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**Guaranteed Savings currently not available in all states. See site for details.

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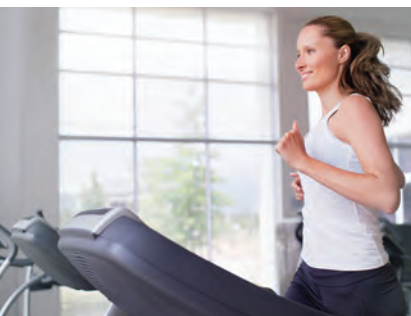
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This issue by the numbers

What's the score?

90

Cub Cadet
31AH57S
snow
blower



57

Stamina CPS
9300 spin bike



Savings this issue

\$3,700

Buy a Volkswagen CC instead of a Mercedes-Benz CLA250 and save this much on your **luxury-car** purchase.

\$750

Buy a ProForm Pro 2000 **folding treadmill** and save this much over a FreeMotion 790 Interactive.

\$150

If one of your **appliances** breaks, you could save this much on average by avoiding a repair call and trying to fix it yourself.

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Coming in March

High-definition televisions, vacuum cleaners, interior paints, mattresses, drugstores, and kitchen appliances.

Check out our iPad app

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



Who we are

Consumer Reports

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

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

How to reach us Write to us at Consumer Reports, 101 Truman Ave., Yonkers, NY 10703-1057, attn: Customer Service.
• To send a letter to the editor, go to ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor.
• For news tips and story ideas, go to ConsumerReports.org/tips.
• E-mail submissions for Selling It to SellingIt@cro.consumer.org.
• For subscription information, go to ConsumerReports.org/magazine or call 800-666-5261. See page 61 for more details.

Ratings We rate products using these symbols:

● Excellent ● Very good ○ Good ● Fair ● Poor

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

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

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

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

ON YOUR MIND

Health care questions

I have a problem with your statement in "The Best Health News of 2013" (December 2013) that "premiums are coming in lower than expected, with most people able to buy a plan for less than \$100 a month." All the reports I have heard are that people are finding out their premiums will be \$500 or more, with increased deductibles. I'm wondering where you obtained your data.

—Linda Hocker Tyler, TX

The information about potential premiums for people who didn't have insurance was based on an analysis by the Department of Health and Human Services of premiums filed by companies who are selling coverage in one or more of the 36 states using HealthCare.gov as their insurance portal. The figure takes into account potential subsidies



for those people. Though the government's website has gotten off to a difficult start, the new health law has already enabled hundreds of thousands of Americans to obtain affordable insurance, many for the first time.

Fast-food trade-offs

In "Mall Snacks from Hell" (Up Front, December 2013), you made recommendations for low-fat or light options. Though you may save a little on calories or fat grams, often there is a significant increase in sodium. Heart disease is a widespread problem, and it's often very important for people to monitor their salt intake in addition to fats. In my opinion, the trade-off is not worth it.

—Miranda Scott Cranston, RI

You make an excellent point. For most people, calories and fat are probably more of a concern.

But for others, looking for lower-sodium choices is important, or even passing on a snack altogether.

Matter of taste

I'm always amused at descriptions of wines, including those in your December 2013 issue, "Celebrate the Season" (Up Front Extra). I take one at random, 14 Hands: "soft wood and leather balance an array of black fruit." I cannot imagine what that combination tastes like or even how it was arrived at. My descriptions are much simpler and boil down to "I like it" or "I don't like it."

—Alphonse Haettenschwiller Nashua, NH

Correction The Canon EOS Rebel SL1 does not have a swiveling touch-screen display. That feature was incorrectly reported in the December 2013 feature on top cameras.

SEND YOUR LETTERS TO
ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor.

Ask our experts

Q We recently took our car in for service (oil change, tire rotation, etc.) at the dealer. They recommended a "Super Fuel Service" for \$185. It includes spray throttle body, clean fuel injectors, decarb induction system, and install premium fuel-system flush. For a car with only 40,000 miles, that seems excessive. Do you recommend the service?

—Steve Dehmer Mandeville, LA

If the car is running fine, then you don't need any of that, especially because it's not called for in the manufacturer's service schedule for the car. Added services like those are laden with profit for the dealer's service department.

Q What is the best computer monitor for writing or reading without eye fatigue? Is a glossy or a matte screen better? LCD vs. LED? 1080x1200 or higher? I do not care about movies and games, and I'm looking for a 27-inch size.

—Cesar Rabellino Stamford, CT

If you are in a brightly lit room with light-colored walls or you wear light clothing regularly, you may be happier with a monitor that has a matte screen. It will not reflect light objects as much as a glossy screen will.

All monitors use LCD technology to create the image but may use either LEDs or CCFLs to backlight the LCD. An LED backlight recovers full brightness immediately upon being turned on or waking from sleep mode, and it uses less power than a CCFL backlight.

At the 27-inch size, look for a "full HD" or 1920x1080 pixel resolution. All modern computer operating systems, including



SERVICE SENSE Follow the manufacturer's suggested schedule, but avoid pricey extras.

Windows and Mac OS, allow rescaling the image to make text and screen objects as large as you might need for easy viewing.

Q The probiotics I take says on the bottle: "3 billion live cells per capsule at time of manufacture." My question is, how long do those live cells last? Is it safe to buy several bottles at a time, or do the live cells diminish? Also, is it advisable to refrigerate the bottle?

—Judith Feder Largo, FL

Without testing, we can't state how many live

cells that probiotic contains or how long they stay viable. Studies, including our own in 2011, have shown that some probiotic products might not contain the dose of the organisms listed on the label. Because it is possible that cells will die off with time, it is probably best to check the expiration date on the package. If the date is approaching, stick to buying just a package or two. As for refrigeration, follow the storage instructions that are on the label.

SEND YOUR QUESTIONS TO
ConsumerReports.org/askourexperts.

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

► WHERE WE STAND

Blowing the whistle on TV blackout rules

THE ISSUE If most tickets to a professional sports matchup aren't sold, the game usually can't be televised in the local market.

OUR TAKE Fans are unfairly being left in the dark. The Federal Communications Commission set the rules that require sports blackouts back in the early 1970s, a time when team owners relied heavily on the revenue from ticket sales. But over the past four decades, dramatic changes in the marketplace have generated millions of dollars in additional revenue sources for the leagues and teams. Some teams even take advantage of special benefits and subsidies that are often bankrolled by taxpayers.

Consumers Union thinks sports blackouts



should be benched and urges lawmakers to pass a new bipartisan bill in Congress that would help curb the practice. Separately, the FCC has signaled that it's taking a hard look at dropping its own rules. That announcement is encouraging, but we urge Congress and the FCC to keep the ball moving so that fans can have greater access to the games.

\$51 billion

The Department of Education was projected to earn that amount in profits from student loans in 2013. But though business is booming for lenders, that isn't exactly a good thing for the millions of families struggling to keep up with the cost of education. "Degrees of Debt," a new report by Consumers Union, highlights the urgent need for student-loan reform. To read the report or share your student-loan situation, go to DefendYourDollars.org.



► Web watch

We have long advised against payday loans, where lenders hold a borrower's postdated check or tap directly into his or her bank account to withdraw the money on payday. Although the process sounds like a decent solution to short-term money woes, payday loans tend to carry high costs and unexpected fees, and to cause other problems. As a result, the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau recently began accepting consumer complaints regarding the lending practice at consumerfinance.gov/complaint. Your complaints are important for helping the CFPB enforce current laws and create future regulations.

► UPDATE

Fighting to stop deadly hospital infections

It has been 10 years since Consumers Union launched a national campaign to require hospitals to publicly report how often their patients acquire infections. Since then, we have helped pass laws in 31 states and the District of Columbia requiring that disclosure. And hospitals nationwide now earn financial incentives through Medicare if they report infection rates. Those measures have stimulated prevention efforts, but medical harm remains too common.

As many as 440,000 Americans die each year as a result of preventable harm that occurs while they're hospitalized, according to a recent analysis in the *Journal of Patient Safety*. It's the third-leading cause of death in the U.S.

Our network of activists continues to advocate for the elimination of medical errors and hospital infections and to strengthen oversight of doctors. To learn more or share your story, go to SafePatientProject.org.

► FROM OUR PRESIDENT

How's that again?

I recently had to explain to a teenager about busy signals. She had never heard one and thought the phone was broken; all of her friends have call waiting. Ah, progress.



I've been rereading my past columns, and it strikes me that we've seen much progress, some progress, and no progress at all, depending on the issue.

Doing a 180. In 2002, a reader sent us a notice from her credit-card company that said, "We will see what the index rate for your Account (the 1 month LIBOR Rate) was on the immediately preceding Determination Date as that rate and Date are defined in your Agreement." She had no idea what her interest rate would be.

No longer. The Credit Card Act, now 5 years old, requires plain-language disclosures and bans unfair interest-rate increases. An October 2013 government report found that the law helped reduce the total cost of credit to consumers by 2 percentage points.

Start your engines. In 2002 I bemoaned vehicles' lousy fuel economy. Cars had to get 27.5 mpg, and light trucks (including SUVs), 20.7 mpg. "Allowing light trucks to meet less stringent requirements no longer makes sense," I wrote, and pushed for higher standards.

We're getting there. By the 2025 model year, cars and light-duty trucks must just about double in efficiency. We're already seeing gains on our test track, with more-efficient engines, improved transmissions, and more diesels. Electric cars are no longer, as we said in 2002, "a long way off."

Hit replay. In 2006, I wrote that the maker of insomnia drug Lunesta had spent millions on its luna-moth advertising. "Butterflies may be free, but moths aren't," I said. The ads worked: Americans spent about \$329 million in one year on the drug.

We didn't like direct-to-consumer drug ads then, and we still don't. They drive up health care costs, overstate the value of pills, and underplay the dangers of new drugs that aren't time-tested. An analysis of TV drug ads published in 2013 found that more than half of the claims are potentially misleading and that 10 percent are out-and-out false. Some progress.

Jim Guest
JIM GUEST
President



Up front

Guacamole that earns an 'olé'!

STRANGE AS IT MAY SEEM, avocados and pigskin have become a popular pairing. To find out which store-bought brands of guacamole will gain fans at your Super Bowl party, our experts tried eight.

What we found. Sabra costs a bit more than others but tastes fresher and has balanced flavors, with a distinct avocado taste. The rest have one or more slight flaws, including bitterness and a slick texture.

All of the tested products received a score of good for nutrition based on calories, fat, sodium, and other nutrients. Two tablespoons have 40 to 60 calories, 4 to 5 grams of fat (mostly the heart-healthy mono-unsaturated kind), 90 to 150 milligrams of sodium, and 2 grams of fiber. By comparison, salsa has about 8 calories per serving and no fat but more sodium.

Bottom line. Sabra scores a win. We also like the recipe below. Dipping chips? Try Tostitos multigrain, best in our past tests of multigrain chips. They're crispy and tender, with lots of sweet corn flavor.

Ratings

All tested products In order of taste.

☒ Recommended

Rec.	Product	Cost, 1 oz.	Comments
VERY GOOD			
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Sabra Classic	50¢	Tastes fresher than others. Some avocado chunks, distinct avocado flavor. Lime, tomato, jalapeño, cilantro, herb bits. Slight heat.
GOOD			
	Wholly Guacamole Classic	34	For garlic lovers. Most samples slightly bitter; one harsh and bitter.
	Trader Joe's Avocado's Number	25	Decent avocado flavor, lots of garlic, but two samples were bitter. Less sodium than most.
	Calavo Authentic Recipe	35	Milder than most. Citrus, slight jalapeño, tomatillo, herb bits. Somewhat bitter. Shiny, slick texture.
	Little Salad Bar Original (Aldi)	21	Big garlic taste; bitter. Less sodium than most.
	Goya Mild Dip*	36	Milder than most. Some citrus, low avocado flavor, slick texture.
	Marketside Classic Smooth (Walmart)	29	Big garlic taste; bitter. Less sodium than most.
	Yucatan Authentic	36	Somewhat bitter; slight heat; slight avocado, vinegar, red pepper, jalapeño flavors. Herb and vegetable bits. Shiny, slick texture.

*Frozen. The rest are refrigerated.

How to create a homemade dip

Choose ripe avocados or buy them ahead of time and let them ripen. (To speed ripening, put them in a paper bag with an apple.) To keep mashed avocado from turning gray-brown, try adding lime juice, keeping the pits in the dip until serving time, or gently adding a half-inch of cold water to the dip as an oxygen barrier. (Pour it off before serving.)

- 2 ripe avocados, mashed
- juice of ½ lime
- salt to taste

Add one or more:

- ¼ to ½ tsp: ground cumin, ground coriander, minced garlic, hot sauce, or mashed roasted garlic



- 1 to 2 tbsp: chopped cilantro, chopped parsley, diced jalapeños, diced chipotles in adobo
- ¼ to ½ cup: diced tomato, diced onion, salsa, cucumber (peeled, seeded, and chopped), diced red and green peppers, mild chilies



Must you register that product?

When you buy a toaster or TV, or receive one as a gift, is it the manufacturer's business to ask about your income, education, hobbies, and car? Frankly, no. Nevertheless, many products include registration cards harvesting personal information that companies then sell to marketers. The companies get money; you get peppered with spam and sales pitches. You might be intimidated into filling out the cards or registering online, fearing that the failure to do so will void your warranty rights.

The straight scoop. As a rule, that's wrong: A sales receipt should suffice if you need to file a warranty claim, according to the California-based Privacy Rights Clearinghouse, a nonprofit consumer-education organization. No demographic or lifestyle info is necessary to register a product, yet registration cards usually don't say so. Instead, they often warn about the importance of filling out the card, implying that if you don't, you'll invalidate the warranty. Opt-out notices are usually vague and in small type.

