sony Bravia KDL-40BX420</td>
<td>630*</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9 Panasonic Viera TC-L42U30</td>
<td>850*</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Samsung UN40D5500</td>
<td>780*</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Toshiba 40L12U</td>
<td>750*</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Toshiba 40E210U</td>
<td>630*</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20 ViewSonic VT4210LED</td>
<td>800*</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>37-INCH</strong> All have 1080p resolution.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Panasonic Viera TC-L37E3</td>
<td>700*</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 LG 37LV3500</td>
<td>700*</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>32-INCH</strong> F1, F4, and F5 have 1080p resolution. The rest have 720p.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 LG 32LK450</td>
<td>$480*</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Sony Bravia KDL-32BX320</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Panasonic Viera TC-L32U3</td>
<td>500*</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Vizio M320NV-CA</td>
<td>400*</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 ViewSonic VT320SLED</td>
<td>575</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12 Samsung UN32D4000</td>
<td>530*</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13 Toshiba 32C110U</td>
<td>400*</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>22- TO 27-INCH</strong> Both have 1080p resolution.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Dynex DX-24LD230A12</td>
<td>250*</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 ViewSonic VT1730</td>
<td>430</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3D MODELS, 32- TO 65-INCH</strong> All have 1080p resolution.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Sony Bravia XBR-55HX929</td>
<td>3,600</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 LG 55LW6500 (†)</td>
<td>2,300*</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 LG 55LW9900 (†)</td>
<td>3,800*</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Sony Bravia KDL-55HX729</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7 Samsung UN55D7000</td>
<td>2,750*</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 Samsung UN55D7900</td>
<td>2,950*</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 Sony Bravia KDL-46HX820</td>
<td>2,200*</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11 Samsung UN46D6900</td>
<td>1,800*</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 Sony Bravia KDL-60EX720</td>
<td>2,900</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15 Sony Bravia KDL-60NX720</td>
<td>3,200</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 Sony Bravia KDL-55EX720</td>
<td>1,900</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19 Samsung UN55F6500</td>
<td>1,900*</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23 Sharp Aquos LC-46LE835U</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24 Samsung UN55S8000</td>
<td>3,150*</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 Toshiba 32TL515U (†)</td>
<td>950*</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26 Sharp Aquos LC-52LE835U</td>
<td>2,400</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27 Toshiba 47TL515U</td>
<td>1,300*</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(†) Includes four pairs of 3D glasses.
All of the tested vehicles are available in Canada.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Make &amp; model</th>
<th>Price range</th>
<th>Acceleration (sec.)</th>
<th>Fuel economy (liters per 100 km)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0-50 km/h</td>
<td>0-100 km/h</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WAGON</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toyota Prius v</td>
<td>$27,200–$36,875</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPACT LUXURY SUVS</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMW X3</td>
<td>41,900–46,900</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volkswagen Tiguan</td>
<td>27,875–38,375</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Land Rover Range Rover Evoque</td>
<td>46,995–61,195</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>7.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIDSIZED SUV</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeep Wrangler</td>
<td>22,195–31,595</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>9.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>