Companies whose products have a limited warranty (the usual type) may ask buyers to complete warranty registrations, says Elizabeth Lordan, a spokeswoman for the Federal Trade Commission. But they must also tell them whether a returned card is required or optional, says Carolyn L. Carter, deputy director for advocacy at the National Consumer Law Center, a Boston-based nonprofit group. (Products with a full warranty, relatively rare, can't require registration as a condition of coverage.)

There is one advantage to registration: A company that has your name and contact information, and the product model and serial number, can reach you if the product is recalled. Many children's products must be accompanied by registration cards for that very reason, says Scott Wolfson, a spokesman for the Consumer Products Safety Commission.

Bottom line. Read a product's warranty to determine whether you're required to return the card. If so, provide only as much information as is necessary.

Special chocolates for Valentine's Day

IF YOU'RE GOING to spend \$50 to \$125 on a box of chocolates, it should be as special as your Valentine. In tasting dozens of products (such as a chore), we found 15 that left our tasters using such words as "amazing," "ultrasmooth," "exceptional," and "artistic." Among them are three that are new to our annual tests: Recchiuti, Xocolatti, and zChocolat. The Ratings show only the excellent choices among the products we tried.

Shop smart. Bear in mind that you generally have to buy the candies online, and it's shipping that can kick their cost into the stratosphere. (With shipping charges excluded, eight are CR Best Buys.) In answer to a question about high shipping costs, Jacques Torres' website cites the candy's "time and temperature-sensitive nature" and the need for chocolate to arrive "tasting just as fresh as it does when it leaves our shop." Here are ways to get the most for your money:

- Don't assume that all pricey chocolates are excellent. Maggie Lyons, at \$54 per box including shipping, was just fair, with

chalky, gritty, hard pieces (one tasted like cough syrup) and chocolate that was slow to melt in the mouth.

- Don't buy by name. Norman Love's FM Artisan chocolates look like Norman Love's Confections but weren't as good.

- Try to buy at a walk-in store. Some sellers—among them Christopher Elbow, Norman Love, and Vosges—sell at least some of their products in boutiques.

- Try Ferrero Collection Fine Assorted, \$1.25 per ounce, or See's Assorted, \$1.06 per ounce. Although neither scored high enough to make our cutoff, they were very good. Ferrero is widely sold in stores; See's is in more than 200 See's shops in the U.S.

- Get discounts. Sign up for a company's newsletter or mailing list.

Bottom line. Quality is exceptional in all of the rated choices, but styles and flavors are quite different. Consider the recipient's tastes as you read our descriptions. And make sure that he or she checks the shelf life: Some products last just 7 to 14 days. Although the candies may go to waist, you won't want them to go to waste.



DANDY CANDY
Christopher Elbow (top) and Woodhouse are top choices.



Ratings Chocolates

Excellent products only In taste order.

☒ CR Best Buy ☒ Recommended

Rec.	Product (pieces) ^①	Weight (oz.)	Cost		Shipping ^②	Comments
			Box	Ounce		
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Woodhouse Assortment (48)	16	\$90	\$5.63	\$32.00	Ultrasmooth milk, dark, and white chocolate encases textures and flavors (cinnamon toast, pecan pie, fresh mint) that explode from the first bite.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Christopher Elbow (21)	8	42	5.25	36.00	Not for the faint of heart. Ultrasmooth chocolate surrounds bold, unusual combinations such as buttery caramel with a taste of rosemary.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Candinas (36)	16	49	3.06	34.80	Ultrasmooth dark and milk chocolate with exceptional hazelnut, caramel, and liqueur-flavored centers, plus hints of fresh cream and butter.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	John & Kira's Every Flavor Collection (56)	21	79	3.76	22.95	Ordinary flavors made extraordinary by fresh ingredients. Ultrasmooth dark-chocolate squares flavored with coffee, raspberry, ginger, star anise, and others.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	L.A. Burdick Large Wood Box Assortment (64)	16	66	4.13	19.00	Ultrasmooth tiny bites of sophisticated but subtle flavor combinations with intense chocolate. Some pieces have hints of fresh cream and butter.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	La Maison du Chocolat Coffret Maison Dark and Milk (42)	11.3	78	6.90	23.95	Ultrasmooth, mostly dark chocolates and chocolate-based fillings with hazelnut, fruit, cinnamon, and liqueur flavors. Hints of fresh cream.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	zChocolat Traditional Assortment zbox (15)	4.8	51	10.63	19.02	Smooth, well-blended dark, milk, and white chocolates hold raspberry, passion fruit/mango, and other flavors. Many nut butters. Pieces are identified.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Fran's Assorted Truffles Collection (36)	12	50	4.17	25.00	Ultrasmooth milk and dark pieces. Mostly chocolate-based fillings with hazelnut, coffee, and caramel flavors. Great for truffle lovers.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Jacques Torres Jacques' Choice (50)	16	66	4.13	17.50	Wide variety of ultrasmooth milk, dark, and white chocolates with fillings of tropical fruit, key lime, caramel, coffee, nut butter, and others.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Norman Love Confections Signature Gift Box (25)	12	49	4.08	37.31	Unusual fillings (key lime, passion fruit, peanut butter and jelly) in smooth, decorative candies. White chocolates, truffles, creams, nut butters, and fruit purées.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Vosges Exotic Truffle Collection (16)	6.4	40	6.25	39.95	Traditional and unusual fillings (curry, paprika, wasabi) worth exploring. Ultrasmooth; hints of fresh cream.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Nonnie Waller's Traditional Southern Treasure Chest Truffles (32)	25.7	87	3.39	26.00	Huge truffles of milk, dark, and white chocolate that scream cream. Very smooth, "meaty" truffles. Each piece could be a dessert.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Theo Artisan Confection Collection (12)	4.5	26	5.78	26.66	Mostly dark chocolate with fillings such as lemon ganache, hazelnut praline, and mint.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Recchiuti Confections Black Box (16)	6.25	45	7.20	25.00	Dark, milk, and white chocolates with mostly dark-chocolate fillings. Smooth centers, cream notes. Some flavors (such as rose caramel) may not appeal to all.
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	Xocolatti The Original Collection (16)	16	50	3.13	38.80	Round truffles; creamy interiors of mostly dark chocolate. Some unusual flavors (olive-oil basil, coffee nutmeg). Unroasted nuts atop some pieces.

^① Most have toll-free phone numbers and websites that reflect their names. ^② To nearest dollar overnight to New York in the summer, when shipping costs tend to be high.

CLAIM CHECK

Control lights with your phone

The claim. With Belkin WeMo light switches, you can "turn lights on and off from anywhere" with an Android or Apple smart phone or tablet. They replace regular switches and, via an app, connect to a home Wi-Fi system to let you control lights remotely. The devices also let you program your lighting schedule and find out whether lights are on or off. WeMos work with porch lights, lamps, and ceiling fixtures (including fans) and install "quickly and easily." They're \$50 each at Amazon.com, Apple stores, and Walmart.

The check. We tried to set up a WeMo in a staffer's house and ended up installing it in a lab, where we used it to control lights and receive on-off status alerts.

Bottom line. WeMos worked well: Scheduling lights to turn on and off was a snap, and changes in on-off status appeared almost instantly in the app. But they won't be at home in every house. WeMos were too big to replace any of the regular switches in our staffer's house. And even in our lab, setup required patience.



TECH TIP

Deep washers vs. short people

Deeper tubs in some top-loading washing machines, and sometimes greater heights, have left short people resorting to tiptoes and tongs to retrieve that last clean sock. Deeper, larger tubs are becoming more prevalent: Washers in our recent tests hold up to 24 pounds. Because of increased water efficiency, wash cycles take longer than they used to, and deep tubs can be a boon, letting consumers do more laundry at a time. But if you're vertically challenged and shopping for a washer, make sure you can easily reach the bottom of its tub. If you need tongs, the washer isn't for you.



LEAN IN Deep tubs in some top-loading washers, such as this LG, may make laundry hard to reach.



Credit scores, for real

FICO, THE COMPANY that invented credit scores in 1958, is making its previously secret numbers available to customers of any lender willing to share them. That's great news because those FICO scores are the real McCoy—the ones that lenders, insurance companies, and other businesses use to make credit decisions and set your interest rates and auto- or home-insurance premiums. Up to now, consumers usually had access only to inferior “educational credit scores” that credit bureaus, *myFICO.com*, and a gajillion other websites sell for up to \$20 a pop.

As of November, three of the nation's largest credit-card issuers—Discover, Barclays, and First National Bank of Omaha—began providing customers with scores. (Discover It cardholders were first to see them; other Discover cardholders are to see them on statements in 2014.)

FICO's action comes in response to increased scrutiny by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau and pressure from pending Congressional legislation supported by Consumers Union, the advocacy arm of Consumer Reports. That law would require free annual disclosure of the scores that the lenders actually use.

Does that mean the death of educational scores? “I’m cynical about that,” says Chi Chi Wu, a staff lawyer for the National Consumer Law Center and an expert on credit scores. The reason: Scores are sold as

a part of credit-monitoring services, which can cost about \$180 a year and are pushed heavily by the credit bureaus. “That’s an incredibly lucrative business for credit bureaus,” Wu says. “More consumers obtained their credit reports by paying for them through credit monitoring than for free from AnnualCreditReport.com.”

Lenders seem to have detected a sea change against keeping customers in the dark, so if yours doesn’t reveal real scores free, now is the time to complain. Start with the bank president’s office, and if you’re thinking of switching to a competitor that does provide real scores, be sure to say so.

If you’d like, put us in the loop to let lenders know we’re with you. Put “cc: Consumer Reports” at the end of your complaint letter, and e-mail a copy to us at MoneyEditor@CR.Consumer.org. (Omit any account numbers on that copy.) We’ll report on reader activism on this matter at ConsumerReports.org.

Another freebie to request

Go to AnnualCreditReport.com to obtain your free annual credit report from each of the big three credit bureaus, then look for and dispute any errors. Stagger your requests to get one report from a different bureau every four months.

Lost keys? These devices may help you find them

If you've never misplaced your keys, remote, cell phone, wallet, or purse, you can stop reading now. The rest of us might want to check out three devices we recently tested: Cobra Tag BT225UNI, \$39 each; StickNFind, \$49 per pair; and BiKN Smart Case for the iPhone 4/4S, \$100 for one case and tag (\$25 to \$31 for additional tags). They locate missing items by using apps on smart phones or tablets equipped with Bluetooth (Cobra), Bluetooth Low Energy (StickNFind), or their own technology (BiKN).

All require attaching a small tag to the often misplaced item and creating links between the tag, smart phone, tablet, or BiKN's case. To find your tagged keys, for example, you might touch a button on the app and follow the tag's chirp or buzz. To be found, the missing item must be within about 30 feet, though the range can grow under ideal conditions.

The **Cobra** app makes the tag chirp and indicates the strength of its signal but doesn't graph its relative distance from you. It can, however, find items in reverse: If you've misplaced your phone but have your keys, press a button on the tag and your phone will vibrate and play a song. If you leave home with the tagged item or your phone but not both, the devices will alert you. The app can also send a map link to a lost item's last known location. You can use multiple tags with Android devices but just one with iOS devices. Tags need a weekly charge.

StickNFind adheres to flat surfaces or to an included "dog tag" that you attach to an item. The app's screen shows all the tagged



items within range—the app supports up to 20 tags—and you can make the sticker on the lost item buzz, flash, or both. The screen indicates relative distance of the StickNFind from your smart phone or tablet; you walk and see whether you're getting closer or farther from the blue dot on the screen. You can also create a "virtual leash" so that the phone warns you if a sticker moves farther than a chosen distance. The stickers use a standard watch battery that should last a year.

As with Cobra, **BiKN** makes its tags chirp and has reverse finding; as with StickNFind, it displays relative distance to the lost item. Each BiKN case also has its own battery, so your iPhone needn't be on when using the tag. You can link up to eight tags and use any tag to find the others without using

the phone. The case's battery is charged whenever you charge the phone.

Bottom line. All three devices work. The Cobra Tag is versatile and is always on, so it took just a few seconds to start the app, touch the button, and find the tag. BiKN is limited to the iPhone 4/4S, though a newer version that works on many devices is expected. Its multi-tag network might be useful for families that tend to misplace lots of stuff. StickNFind took up to 2½ minutes to find our stickered item even when it was next to our phone—a poor choice for the impatient.

The size of the lost item (a key chain vs. a large purse), its willingness to be found (an aloof cat vs. a friendly dog), and its location (on the counter or under the sofa) will affect how readily it's found.

Think twice about flushing wet wipes

You don't want a flushable wipe that's wimpy, because ... well, it needs to do the job. But you also need a wipe that's weak enough to fall apart when flushed.

The four tested products were all strong enough to stand up to everyday use based on the force required to push a metal ball through layers of wipes. When we put them in a stand mixer filled with water and pushed the slowest speed (more churning than your waste pipe will provide), it took at least 10 minutes to break each into small pieces.

That means you may not want to flush "flushable" wipes.

After we let intact wipes sit in water overnight, we saw differences. The Charmin and the Equate stayed in one piece, but the Cottonelle and the Scott disintegrated easily.

Bottom line. Treating soiled wipes like disposable diapers and tossing them in a lined wastebasket will definitely keep your drain and sewer pipes clear. But if you're going to flush them, choose Cottonelle or Scott, which are less likely to cause plumbing problems.

TESTED



Cottonelle FreshCare
42 wipes **\$2.49**



Charmin Freshmates
40 wipes **\$2.49**



Scott Naturals
51 wipes **\$2.59**



Equate Flushable Wipes
48 wipes **\$1.97**

Pretty as their picture?

The fast food you're served may look less appealing than advertised

READERS SPOKE, WE LISTENED. After we published a report about supermarket foods that bear no resemblance to the photo on their packaging, some of you said that we had missed a similar annoyance: fast foods that are less attractive in person than in their ads or on menus, billboards, or websites.

"I have often felt that the pictures shown in ads for these companies should ... use the actual food they serve," wrote a disgruntled diner, "not the dolled-up, completely unrealistic fantasies they somehow are permitted to display." Another reader supplied a vivid description: "You get a green tomato, cheese that is on lopsided, squished; mustard, ketchup all over the wrapping." In sum, wrote a third, "It's a pain in my posterior."

So we sent staffers to seven fast-food chains: Burger King, Dunkin' Donuts, McDonald's, Quiznos, Subway, Taco Bell, and Wendy's. They visited two or three stores per chain, ordered a variety of menu items, photographed them in a van parked outside, then compared the reality with the picture in the website pitch.

Some foods resembled their publicity shots, but at each chain at least one sample of one menu item didn't. In our small sampling, Subway sandwiches were the worst offenders. That would come as no surprise to some of our readers. As one said, "None of them look like what they are advertising." Said another: "Go to any Subway store. Order from that nice, beautiful menu board. Then look at what they shove into the bag they give you."

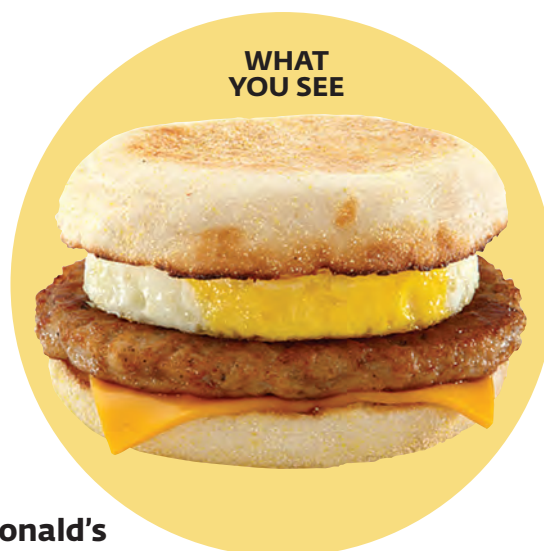
Rules of the 'road food'

"The FTC should make them toe the line," wrote a reader from Newburgh, Ind. Elizabeth Lordan, a press spokeswoman for the Federal Trade Commission, says that truth-in-advertising laws do apply when restaurants show menu items in print and television ads. Although no specific FTC regulations govern the photos that marketers use to sell food, Section 5 of the FTC Act says that "the net impression of any advertisement—which includes photographs, other graphic elements, and text—must be truthful and non-misleading."

But the FTC hasn't pursued any cases alleging that food ads are deceptive based on photos, Lordan said. "That isn't surprising," she added. "The commission is unlikely to take law-enforcement actions in cases where consumers can easily evaluate the product, it's inexpensive, and it's frequently purchased."

We asked each company several questions about pictures vs. reality: Is it realistic to expect served food to match its

photo? Does the company train employees to make products as pictured? Does it do quality-control checks? What happens if a customer complains that food doesn't look as expected? Only Subway came close to answering any of them. "All Subway menu items portrayed in our commercials and marketing materials are made to the exact specifications as those found at our 26,000+ restaurants," said Cindy Carrasquilla, a spokeswoman.



WHAT YOU SEE

► McDonald's

Sausage McMuffin with Egg

THE AD. It's a neat stack of cheese, sausage, and egg.

THE REALITY. It's lopsided and a bit goopy.



WHAT WE GOT

WHAT YOU SEE



WHAT WE GOT



► Burger King

Crispy Chicken BLT Salad Wrap

THE AD. The ingredients emerge from a carefully folded wrap.

THE REALITY. The person who made the wrap needs an origami lesson.

► Subway

Chipotle Steak & Cheese with Avocado

THE AD. It's gaping, and look at all that avocado.

THE REALITY. It's swaybacked, and the green is barely seen.

As a buyer of a Subway turkey avocado sandwich told us, the avocado "was spread across the bread, staining the bread yellowish-green," and it added "no measurable depth."

WHAT YOU SEE



WHAT WE GOT



► DID YOU KNOW?

Tricks of the trade

Donna Lafferty has been preparing mouthwatering meals for more than 30 years, but she isn't a chef. She's a food stylist, and it's her job to make foods look picture-perfect for the camera. "The difference between me and a chef," says Lafferty, whose long list of clients includes Chefs Catalog and General Electric, "is that my work is designed to be viewed and sell products. A chef's food is designed to be eaten." Below are some of her techniques.

Not all of them are used in fast-food ads—fake ice cream, for instance, probably wouldn't appear in menu photos. The restaurants wouldn't talk to us about their food styling, but McDonald's Canada produced a video noting that advertised burgers have exactly the same ingredients as those sold in stores; they just undergo lots of primping, including moving contents to the front of the bun, using a syringe to insert strategic dollops of ketchup, and blow-drying the cheese.

How food gets from blah to beautiful



► Red meat

For presentation purposes, it's barely cooked (to avoid looking "creamed," Lafferty says). It gets a rich, roasted complexion from a mixture of Kitchen Bouquet, a seasoning sauce, and Angostura bitters.



► Fruit

Once it has been cut, some fresh fruit quickly dries out and discolors. A solution: Paint on a mixture of water and a product called Quick Thick, which makes fruit glisten.



► Ice cream

The real deal melts, of course, so Lafferty creates a faux ice cream by mixing sugar, shortening, corn syrup, and coloring. You might not want to eat it, but it can be scooped.



► Breakfast sandwich

Lafferty often has to sort through lots of buns to find nicely colored tops and bottoms that match. As for wraps, to keep them from drying out, she'll apply a thin layer of Vaseline. To keep them from unraveling? She makes a paste from flour and water.



► Meatball sub

The challenge is to keep red tomato sauce from staining the bread and making it soggy. Lafferty's solution: a barrier of clear spray. For pizza, a clothes steamer imparts a fresh-from-the-oven look.

WHAT YOU SEE



▶ **Taco Bell**

Gordita Supreme, Beef

THE AD. Round bread is stuffed with meat that's topped by vegetables.

THE REALITY. Misshapen, blemished bread and some veggies.

But to quote an ad from another fast-food chain, where's the beef?

WHAT WE GOT



WHAT YOU SEE



WHAT WE GOT



▶ **Wendy's**

Dave's Hot 'N Juicy ¼-pound Single with Cheese

THE AD. Melted cheese sits atop a charbroiled meat square that extends over the bun's edge, with red tomato and a full lettuce leaf.

THE REALITY. The beef doesn't overlap the bun, the lettuce is shredded, and the cheese is almost invisible. As a reader griped about all fast-food joints, "Sometimes my burger looks like ... a person put it together while wearing a blindfold."

WHAT YOU SEE



WHAT WE GOT



▶ **Dunkin' Donuts**

Wake-Up Wrap with Bacon

THE AD. There's egg, cheese, and bacon. What's not to like?

THE REALITY. Calling all ingredients to the front!

WHAT YOU SEE



WHAT WE GOT



▶ **Quiznos**

The Traditional

THE AD. The loaf is so full you might have to unhinge your jaw.

THE REALITY. Well, at least the bread is thick.

Costly fees you should never pay

FEES! WE HATE THEM as much as you do. And not just because all of that nickel-and-dime adds up to a pretty penny. It's also because they can be hard to escape. Consumers pay \$2.4 billion per year in credit-card late fees—and \$800 million in expedited-payment fees to *avoid* those late charges. We cough up \$31 billion annually in debit-card overdraft fees. That's a lot of \$30-a-pop penalties for payments that banks authorized in the first place.

Airlines fees can be just as bad. Spirit Airlines, for example, ropes you in with its claim of “ultra-low fares,” then gouges you for \$90 to check your first bag at the airport, \$110 for the second, and \$100 per carry-on (round-trip).

Still, many fees can be avoided or minimized. Here's a guide:

▣ Banking

Banks often give you an escape hatch, so use it to save. Avoid **ATM withdrawal fees**, usually \$2 to \$3, by using your own bank's machines or fee-free ATM network. Or tap the cash-back feature many supermarkets offer when you pay by debit card. Stamp out those \$25 to \$35 **overdraft fees** by monitoring balances with a smart-phone banking app, signing up for e-mail alerts that tell you when your balance is low, and opting out of overdraft protection plans, which set you up to overdraw.

Avoid big-bank **checking fees** of \$8 to \$15 per month by signing up for direct deposit, maintaining minimum balances, or switching to a credit union, community bank, or branchless online or smart-phone virtual bank, where free checking is more common. And axe your bank's \$75 **check-printing fee** by paying more bills electronically and by buying the same 500 checks from Costco for just \$12 to \$14.

▣ Credit

It's easy to avoid \$65 to \$495 in credit-card **annual fees** because only 5 percent of credit cards have them; shop for no-fee, low-interest-rate options at bankrate.com. Stop **overlimit fees** by contacting your card issuer to opt out of plans that let you charge beyond your credit limit.

Knowing your consumer rights is the key to fee-zapping here. There's almost no need to pay \$12 to \$17 in **credit-report fees**, because you can get a free copy once per year from each of the three big credit bu-

reaus—Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion—at annualcreditreport.com. Some states allow a second free report, and you can get additional free reports by filing a fraud alert with a credit bureau every 90 days and asking for one.

Never pay **credit-score fees**, usually \$8 to \$20, because the “educational scores” you get are not the ones that lenders really use. FICO, the scoring company, recently began making the scores that it actually uses available without charge to customers of participating credit-card issuers, including Discover, Barclays, and First National Bank of Omaha.

You can deal with a variety of **mortgage fees** by asking the lender to explain them, then negotiating to reduce or eliminate them. Those include **prepayment fees**, **origination fees**, and **various document fees**. And if you forgot to pay a mortgage or credit-card bill that's due tomorrow, avoid a **late-payment fee** of up to \$50 and reduce expedited-payment fees as high as \$25 by dashing to Walmart for its \$1.50 next-day payment service or its \$4 to \$12 same-day service. Or use your free online bill-paying feature if it will get the money there in time.

▣ Investing

Never pay a **mutual-fund sales fee**, or “load,” which can be a whopping 3 percent to 8.5 percent of the amount you pay for fund shares; buy only true “no load”

funds. Reduce **management fees** that can tax your balances by as much as 1.5 percent every year, which hurts long-term returns, by shopping for stock funds with fees below 1 percent and index funds with fees below 0.4 percent.

And stay away from variable annuities and the **mortality and expense risk charges** they come with. Annuities are overpriced, and it's hard to comparison shop to begin with. But such charges cost 1.25 percent of the annuity's asset value every year to insure the *insurer* in case you live longer than their calculations supposed.

▣ Travel

Sidestep airline **telephone-booking fees** of \$25 to \$35 per ticket by reserving and buying online. Include **baggage fees** to compare the true cost of low-fare come-ons, and consider two carriers highly rated by our readers that let you check one bag (JetBlue) or two bags (Southwest) free on domestic flights.

▣ Autos

The **additional dealer markup**, often found on new or high-demand models, can be made to hit the road if you threaten to bail on the deal or simply wait until that hot model cools down. And let the salesman know that because manufacturers pay dealers to remove coatings and coverings that protect vehicles during shipping, you won't be paying that **dealer-prep fee**.



THOSE PESKY FEES Bank charges can really add up if you let them.

SAFETY TIP

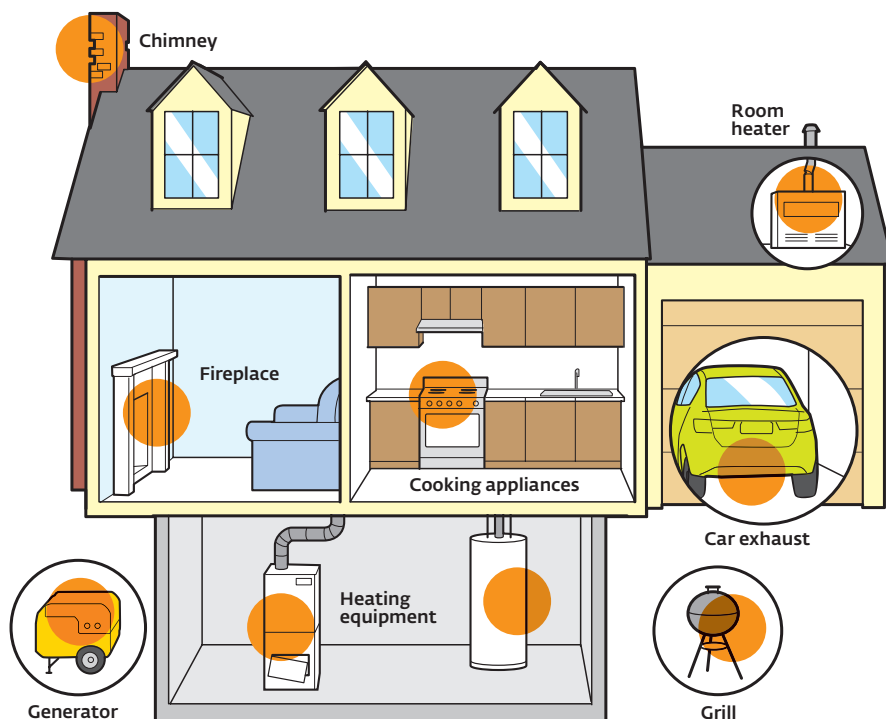
Beware of carbon monoxide poisoning

ACCIDENTAL carbon monoxide (CO) poisoning causes more than 450 deaths and 15,000 injuries each year, many while victims are asleep in their home.

CO-emitting household appliances include gas-burning furnaces, gas stoves, and water heaters. Kerosene heaters and portable generators also give off CO as a product of combustion, and they should never be used indoors. Car exhaust is also a source of the gas, so don't let an auto idle in an enclosed space, such as a garage or carport. Here's what else you need to know:

- Have your furnace professionally inspected annually to make certain it's functioning properly. Also make sure that the vent system is inspected.
- Though CO gas is odorless, if you notice unusual smells, excess moisture in your home, or signs of soot or heat discoloration around your water heater or furnace, have it checked out immediately.
- Put CO alarms on each floor of your house, away from major appliances and in spots where you will hear them.
- Recognize the signs of CO poisoning, which include headache, fatigue, nausea, and dizziness.

POTENTIAL DANGER ZONES



ON THE RECORD

“The handle on the carafe for our [coffeemaker] broke loose, and the carafe landed on our countertop and broke, spilling hot coffee on my wife from the waist down. The glass shattered all over the floor.”

—CONSUMER COMPLAINT TO SAFERPRODUCTS.GOV about the Black & Decker Spacemaker coffeemaker, which was recalled because the pot handle can break.



\$400,000

That's how much Kolcraft Enterprises agreed to pay to settle a Consumer Product Safety Commission claim that it failed to report a safety hazard related to almost 900,000 play yards. From 2000 through July 2009, Kolcraft received approximately 350 reports of play yards collapsing suddenly, including 21 instances of injuries to young children. Yet the company waited until January 2009 to report the risk.

RECALLS

AUTOMOBILES

'13 Ford Escape

Some models with 1.6L engines could overheat, which might cause cracks that could allow oil to leak, resulting in a fire.

MODELS

139,917 vehicles manufactured from Oct. 5, 2011, through June 2, 2013.

WHAT TO DO Ford will notify owners, and dealers will change shielding, cooling, and control systems free. Call Ford at 866-436-7332 for details.



'13-'14 Chevrolet Malibu

The wiring harness for 14,909 2013 Malibu models equipped with an 8-way power adjustable front seat may contact the seat frame and chafe.

That may expose the wires, which could short-circuit. The seat will move unintentionally and become inoperative, and sparking could occur under it, causing flickering lights, smoke, or a fire.

The windshield defroster in 42,696 2014 Malibu vehicles may not turn on, decreasing visibility and increasing the risk of a crash.

WHAT TO DO For the 2013 Malibu, the dealer will repair and secure the wire harness as necessary, free. For the 2014 model, the dealer will update the electronic climate control module software that controls the defroster free of charge. Call GM at 800-521-7300 for information.



'06-'12 Kia Sedona

The front lower control arms may break, due to corrosion resulting from exposure to salty environments. A broken control arm can result in loss of control of the car, increasing the risk of a crash.

MODELS 79,867 vehicles manufactured from June 15, 2005, through Aug. 14, 2012, and sold or registered in CT, DE, IL, IN, IA, ME, MD, MA, MI, MN, MO, NH, NJ, NY, OH, PA, RI, VT, WV, WI, or Washington, D.C.

WHAT TO DO The dealer will inspect the lower control arms and either rustproof or replace them free of cost. Call Kia at 800-333-4542 for details.



HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTS

Ryobi dual chemistry battery chargers

The charger can malfunction, posing risks of fire and burns.

PRODUCTS 578,000 Ryobi P113 battery chargers sold nationwide and online at homedepot.com from September 2007 to December 2009 individually and as part of a kit for \$30 to \$270. One World Technologies, the importer, has received 25 reports of the charger overheating, causing property damage to the charger and surrounding areas.

WHAT TO DO Remove any battery from the charger, unplug it, and contact One World Technologies at 800-597-9624 or go to ryobitools.com for a free replacement charger.



Cuisinart 7-cup food processors

The slicing/shredding disc can loosen when it's being used, and strike and break the processor cover. The cover may shatter, resulting in cuts.

PRODUCTS 25,000 food processors sold nationwide and online at amazon.com and zappos.com from October 2012 through June 2013 for about \$100.

WHAT TO DO Stop using the food processor. Contact Cuisinart at 877-339-2543 or go to cuisinart.com to receive a free replacement lid and reversible slicing/shredding disc.



CHILDREN'S PRODUCTS

Angelcare Movement and Sound baby monitors

The cord attached to the monitor's sensor pad is placed under a crib's mattress, which poses a strangulation hazard if the child pulls the cord into the crib and becomes entangled.

PRODUCTS 600,000 monitors sold nationwide and at baby specialty stores from October 1999 through September 2013 for approximately \$100 to \$300.

Angelcare and the Consumer Product Safety Commission have received reports of two infant cord strangulation deaths, one in 2011 and one in 2004.

WHAT TO DO Immediately make sure cords are placed out of reach of children. Contact Angelcare at 855-355-2643 or go to angelcarebaby.com for a free repair kit that includes rigid protective cord covers through which the sensor pad cords can be threaded.



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PUB02

Repair or replace?

Use our exclusive advice to save money in more than a dozen categories

DECIDING WHETHER to fix a broken product or spring for a new one often feels like an expensive guess. But there's no need to throw away good money on a bad product. In fact, repairing broken items or keeping them going as long as possible isn't always the best way to save money. We've done the homework for you, creating year-by-year advice for more than a dozen common home appliances, electronics, and lawn and snow equipment.

Our advice is based on the experiences of 29,281 subscribers we surveyed as part of our 2013 Online Annual Questionnaire. We also spell out how much repairs usually cost and what our readers thought of the job. And we offer tips that can help

extend the life of your current product or new purchase.

Here's what you need to know:

Products aren't breaking faster. The repair rates of most products in our latest survey are similar to what we found when we conducted the survey in 2010. Some products are breaking less often. Laptops

Don't spend more than 50 percent of the cost of a new item on repairs.

had a repair rate of 24 percent, down from 36 percent in 2010; the LCD TV repair rate is 7 percent, down from 15 percent. So why does it seem like things don't last as long as they used to? Because when products do break, it's memorable: They stop working altogether (53 percent) or work poorly (32 percent), according to our survey.

Avoiding a lemon. Check our "What Breaks and What Doesn't" lists for the most temperamental product types and—from our repair-history surveys—the most and least reliable brands for each. Then use the "Repair-or-Replace Timelines" to help decide whether a repair is worthwhile, questionable, or a bad idea. The timelines also give you an idea of how much a new product costs.

Save money on repairs. People who used independent repair shops were more satisfied with the repairs than those who used factory service, which is consistent with what we've found previously. And repairs cost less, too. That was especially true when it came to large appliances and lawn equipment.

Another way to save on repairs is to do them yourself, as did 31 percent of those surveyed whose products weren't covered by warranty. The prevalence of how-to videos on YouTube and other sites—such as RepairClinic.com, which itself hosts more than 1,400 videos—makes repairing

DID YOU KNOW?

Haggling isn't only for buying. Though few do it—just 17 percent of the people in our survey—those who bargained saved a median of \$64 on a repair.

What breaks and what doesn't

Percentage of 4-year-old products that broke.
Recommended products are shown.



GE JVM3160RFSS

Microwaves

Over-the-range

Reliable brands

None stood out

Repair-prone brand

Samsung

Repair rate

14%

Ranges

Gas & dual-fuel

Reliable brands

None stood out

Repair-prone brand

KitchenAid (gas)

Repair rate

17%

Electric

Reliable brand

GE

Repair-prone brands

Jenn-Air, KitchenAid

Repair rate

14%



GE Café CS980SNSS

even complicated appliances a much less formidable challenge.

But if your product is under manufacturer's warranty, you'll need to use a factory-authorized repair shop or risk voiding the warranty. Just make sure the technician who will be sent to your home has been properly trained on your product.

No matter who does the repair, our long-standing advice remains. Don't spend more than 50 percent of the cost of a new

product on repairing an old one. And if an item has already broken down once before, replacement may make more sense.

Warranties don't improve satisfaction. Only 15 percent of products in our survey were covered by the manufacturer's regular warranty when they broke, and about 10 percent were under a service contract or extended warranty. People who had a service contract or an extended warranty weren't any happier with their repairs.

They actually were more likely to have had repairs done incorrectly the first time around and waited at least two weeks for the repair than people who didn't have those contracts.

Even the 77 percent of people with those contracts who were offered a free repair or replacement for their product didn't save much money overall. The median cost for the contract or warranty was \$136; the median cost for repairs was \$152.



Kenmore Elite 5118[3]

Refrigerators

Side-by-side with icemaker

Reliable brands

None stood out

Repair-prone brands

KitchenAid, LG

Repair rate

31%

Freezer on bottom with icemaker

Reliable brands

None stood out

Repair-prone brands

None stood out

Repair rate

28%

(21% without icemaker)

Freezer on top with icemaker

Reliable brands

None stood out

Repair-prone brands

None stood out

Repair rate

17%

(11% without icemaker)

Cheap fixes you can handle

Not every problem needs a repair technician. Some easy fixes you can do yourself for as little as \$2:

▶ **Refrigerator.** If it seems to run constantly, dirt and debris might be coating the condenser coil. (See the manual for the location.) Cost: up to \$5 for a condenser brush. And if the fridge or freezer door stops self-closing, replace the hinge's cam riser. Cost: \$11 to \$30.

▶ **Range.** If your cooktop coil doesn't heat or heats intermittently, replace the burner receptacle. Cost: \$10. And for \$35, you could replace the bake element for an oven that doesn't heat.

▶ **Clothes washer.** If water enters the machine even when it's off, replace the water-inlet valve, which can wear out. Cost: \$25 to \$50.

▶ **Vacuum.** If the brush roll turns little, if at all, it could be the brush-roll belt or the roll itself. Cost: \$3 to \$40. And if you have weak suction though the hose is clear, check the filters. Cost: \$10 to \$70 for a set.

▶ **Snow blower or mower.** If you know you have fresh fuel and have primed the engine as outlined in the manual, trouble starting could simply be caused by an old spark plug. Cost: \$2 to \$5. Be sure to set the proper gapping before installing it.



Bosch Ascenta SHX3AR7(5)UC

Dishwashers

Reliable brands

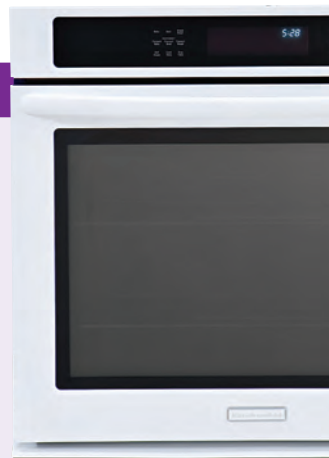
Bosch, Miele, Whirlpool

Repair-prone brands

LG, Samsung

Repair rate

20%



Wall ovens

Electric

Reliable brands

None stood out

Repair-prone brands

None stood out

Repair rate

18%

Consumer Reports' customer-relations staff gets four to six times more repair-related complaints about appliances such as washers, refrigerators, and ranges than about electronics and outdoor gear. Built-in refrigerators in particular drew complaints in our survey. That makes buying an appliance from a reliable brand, and properly maintaining it, especially important.

Manufacturers are trying to improve service and trim repair costs, even if just to save themselves money on warranty-related calls. GE's NewFi program lets service technicians use a laptop to diagnose problems and identify faulty parts. LG's Smart Diagnosis, on many Kenmore and LG washers and dryers, leaves the technician out of the diagnosis. You open the smart-phone app and, when prompted, push a button on your machine and hold your phone to the power button. The washer beeps a code, and the service center diagnoses the problem—and might even fix it.

- Occasionally check the screens where your washer's hoses attach to the water supplies and remove any grit. Don't overload the washer beyond its recommended capacity.

- Clean your dryer's lint filter after each use to keep air flowing freely. Each year, clean the entire exhaust duct to keep it from clogging—a fire hazard. Check the exhaust vent often, especially if you find that the clothes are taking longer to dry.
- Clean your refrigerator's condenser coils every few months or so. (See your manual for the location.) Clean door gaskets with mild detergent and water to ensure a good seal.
- With ranges, place heavy pots and pans gently on smoothtop models to avoid breakage. Don't slide pots across the surface of smoothtops; it can scratch them. Never cover drip pans and bowls with aluminum foil.
- Check a wall oven's door seals for damage. If heat is escaping, adjust or replace the gasket.
- For dishwashers, replace a dish rack that has worn or rusted tines.

Better \longleftrightarrow Worse

● ● ○ ● ●

Repair Consider repair Replace

Product	Age of broken product								Cost					Repair problems			
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	New product	Replacement (median)	Repair (median)	Extended warranty (median)	Satisfaction with repair	Percent with any problems	Process	Repair quality	Cost
Clothes dryer electric									\$ 450-\$1,100	\$ 700	\$144	\$132	⬇️	37%	⬇️	⬇️	○
Clothes dryer gas									550-1,150	800	148	144	⬇️	31	⬇️	⬇️	○
Dishwasher									350-800	550	153	135	○	42	⬇️	⬇️	○
Microwave oven over-the-range									250-600	350	132	98	○	41	○	⬇️	○
Range electric									400-1,000	600	190	154	○	50	○	○	⬇️
Range gas									500-1,300	700	187	155	○	48	○	⬇️	○
Refrigerator built-in									6,000-8,000	7,000	289	–	⬇️	54	⬇️	⬇️	○
Refrigerator side-by-side									800-1,700	1,200	194	157	○	46	⬇️	⬇️	○
Refrigerator bottom-freezer (without icemaker)									800-2,200	1,500	216	161	○	50	○	⬇️	○
Refrigerator top-freezer (without icemaker)									500-900	700	152	169	○	44	⬇️	○	⬇️
Vacuum cleaner full-sized canister									200-600	400	83	–	○	41	○	○	○
Vacuum cleaner full-sized upright									70-400	235	67	–	○	38	⬇️	⬇️	⬇️
Wall oven electric									800-2,000	1,000	248	187	○	46	○	○	○
Washing machine front-loader									700-1,200	900	186	153	○	47	⬇️	⬇️	⬇️
Washing machine top-loader									400-900	700	150	137	○	38	⬇️	○	○

Vacuums

Canister
Reliable brands
 None stood out
Repair-prone brand
 Electrolux
Repair rate
17%

Upright
Reliable brand
Kirby
Air-prone brands
Car, Simplicity
Repair rate
13%

Washing machines

Front-loader
Reliable brands
 LG, Samsung
Repair-prone brands
 Frigidaire, GE
Repair rate
22%

Top-loader
Reliable brands
 None stood out
Repair-prone brand
 Fisher & Paykel
Repair rate
21%



LG WM8000H[V]A

Dryers

Gas
Reliable brand
 LG
Repair-prone brand
 Frigidaire
Repair rate
14%

Electric
Reliable brand
LG
Repair-prone brands
None stood out
Repair rate
12%

Getting rid of the old one

Ready to part with your obsolete, failing, or broken product? Even if it's of no use to you, it has a value to others—and maybe even to you. Here are some options:

❏ Sell it. One channel through which you can sell your discarded products, even just for parts, is eBay. And as for those electronic products that still work but don't have the latest bells and whistles, some buyers prefer bargains over nifty features.

❏ Donate it. The Salvation Army is among charities that will pick up appliances and TVs, and it provides a chart of value ranges that you can use to write them off on your taxes. Fridges and TVs must be in working order for that charity to accept them.

❏ Send it away. The quickest option, though not the cheapest, is to have your old TV or appliance hauled away when the new one is delivered. ApplianceSmart, Best Buy, Home Depot, and Sears participate in the Environmental Protection Agency's Responsible Appliance Disposal Program, which ensures that any harmful chemicals will be reclaimed or destroyed and that all metal, plastic, and glass will be recycled.

❏ Recycle it. Check with your municipality or county for times and location, such as scheduled recycling events that accept discarded electronics; also check at earth911.com for local pickup sites. Best Buy, Staples, and other retailers (check terms) accept numerous electronic products for recycling. Another option: the Steel Recycling Institute, which lists local pickup locations at recycle-steel.org.

❏ Leave it curbside. For a municipal pickup, check locally for the appliances or electronics that you can leave—and find out whether there's a fee. (For refrigerators, you'll need to remove the door.) For mowers and snow blowers, leaving your unit at the curb with a "free" sign on it can quickly take care of your problem.

▶ Electronics

Electronic gear doesn't stay on the cutting edge for very long. So when a device breaks, the temptation to ditch it is high, especially if the price of a shiny new model isn't much more than the cost of buffing up the old one.

You can buy a new 32-inch LCD TV from a major brand such as Samsung or Sony for about \$300, for example, so why spend \$138 (the median repair cost for that type of TV in our survey) to revive one that's a few years old? Only 14 percent of the consumers we surveyed repaired a 32-incher that wasn't under warranty. But LCD TV owners were among the most satisfied with repairs in our survey. Owners of cameras and plasma TVs found it to be a frustrating process that took too long, more than two weeks.

The hassle of transferring files and programs might make you more likely to consider repairing your computer, which was the most troublesome electronic product in our survey. Almost one in four laptops and desktops broke by their fourth year, compared with just 7 percent of LCD TVs.

Though we generally don't recommend extended warranties, you might want one for a computer, especially if it covers accidental damage. But be warned: Computer owners griped about repairs that didn't solve the problem or had to be redone.

Make it last

All devices

- When you plug in a device, use a surge protector to safeguard the product from sudden spikes in electrical power.

- Avoid window cleaners and abrasive cloths that can scratch displays; use a dry microfiber cloth. (If in doubt, check the manual.)
- Occasionally charge infrequently used devices so that a discharged battery isn't damaged.
- Don't expose equipment to extreme hot or cold temperatures, such as in a car.
- Enclose a mobile device in a zippered plastic storage bag before you go anywhere that's wet or dirty.

Computers

- Install security software and update it regularly to protect against malware.
- Leave space around the computer for airflow. Heat buildup can damage circuitry, so don't pile stuff on top of it, and don't place a laptop on a soft surface such as a pillow, which can block cooling vents.
- Make sure your computer or tablet is at least 50 percent charged and powered off (not asleep) if you need to store it for two weeks or more. An uncharged battery can get damaged.

TVs

- Don't leave your TV turned on for long periods when nobody is watching it.
- Avoid yanking on cables, which could damage the input and the cable's connector.

Cameras

- Don't change lenses in windy or dusty settings. Dust could get into the camera body.
- Take batteries out of the camera if you won't be using it for a while; they can leak and damage it.

What breaks and what doesn't

Computers

Desktop, laptop, notebook

Reliable brand

Apple
(desktop and laptop)

Repair-prone brands

None stood out

Repair rate

24%

Apple MacBook
Pro 13-inch



ELECTRONICS

Repair-or-replace timeline

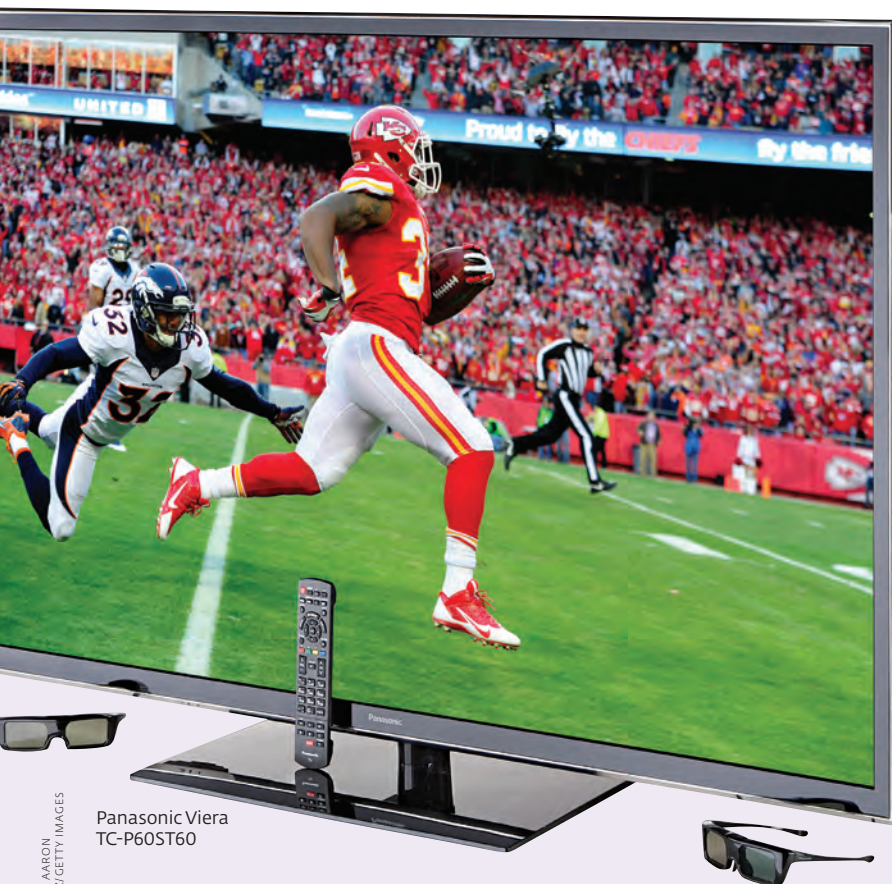
Product	Age of broken product								Cost		Repair problems					
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5	Year 6	Year 7	Year 8	New product	Replacement (median)	Repair (median)	Extended warranty (median)	Satisfaction with repair	Percent with any problems	Process	Repair quality
Digital camera point-and-shoot									\$ 90-\$700	\$ 220	\$ 89	-	○	52%	●	○
Digital camera SLR									450-1,700	875	185	-	○	51	●	○
PC desktop									300-1,600	900	147	\$139	○	42	○	●
PC laptop or notebook									450-2,000	900	152	156	○	51	○	●
Tablet									175-850	400	118	74	●	35	●	○
TV LCD (32 inches)									200-400	325	138	-	●	37	○	○
TV LCD (40 to 43 inches)									400-850	550	158	121	●	45	○	○
TV LCD (46 to 52 inches)									500-1,200	800	174	155	●	41	○	○
TV LCD (55 inches or larger)									750-3,000	1,700	250	206	●	56	○	○
TV plasma (46 to 51 inches)									500-1,200	800	299	-	○	59	●	○

Better ← → Worse

● Repair ● Consider repair ● Replace

Guide to the timelines

Data are based largely on our 2013 Annual Questionnaire and include only nonwarranty professional repairs. **Repair-or-replace timelines** take into account the product's age, usually repair and replacement costs, and the judgment of our marketing and engineering experts. Green shows when a repair is worthwhile; yellow signals a judgment call; red means we advise against repair. Timelines apply to products most people buy, not the least or most expensive in a category. **New product** and **replacement (median)** reflect what you should expect to pay for a midpriced replacement model. **Repair** is the median repair cost paid by survey respondents. **Extended warranty**, where we have sufficient data, is the median cost for that product. **Satisfaction with repair** reflects respondents' overall satisfaction. **Percent with any problems** indicates how often readers encountered problems during repair, and scores indicate readers' assessment of those parts of their experience. On average, 13 percent of readers complained about a frustrating repair process, 13 percent about bad repairs, and 12 percent about excessive cost.



Panasonic Viera TC-P60ST60



Canon EOS Rebel T5i



Panasonic Lumix DMC-TS4

Digital cameras

SLR

Reliable brands
None stood out
Repair-prone brands
None stood out

Repair rate
8%

Point-and-shoot

Reliable brands
None stood out
Repair-prone brands
None stood out

Repair rate
5%

TVs

Plasma

Reliable brands
None stood out
Repair-prone brands
None stood out

Repair rate
8%

LCD

Reliable brands
None stood out
Repair-prone brand
Westinghouse

Repair rate
7%

Brand repair rates are based on the Consumer Reports 2013 Annual Product Reliability Survey. There are often many reliable brands, and we have listed some of the more outstanding ones. Note that models within a brand might vary, and changes in design or manufacture might affect reliability.

Save time in the kitchen

Prepare faster, tastier meals with our top products and practices

FIVE TO TEN MINUTES might not sound like much, but when you're racing to get dinner on the table, that can be the difference between a relaxing family meal and one gobbled down with hardly a "How was your day?" When we surveyed 3,435 CONSUMER REPORTS subscribers about their experiences cooking weeknight meals, almost half said they wished the task took less time. The average difference between actual time spent and what they desired: 8 minutes.

With that goal in mind, we set out to create the ultimate time-saving kitchen, one that uses the latest innovations, design trends, and lifestyle advice. That involved testing a slew of appliances and paying close attention to those that tout special time savings (such as steam ovens and induction cooktops). We also gleaned wisdom from chefs, designers, organizers, psychologists, and others. And we tested steamable prepared meals to see whether they improve on the usual frozen fare.

You'll find detailed reports on those appliances and products on the following pages. Up first: our keys to saving 8 minutes (or more) during your daily effort to get meals to the table fast.

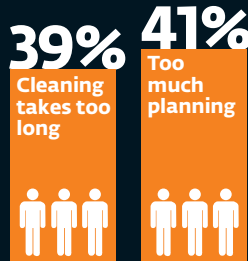


Food for thought

How readers would spend the extra time if they could save on meal prep

READING	46%
WITH FAMILY	44%
HOBBIES	38%
WATCHING TV	31%
EXERCISING	28%

Biggest gripes



35 - **27** = **8**
minutes **minutes** **minutes**
 how long the typical weeknight dinner takes subscribers to cook how long, on average, respondents wished it took desired savings

Source: Consumer Reports National Research Center, October 2013.

Design for efficiency

If you're remodeling the kitchen, follow the design basics, but tailor them to your family's needs and routines. For example, the National Kitchen & Bath Association's guidelines call for kitchen walkways to be at least 36 inches wide. "But for a busy family, that passage needs to be 42 or even 48 inches wide for people to move freely," says Paula Kennedy, a certified master kitchen and bath designer in Seattle.

Similarly, the work triangle—connecting the sink, fridge, and cooktop—is still the baseline for maximum efficiency. But in two-cook kitchens, it often makes sense to have a second triangle, maybe designed around an island counter with a prep sink.

Storage is another customizable design element. If you frequently buy in bulk, you'll need a walk-in pantry or an oversized wall cabinet that's at least 36 inches wide and 24 inches deep. Pantry needs will be less for everyday market shoppers, who will also get by with a smaller refrigerator.

4 Estimated minutes saved daily: 3

► Think ahead

One of the top cooking gripes in our survey was that it takes too much planning. Making double batches of recipes means one less meal to think about. Stews work for dinner, and pancakes can be frozen and reheated for breakfast. "I also love making a lot of something that can be used in different ways throughout the week, like roasted chicken, which might become enchiladas or part of a pasta dish," says Katie Workman, author of "The Mom 100 Cookbook" (Workman Publishing, 2012).

A slow cooker is handy for make-ahead meals. Simply stir ingredients together in the morning, and by night you'll have a hot, ready-to-serve meal. The \$250 All-Clad 99005 slow cooker turned out tasty spareribs in our tests, and its nonstick interior helps with cleanup. See "Little Helpers That Make Food Prep Easier," below, for other useful small appliances.

④ **Estimated minutes saved daily: 5**

► Minimize maintenance

Some materials and finishes are harder to care for than others. Quartz countertops are rivaling granite in part because they don't require periodic sealing. Stainless-steel appliances remain popular, but if fingerprints are a concern, you might consider a newer smudge-resistant finish, such as GE's Slate.

As for flooring, vinyl held up best in our tests against scratches and dents, plus the latest designs mimic natural materials. If you want real wood, opt for a factory finish, which tends to last the longest. And don't forget about the furnishings. "I did all my kitchen chair cushions in outdoor fabric so that spills roll off instead of collecting and staining," says Amy Ellen Clark, founder of the blog MomAdvice.com.

④ **Estimated minutes saved daily: 4**



► Contain the clutter

Precious minutes are lost looking for misplaced items and uncluttering countertops so that they can be used for meal prep. Remember the adage: a place for everything, and everything in its place. In the kitchen, try to put things close at hand, says Jennifer Lava of Austin, Texas, a member of the National Association of Professional Organizers. For example, dishes and flatware should be kept in a cabinet next to the dishwasher; cutting boards and sharp knives belong near the food-prep counter.

Creating a separate landing spot, ideally just off the kitchen or along its perimeter, for mail, school papers, and the like will help keep counters clear. It's a good idea to keep a paper shredder nearby for documents that contain vital personal information. In our latest tests, we liked the Staples SPL-TXC122A wastepaper basket shredder, \$120, which worked faster than other models, with fewer paper jams and less frequent emptying.

④ **Estimated minutes saved daily: 2**

► Make it a family affair

Look for ways to enlist other members of the household. If kids are present, you might designate a lower cabinet for everyday dishes or flatware, allowing young ones to help set the table. Or look for age-appropriate food-prep tasks, such as washing vegetables.

As for the meal itself, don't underestimate the importance of sit-down family dinners. In one study, just an additional 3.5 minutes at mealtime was enough to mitigate the risks of child obesity. "It adds up over time," says Barbara Fiese, director of the Family Resiliency Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and co-author of the study. "A few extra minutes each day turns into 15 minutes each week, and you can learn a lot about the emotional life of your kids in 15 minutes. Plus it's an opportunity to model good behaviors and manners." That includes turning off the television and electronic devices. Remember, with your kitchen running at maximum efficiency, you'll have that much more time for both once dinner is done.

④ **Estimated minutes saved daily: 3**



Little helpers that make food prep easier

Countertop appliances can be big time-savers—if you chose wisely. Here are five winners from our tests:



Toaster oven Panasonic FlashXpress NB-G110P \$150

Its quartz and ceramic heating elements eliminate the 5-minute preheat required with other toaster ovens; corn muffins and pizza came out very nicely.



Food processor Breville BFP800XL/A \$400

Whiz through meal prep with our top food processor. Chopping, slicing, shredding, and grating were all superb, and the 16-cup container lets you process large batches.



Immersion blender Cuisinart Smart Stick CSB-75 \$35

These devices save time by letting you blend soups and such right in the pot. This model from Cuisinart combines solid performance with an outstanding price.



Blender Vitamix Professional Series \$750

This Vitamix whips up a superb smoothie, frozen drink, and even hot soup, plus it's short enough to slide under upper cabinets when it's not in use, freeing up countertop work space.



Single-serve coffeemaker DeLonghi Nescafé Dolce Gusto Genio EDG455T \$130

It was tops in our tests at brewing a single cup quickly and consistently. If you prefer a drip coffeemaker, choose a model that can be set to turn on by itself in the morning.

Speed cookers

The best and briskest appliances for all of your food-prep needs

COOKING APPLIANCES are the engine of any kitchen. Wimpy burners, a wonky oven, and a microwave with a mind of its own can get in the way of efficient meal prep. Our latest tests of kitchen appliances found plenty of first-rate models with true timesaving enhancements. That includes high-powered cooktops that will bring water for pasta to a rapid boil and double ovens that let you simultaneously prepare two dishes at different temperatures.

But not every speed claim from manufacturers pans out in our labs. Case in point: the infrared oven broiler we tested that cooked

burgers only a minute faster than the brand's standard broiler. We also see gas burners with high Btu/hr., or British thermal units per hour, that don't deliver faster cooktop heating.

Read on for our picks of appliances that will help keep your kitchen running at top speed, including steam-enhanced technology, below. Professional chefs have embraced the technology for years, and it's just starting to catch on in homes. We've also included our take on steamable frozen dinners and provided a bunch of tips for maintaining a clean and tidy kitchen—before, during, and after the mealtime rush.



FAST AND FLAVORFUL This countertop model from Cuisinart cooked a crispy chicken in about half the time of a conventional oven.

▶ Steam ovens heat up

Promising speed, versatility, and healthful meal prep, combination steam/convection ovens are becoming more popular. They were used by 18 percent of kitchen designers in 2013, up from 11 percent in 2012, according to the National Kitchen & Bath Association. We bought three models to see whether the hype is real.

The ovens can cost thousands of dollars, but Cuisinart has a \$300 countertop version, model CSO-300. It resembles a standard toaster oven, with a removable reservoir that you fill with tap water. Its size is suited

to cooking just one dish at a time, but the results were impressive. Set to the 450° F steam-bake mode, it cooked a fairly evenly browned 4-pound chicken in about 40 minutes, or half the time required of a conventional electric wall oven set to 350° F. The Cuisinart also made tasty yams in two-thirds the time. Tender rice and broccoli followed, though we didn't save any time compared with our cooktop and microwave preparations of those dishes. And in our bread test, the steam-baked loaf was slightly crispier than what came out of a conventional oven.

We also bought two built-in steam ovens: the Thermador PS0301M, \$4,000, and the Wolf CS024 Convection Steam Oven, \$3,800. Both have larger capacities than the Cuisinart. Testing continues; so far the Wolf has cooked a nicely browned chicken in about 40 minutes using its 425° F convection steam mode, but it took some getting used to. The Thermador has been easier to operate, but temperature and cooking time were similar to a conventional oven when we prepared a chicken using its "easy cook" mode. Go to ConsumerReports.org for more details.

Ranges that sizzle

Our tests of hundreds of ranges revealed more than 25 picks. If cooktop speed is your priority, consider an induction range, which uses an electromagnetic coil beneath a glass-covered surface to deliver more heat. The models we tested cooked about 20 percent faster than conventional electric smoothtops. Gas burners were the slowest, though they provide quick temperature response and visual feedback.

As for ovens, we like the multitasking capability of double-oven configurations—say, broiling fish in one chamber while baking a pie in the other. Whether you opt for a single or double oven, pay attention to usable capacity, especially if you do a lot of entertaining. Few 30-inch pro-style models made our recommended list, in part because their smaller ovens can cost you time when you're cooking for a crowd.



A3 Frigidaire



D1 GE

Ratings

Recommended models only From 173 tested.

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

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results						Features	
		Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model.			Cooktop high	Cooktop low	Baking	Broiling	Oven capacity	Oven cleaning	Convection	High-power elements or burners
				0 100 P F G V E								

A 30-INCH SMOOTHTOP DOUBLE OVENS

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	GE Profile P5978STSS ^[1]	\$2,800	86	○	●	●	○	●	●	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Maytag MET8885XS	1,700	83	●	●	●	○	●	○	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Frigidaire FGFE302TNF	1,400	82	●	●	○	○	●	●	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Frigidaire FGFE308TNF	1,800	81	○	●	○	○	●	●	●	1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	LG LDE3015ST	1,300	81	●	●	○	●	●	○	●	2

B 30-INCH SMOOTHTOP SINGLE OVENS

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Kenmore 92163	1,600	87	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	GE JB705STSS	1,000	86	●	●	○	○	●	●	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	LG LRE3023S	1,000	86	●	●	○	○	●	○	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	GE Café CS980SNSS ^[2]	2,800	86	○	●	●	●	●	○	●	1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	LG LRE3025S	1,250	86	●	●	●	○	●	○	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	6	GE PB920STSS	1,800	85	●	●	○	○	●	●	●	1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	Electrolux EI30EF35JS	1,600	85	●	●	●	○	○	○	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8	Samsung NX58F9500WS ^[1]	1,800	84	●	●	○	●	●	○	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9	GE JB650DTWW JB655DTWW	800	81	●	●	○	○	●	●	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	10	LG LRE3012ST	850	81	●	●	○	○	○	○	○	2

C 30-INCH ELECTRIC COIL SINGLE OVEN

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Kenmore 94142	430	81	○	●	○	○	●	●	●	2
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D 30-INCH INDUCTION SINGLE OVENS

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	GE Profile PHB925STSS	2,700	90	●	●	○	●	●	●	●	3
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Samsung FTQ307NWGX	2,000	89	●	●	●	●	●	○	●	2

E 30-INCH GAS AND DUAL-FUEL DOUBLE OVENS

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	LG LDG3037ST	1,900	75	○	●	●	○	○	○	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	KitchenAid KDRS505XSS ^[3]	2,000	71	○	●	○	○	●	○	●	1
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	LG LDG3016ST	1,800	70	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	2

F 30-INCH GAS SINGLE OVENS

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	LG LRG3097ST	1,900	74	○	●	○	○	○	○	●	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	LG LRG3095ST	1,500	72	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Frigidaire Gallery FGGF3032MW	775	71	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Samsung NX58F5500SS	1,000	71	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	2
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	LG LRG3091SW	1,000	71	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	2

G 30-INCH PROFESSIONAL DUAL-FUEL SINGLE OVEN

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	KitchenAid KDRS407VSS KDRU-707VSS	4,500	72	○	●	○	○	○	○	●	3
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H 36-INCH PROFESSIONAL DUAL-FUEL SINGLE OVENS

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	KitchenAid KDRU763VSS KDRS-462VSS, KDRS463VSS, KDRS467VSS, KDRU767VSS	6,000	74	○	●	○	○	○	○	●	3
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	GE Monogram ZDP364NDPSS	7,500	72	○	●	○	○	○	○	○	4

^[1] Slide-in model. ^[2] Has cooking drawer. ^[3] Dual-fuel model.



Electrolux

Dacor

Kenmore

► Microwave ovens: Ultimate speed cooking—within reason

Ever since we started testing microwave ovens more than 40 years ago, they've been hailed as the ultimate speed cooker. Our first report from 1968 conjured up "giddy visions of 2-minute lunches and 15-minute company dinners." But for all of their enduring value, there are limits to what a microwave can do, as we found when we cooked a whole chicken and a frozen pizza in three high-priced models with special speed-cooking claims.

The **Electrolux IQ-Touch EI30BM60MS**, \$630, comes with promises of "oven results at microwave speed." The **Dacor Discovery PCOR30S**, \$1,270, "allows your food to cook more evenly." And the **Kenmore Elite 74153**, \$300, has special features for "browning food and shortening cooking time."

All three microwaves did require less cooking time than our standard electric oven; 10 to

30 minutes less for the chicken and 7 to 10 minutes less for the pizza. But quality suffered, in the form of dried-out poultry with pale skin, and pizzas that had unevenly melted cheese and doughy crusts.

Where microwaves did well. In our regular tests, even some less-expensive models excelled at the basics—reheating and defrosting. The **Sharp R-323TKC** midsize countertop model, \$140, is also relatively quiet. The **Kenmore Elite 74229** large countertop model, \$180, comes in stainless steel. And the **GE JVM7195SFSS** over-the-range model, \$400, adds impressive venting.

Any of those microwaves should be able to handle an array of tasks, including these five: **Fish.** Sole, flounder, and other thin fillets turn out tender and moist. Simply cover and cook until the fish is milky white, it flakes with a

fork, and it reaches an internal temperature of 145° F on a meat thermometer.

Steamed vegetables. Add 1 to 3 tablespoons of water to a bowl and cover the veggies with wax paper or a paper towel to hold in moisture and reduce splatters.

Oven-cooked chicken. A whole chicken won't taste great out of the microwave. But you can cut the cooking time in the oven or on an outdoor grill by partly cooking chicken pieces in a microwave first. The same goes for long-cooking veggies, such as winter squash.

Melted chocolate. Heat chopped pieces on medium in a microwave-safe dish—skip the lid—for a minute, then stir until smooth. If the chocolate isn't fully melted, continue in 15-second increments, stirring after each.

Lemon juice. Microwave lemons for 20 seconds to get more juice when squeezing.

► Cooktops and wall ovens: Divide and conquer

A cooktop/wall oven combo can save time by creating a more efficient layout, especially in two-cook kitchens. Food is also more accessible from a wall oven. Here are three combos to consider:



GE Profile PHP900DMBB 30-inch induction cooktop
\$1,400

GE PT9550FSS 30-inch electric double-oven wall oven
\$3,500

Ultimate speed

This GE cooktop delivers fast heat and precision simmering. Two large ovens let you bake and broil at once; both ovens also have a convection option. The Wi-Fi-enabled ovens can be controlled from a smart phone, allowing you to save time by changing settings without having to be in the kitchen.



Maytag MEC7430WS Electric smoothtop cooktop
\$700

Maytag MEW7530AW 30-inch single wall oven
\$1,000

Budget buy

Two of the four elements on the Maytag cooktop are high-powered for fast heating and boiling. Low-heat cooking is also superb. The wall oven outperformed models costing two and three times as much thanks to its large capacity, impressive baking, and excellent broiling.



Thermador SGSX365FS 36-inch gas cooktop
\$1,900

Whirlpool WOD93ECOAS 30-inch electric double-oven wall oven
\$2,500

Gas gourmet

This combo mixes brands to tap the top models in their categories. Fast heating and superb simmering made the Thermador our best 36-inch cooktop; three of five burners are high-powered. For the Whirlpool, oven space and convection in the upper chamber are potential time-savers.

Seven steps to a quick cleanup

When we asked readers about their top cooking gripes, cleaning was high on the list, cited by 39 percent of them. Here are some ways to make the process less laborious:

1 Choose a speedy dishwasher.

The downside of more water- and energy-efficient machines is a cycle time that can approach 3 hours. Some models are quicker, such as the \$700 Bosch Ascenta SHX3AR7[5]UC, which took a relatively brisk 95 minutes in our tests; a 30-minute cycle works for lighter loads.

2 Skip the prerinsing.

Most modern dishwashers don't need it. You'll save time, and you could reduce your household's annual water consumption by up to 6,500 gallons.

3 Let all-purpose cleaners settle in.

Manufacturers of those products often make "spray and wipe" claims. But based on our tests, letting them sit for a few minutes results in better cleaning power, which could save you time in the long run. Our top-rated spray cleaner was Seventh Generation Natural All Purpose Cleaner.

4 Clean smoothtops quickly.

Cleanup is easy with smoothtop cooktops. But food that contains sugar, such as tomato sauce, can bond with the glass if you let it cool. For routine care, use a cleaner made especially for smoothtops. Cerama Bryte and Cooktop Magic combined value and performance in our tests.

5 Consider a robotic vacuum.

They can't deliver the deep carpet cleaning of a regular vacuum, but they're perfect for collecting cereal, crumbs, and other surface debris from the kitchen floor. Tops in our tests was the Roomba 760 for \$450.

6 Clean as you go.

Put ingredients away once you're finished with them—or enlist someone else to do so, including a child who's old enough. Keep a bowl or receptacle on your work surface for food scraps, preferably running them out to a compost heap once meal prep is complete.

7 Time fridge cleanings.

Wait until it's almost empty, then push any remaining items to one side. Clean shelves with a sponge and a solution of dish detergent and warm water. Rotate the items and repeat until the entire fridge is clean.

Frozen dinners get the steam treatment

"Freshly steams in minutes," the Lean Cuisine package says about its latest garlic chicken. "Uses the power of steam to cook flavorful Seven Whole Grain pasta in just minutes," Kashi says of its new three-cheese ravioli. But are those steamable meals any different from standard frozen entrées? We decided to put 10 to the test.

The packaging is clearly different. Kashi and Lean Cuisine both use vented plastic bags that release steam during cooking. Healthy Choice and Marie Callender's have a steamer basket that sits inside a sauce bowl. Cooking times for most was 4 to 5½ minutes—about what it takes to heat conventional frozen entrées.

Flavor and texture were also what you'd expect from a typical frozen meal: tasty, but

not off-the-charts. Lean Cuisine's garlic chicken has large white chicken pieces and flavorful veggies, Kashi's sesame chicken offers a nice mix of chewy whole grains, and Marie Callender's three-cheese tortellini has a soft cheese filling and decent tomato sauce. With the others, pasta could be hard in spots and the chicken could be dry.

Nutritional profiles were comparable, too, with most steamable meals receiving the same very good scores we've seen with many diet meals. But if you're counting calories or following a low-sodium diet, check the labels, because we did note some variations there.

Bottom line. Steamable meals offer a fast and fairly tasty and healthful dinner for one. But any suggestion that they're reinventing frozen entrées is just a lot of hot air.



Steamable meals

All tested products In alphabetical order.

	Product	Price per serving	Calories per serving	Total fat per serving (g)	Sodium per serving (mg)	Nutrition score
Taste Winner	Garlic Chicken					
	Healthy Choice Café Steamers Mediterranean Inspired Balsamic Garlic Chicken	\$3.00	250	3.5	540	⊖
	✓ Lean Cuisine Market Collection Freshly Steams in Minutes Garlic Chicken	4.14	290	5	650	⊖
	Marie Callender's Fresh Flavor Steamer Roasted Garlic Chicken	3.25	410	17	950	○
	Sesame Chicken					
	Healthy Choice Café Steamers Asian Inspired Sweet Sesame Chicken	4.54	340	5	330	⊖
	✓ Kashi Steam Meal Sesame Chicken	4.49	300	9	630	⊖
	Marie Callender's Fresh Flavor Steamer Sesame Chicken	2.84	400	12	710	⊖
	Stuffed Pasta					
	Healthy Choice Café Steamers Tortellini Primavera Parmesan	3.76	240	4	500	⊖
	Kashi Steam Meal Three Cheese Ravioli	3.50	310	10	650	⊖
	Lean Cuisine Market Collection Freshly Steams in Minutes Asiago Cheese Tortellini	4.23	280	7	700	⊖
	✓ Marie Callender's Fresh Flavor Steamer Three Cheese Tortellini	2.50	420	13	810	⊖

A whole raw chicken is shown on a white plate, which is placed on a light-colored wooden surface. The chicken is positioned with its back to the camera, showing the skin and bones. The legs are spread out to the sides.

The high cost of

97 percent of the breasts we tested harbored bacteria that could make you sick. Learn how to protect yourself.

cheap

chicken

WHEN YOU SHOP at your favorite grocery store, you probably assume that the food on display is safe to take home. But in the poultry aisle, that simple assumption could make you very sick. Consumer Reports' recent analysis of more than 300 raw chicken breasts purchased at stores across the U.S. found potentially harmful bacteria lurking in almost all of the chicken, including organic brands. In fact, we were conducting our research when news of the national salmonella outbreak linked to three Foster Farms chicken plants became public. In that case 389 people were infected, and 40 percent of them were hospitalized, double the usual percentage in most outbreaks linked to salmonella.

What's going on with the nation's most popular meat? (We buy an estimated 83 pounds per capita annually.) Though 48 million people fall sick every year from eating food tainted with salmonella, campylobacter, *E. coli*, and other contaminants, "more deaths were attributed to poultry than to any other commodity," according to an analysis of outbreaks from 1998 through 2008 by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Here's what you should know before buying your next package of chicken:

Dangerous bacteria

It's unrealistic to expect that the uncooked chicken you buy won't contain any potentially harmful bacteria. That's one reason we advise you to prevent raw chicken or its juices from touching any other food and to cook it to at least 165° F. Yet some bacteria are more worrisome than others—and our latest tests produced troubling findings. More than half of the samples contained fecal contaminants. And about half of them harbored at least one bacterium that was resistant to three or more commonly prescribed antibiotics.

Public-health officials think that the resistance to antibiotics in general is such a major concern that last September the CDC released a landmark report outlining the dire threat it poses to our health. Antibiotic-resistant infections are linked to at least 2 million illnesses and 23,000 deaths in the U.S. each year. And if antibiotic-resistant bacteria continue their scary spread, they could lead to deadly infections after routine surgery or even a seemingly innocuous cut because the drugs that doctors prescribe will have lost their effectiveness.

Our tests showed that those resistant bacteria are commonly found in chicken at your local grocery store. We collected samples in July 2013, months before the Foster Farms salmonella outbreak triggered a public-health alert from the Department of Agriculture (USDA). It turned out that we had purchased a package of the tainted chicken and that our tests

48 million people fall sick each year from eating tainted food.

found a strain of salmonella (known as Heidelberg) that matched one of those linked to the outbreak.

Salmonella bacteria come in many strains. To understand their differences, think of all of the different breeds of dogs, says Lance Price, Ph.D., a professor in environmental and occupational health at the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services in Washington, D.C. "All dogs are the same species, but a Chihuahua and a pit bull behave differently," he says. The drug-resistant Heidelberg strain of salmonella

associated with the Foster Farms outbreak is more likely than other strains to cause disease. Antibiotic resistance by itself doesn't make a pathogen more virulent, but when it occurs in a virulent strain such as the Heidelberg, something inherently dangerous suddenly becomes even worse—a bacterium that Price says acts "like a pit bull with rabies."

Most of the illnesses caused by Foster Farms chicken produced symptoms typical of any salmonella infection—nausea, vomiting, severe stomach cramps, diarrhea, and a low-grade fever, says Christopher Braden, M.D., director of the division of foodborne, waterborne, and environmental diseases at the CDC. What was different was that the outbreak sent about twice as many people to a hospital as a typical salmonella outbreak does. About 20 percent of people with salmonella end up hospitalized; almost 40 percent of those sickened by the Foster Farms-produced chicken did, Braden says.

Rick Schiller, 51, was one of those unlucky victims. Last September the San Jose, Calif., resident woke up at 2 a.m. "I've never felt so sick in my life," he recalls. In addition to vomiting and diarrhea, he had terrible stomach pain. His symptoms worsened during the next few days, and his abdominal pain became so



CHICKEN INVESTIGATION The Foster Farms facility in Livingston, Calif., is one of three plants linked to a salmonella outbreak that made headlines across the country last fall.

severe that his fiancée rushed him to an emergency room.

Schiller's doctor ordered a stool culture, which revealed salmonella Heidelberg. It was one of the strains identified in the Foster Farms outbreak. Schiller had bought two packages of Foster Farms chicken thighs, and his fiancée prepared a meal for him using one of them. The other package, which was still in his freezer, had a plant code that matched one associated with the outbreak.

Tainted chicken

Our investigation suggests that potentially harmful bacteria are common on raw chicken. We bought 316 chicken breasts from major national grocery chains, big-box stores, and regional markets in 26 states, and tested them for six bacteria. They were salmonella, campylobacter, and staphylococcus aureus, which are some of the most common bacterial causes of food poisoning; E. coli and enterococcus, which are typical measures of fecal contamination; and klebsiella pneumoniae, a bug that's naturally present in our stomach

Bacteria can live on surfaces for hours and even for days.

but that can cause infections such as pneumonia. Where we found those bacteria in our chicken samples, we conducted additional tests to determine what the strains were and whether they were resistant to antibiotics.

We tested 252 samples from conventionally produced chickens and 64 from brands that use no antibiotics in raising chickens, including 24 organic samples. (See "The Bacteria Count," on page 34.) Our findings were similar to what the Food and Drug Administration sees in its National Antimicrobial Resistance Monitoring System of retail meat. Here are more highlights from our exclusive study:

- Every one of the four major brands we tested (Perdue, Pilgrim's, Sanderson Farms, and Tyson) contained worrisome amounts

of bacteria, even the chicken breasts labeled "no antibiotics" or "organic."

- Almost none of the brands was free of bacteria. And we found no significant difference in the average number of types of bacteria between conventional samples and those labeled "no antibiotics" or "organic."

- More than half of the chicken breasts were tainted with fecal contaminants (enterococcus and E. coli), which can cause blood and urinary-tract infections, among other problems.

- Enterococcus was the most common bacterium we found, occurring in 79.8 percent of our samples. Next was E. coli, in 65.2 percent of them; campylobacter, 43 percent; klebsiella pneumoniae, 13.6 percent; salmonella, 10.8 percent; and staphylococcus aureus, 9.2 percent.

- About half of our samples (49.7 percent) tested positive for at least one multidrug-resistant bacterium, and 11.5 percent carried two or more types of multidrug-resistant bacteria.

- Of the 65.2 percent of samples testing positive for E. coli, 17.5 percent of the bugs were "ExPEC" bacteria, a nasty type of E. coli that's more likely than other types to make you sick with a urinary-tract infection.

A new level of caution

How does all of that contamination make its way into those nicely packaged chicken breasts displayed on store shelves? According to public-health expert J. Glenn Morris Jr., M.D., director of the Emerging Pathogens Institute at the University of Florida, it's perfectly common for a chicken's intestinal tract to carry salmonella and/or campylobacter, and when they're contained there, they don't harm the animal. But they can be transferred to the meat during the slaughtering process. Or if a chicken living in cramped conditions regularly comes into contact with feces, the bacteria can cling to its skin and make their way onto your dinner plate.

The most obvious way that people become infected with bacteria from raw chicken is through cross-contamination in the kitchen, Morris says. You take it out of the package, get bacteria on your hands, then touch the handle of your faucet, trash bin, or kitchen cabinet. Once they have bacteria on them, the pathogens can live on those surfaces for hours and sometimes days.

Even if you keep your kitchen very clean,

DINNER DANGER

Rick Schiller of San Jose, Calif., is a victim of the latest contaminated-chicken outbreak.



PHOTO: JEFF SINGER

Confusing chicken labels decoded

Read labels carefully. Terms are sometimes misleading, and chicken produced in different ways are often sold next to each other (in packages labeled "natural" and "no antibiotics," for example), according to a new CONSUMER REPORTS shopping survey. For more details about these labels and others, go to GreenerChoices.org.

■ ORGANIC

The chicken was fed a vegetarian diet with feed produced without genetically modified organisms or toxic synthetic pesticides. Chickens cannot be organically raised with antibiotics, though they can be treated up until their first day of life. Access to the outdoors is required, but there are no specific standards for the size of the outdoor area, the size of the door leading there, or the amount of time the birds spend outdoors. Annual inspections are required.

■ NO ANTIBIOTICS

Never given antibiotics, including in the egg. "Raised without antibiotics" means the same thing. No inspections are required.

■ CERTIFIED HUMANE

The chickens are raised according to guidelines from Humane Farm Animal Care. There are standards for the environment the birds are raised in and for minimizing their stress and

injuries during transportation and slaughter. They may or may not have access to the outdoors. Annual inspections are required.

■ NO HORMONES

Hormone use is prohibited in chickens, so even if a product doesn't come with this claim, it will be free of added hormones as well as steroids.

■ AMERICAN HUMANE CERTIFIED

Requirements to minimize stress and suffering of the birds are very close to the basic industry standard. Birds are not required to have access to the outdoors. Inspections are required.

■ CAGE-FREE

Essentially meaningless. No chickens raised for meat in the U.S. are kept in cages. Neither does it mean that the birds have access to the outdoors. No inspections are required.

■ NATURAL

Meaningless. The product is minimally processed and contains no artificial ingredients, but no inspection is

required to verify that. (See "The Most Misleading Label," below).

■ FREE-RANGE

There is no definition of "outdoors." And there are no requirements as far as the size of the outdoor area (it can be a small concrete slab), the size of the door to the outside, or the amount of time the birds spend there. Chickens can still be raised in crowded conditions. No inspections required.

■ NO GMOs

If you see the "Non GMO Project Verified" label, the feed contains less than 0.9 percent of GMO crops. Verification is required.



■ PASTURE-RAISED

Although not a legal definition, it should mean that the birds are raised on grassy pastures. "Animal Welfare Approved" is the only verified label requiring that animals are pasture-raised. But products with that label are not widely available.



you could still be exposed to illness-causing bacteria if you don't cook the chicken to an internal temperature of 165° F. It's vital that you check using a meat thermometer.

In spite of those warnings, the latest salmonella outbreak shows just how difficult it can be to prevent spreading bacteria from chicken and making people sick. In October a Costco store in California recalled more than 22,000 cooked rotisserie Kirkland Signature Foster Farms chickens and 951 Kirkland Farm containers of rotisserie chicken soup, leg quarters, and chicken salad after discovering that some of the cooked birds may have harbored strains of the outbreak-related salmonella. But neither Costco nor Foster Farms recalled the raw chicken sold to consumers.

Christopher Braden of the CDC hesitates to put the blame for the Foster Farms outbreak on the victims. The theory that

the people sickened in the outbreak had all handled the raw meat in a careless way, "doesn't ring true to me," he says, not with an outbreak that big.

According to James R. Johnson, M.D., a professor of medicine in the division of infectious diseases and international medi-

■ THE MOST MISLEADING LABEL

A Consumer Reports survey on chicken safety found that more than half of the 1,005 U.S. residents polled thought that "natural" chickens didn't receive antibiotics or genetically modified feed. Forty-two percent thought the word meant that the birds were raised outdoors. More than one-third thought "natural" was equal to "organic." But it doesn't mean any of those things. You should simply ignore "natural" claims.

cine at the University of Minnesota, you don't have to ingest a lot of bacteria to become sick. It's possible that simply touching the plastic wrapping on the outside of chicken packages might expose you to harmful bacteria, Johnson says.

A 2010 study led by CDC scientists found that 13 percent of children younger than 3 were potentially exposed to raw meat or poultry products while riding in a grocery store shopping cart.

The better chicken to buy

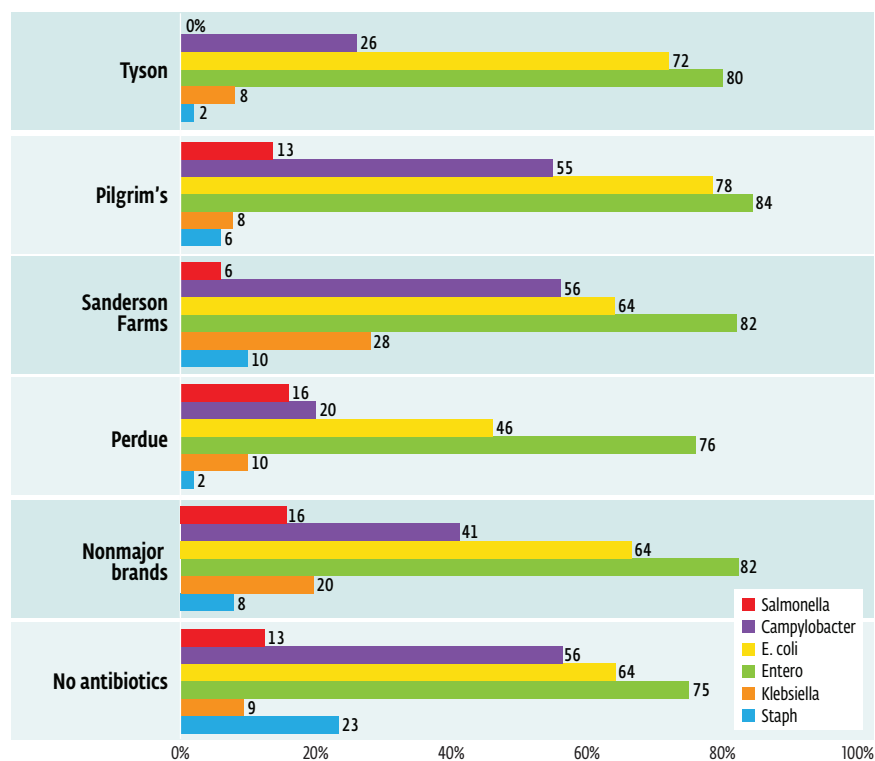
Our tests did not find brands or types of chicken breasts that had less bacteria than the rest. At the moment, the only way to protect yourself from becoming sick is to remain vigilant about safe handling and cooking, says Urvashi Rangan, Ph.D., toxicologist and executive director of the Consumer Reports Food Safety and Sus-

The bacteria count

Below, the percentage of chicken breasts that tested positive for campylobacter, salmonella, enterococcus, E. coli, staph, and klebsiella. We analyzed 316 raw samples of skinless, boneless chicken breasts, thin-sliced breasts, breast tenderloins, and skin-on, bone-in breasts from the four major brands (Perdue, Pilgrim's, Sanderson Farms, and Tyson); nonmajor brands (including store brands and minor brands), as well as a sampling of "no antibiotics" and "organic" brands. Samples were purchased in 26 states throughout the U.S.

► Levels of contamination

Overall there was no difference in the total occurrence of all bacteria between conventional brands and those labeled "no antibiotics" or "organic." All contained worrisome levels of bacteria.



► Resistance to antibiotics

Our tests reveal that superbugs can be found in about half of the chicken we tested, from stores across the country. Our test results found that 49.7 percent of our samples contained at least one multidrug-resistant bacterium, and 11.5 percent had at least two. (Multidrug-resistant bacteria are defined as those that are resistant to three or more classes of drugs that they would normally be susceptible to.) The adjacent table shows the percentage of each bacteria that was multidrug-resistant. The bacteria we found were significantly more resistant to classes of antibiotics approved by the FDA for chicken production than for those not approved for such use.



Bacteria	% multidrug-resistant
Salmonella	38.0
Campylobacter	13.0
E. coli	40.0
Enterococcus	26.0
Klebsiella pneumonia	8.5
Staphylococcus aureus	3.6*

*One staph aureus was a methicillin-resistant staph aureus (MRSA).

tainability Center. (See "Do You Practice Chicken Safety?" on page 36.) For more on food safety and sustainability, go to ConsumerReports.org/cro/chicken0214.

Still, there are good reasons for selecting chickens raised without the use of antibiotics. Buying those products supports farmers who keep their chickens off unnecessary drugs, and that's good for your health and preserves the effectiveness of antibiotics. Chickens without antibiotic resistance to salmonella and other dangerous pathogens can't pass antibiotic-resistant bugs on to you, says Robert Lawrence, M.D., the Center for a Livable Future Professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

A good drug gone wrong

Antibiotics are perhaps one of modern medicine's greatest tools, but the rise of antibiotic resistance threatens to undermine the disease-fighting power of those miracle drugs. If bacteria such as the ones found in our chicken samples become resistant to even more drugs, it could mean that antibiotics we now use to treat life-threatening illnesses from salmonella and other foodborne infections could become useless.

Most deaths associated with antibiotic-resistant bacteria arise from the misuse of antibiotics for people, but the use of antibiotics in agriculture also plays an important role, says Braden at the CDC. In the 1940s farmers noticed that poultry that had been fed antibiotics grew faster than those raised without them. That discovery led them to start feeding chickens low doses of antibiotics to promote growth, not just to treat the sick ones, and thus allowed farmers to increase production. But research suggests that this practice, now widespread, might not be that cost-effective, says Michael Crupain, M.D., M.P.H., director of the Consumer Reports Food Safety and Sustainability Center.

And from a biological perspective, says Lawrence at Johns Hopkins, giving antibiotics to animals that aren't sick is an invitation to disaster. Low-level exposure to antibiotics kills off the bacteria most vulnerable to the drugs and allows those resistant to antibiotics to flourish. As a result, the practice essentially breeds antibiotic-resistant bacteria in chickens, Lawrence says. They end up with campylobacter, salmonella, and enterococcus that are resistant to antibiotics. Those bacteria can spread to people, whose in-

fections then can't be treated successfully with antibiotics, he says.

About 80 percent of all of the antibiotics sold in the U.S. each year are used in animal production, but that information is not tracked in any systematic way. "We don't have good data on how the antibiotics are used on the farms," Braden says. The chicken industry uses that uncertainty to argue that their practices aren't driving the antibiotic-resistance problem. The National Chicken Council says that there are several published, peer-reviewed risk assessments showing that any threat to human health from antibiotic use in livestock and poultry production is negligible, if it exists at all. Tom Super, the council's vice president of communications, adds that, according to the FDA guidance process, the chicken industry is phasing out the use of antibiotics for growth purposes if it's medically important for treating people. He also contends that antibiotics for humans are currently used only minimally for chickens.

Even if farms feed chickens an antibiotic that's not used by humans, any resistance that develops may still have consequences for people. "Antibiotics come in families, and if one in a group is used, there may be resistance that emerges that also makes the organism resistant to others in that group, which may be used to treat humans," says Robert Tauxe, M.D., M.P.H., deputy director of the division of foodborne, waterborne, and environmental diseases at the CDC.

"Antibiotics need to be used judiciously," Braden says. "It doesn't matter if they're used on a farm or in humans." "Judicious" means that the drugs are given to chickens to treat a specific disease for which the antibiotic is known to be effective. Using antibiotics for growth promotion is not judicious use, he says.

Given all of this, eliminating antibiotics in chicken production, except to treat sick birds, might seem like a no-brainer. But implementing a ban has proved to be challenging. "The FDA has tried to put in place programs to reduce antibiotic use and has had major push-back from industry," Morris says. Louise Slaughter, a microbiologist who is also a Democratic congresswoman from New York, has introduced legislation for the fourth time to halt the overuse of antibiotics in agriculture. But those proposed rules face stiff opposition from the chicken industry and pharmaceutical firms.



BROILER FARM Thousands of chickens are raised together on a farm in Texas.

Taking animals off drugs

What happens when a country takes its livestock off antibiotics?

In 2000 Denmark's pork industry ceased using antibiotics to promote the growth of its animals.

Instead of eviscerating the nation's pork industry, those moves contributed to a 50 percent rise in pork production, according to a 2012 article in the journal *Nature*. Frank Aarestrup, D.V.M., Ph.D.,

head of the EU Reference Laboratory for Antimicrobial Resistance and author of the article, attributes Denmark's success to three factors: laws banning the improper use of antibiotics, a robust system of surveillance and enforcement, and rules that prevent veterinarians from profiting from selling antibiotics to farmers.

"Farmers and their livestock can thrive without the heavy use of antibiotics," Aarestrup wrote. "With a little effort, I believe that other countries can and must help their farmers to do the same."

Chicken's hidden cost

Most chicken raised in the U.S. today comes from large-scale commercial farms optimized to produce the most meat at the lowest cost. To meet domestic and global demand, the industry slaughters almost 9 billion chickens a year.

A new USDA rule currently under consideration could make many changes in poultry production that food-safety advocates consider alarming and dangerous. It could increase the maximum line speeds at slaughter plants to 175 chickens a minute from the current maximum of 140 birds a minute. The new rule could also reassign some of the USDA inspectors' duties to plant employees. Unlike

The price of chicken

Here's how the cost of chicken breasts stack up. These are median prices based on what we paid when shopping for our tests.

CONVENTIONAL
\$3.68 per pound

WITHOUT ANTIBIOTICS
\$5.49 per pound

ORGANIC
\$6.99 per pound

federal inspectors, the plant employees are paid by the company, so they would have an incentive to overlook problems that might slow the lines down.

The rule would transfer more responsibility for safety to the companies that produce the chickens, allowing them to police themselves, says Tony Corbo, senior lobbyist at Food & Water Watch, a nonprofit group.

The USDA disputes the notion that the proposed new rule would have an impact on safety. And according to Dan Engeljohn, Ph.D., of the USDA, a government inspector would still be able to stop a line “if he has evidence to believe that the plant is not exercising good process control.”

As of July 2013 a pilot project was being tested in 24 poultry plants. The chicken industry considers the test, called the HIMP (for HACCP-Based Inspection Models Project), a success, and backs the proposal to adopt the new rule. But the Government Accountability Project, a nonprofit whistle-blower group, has released affidavits from federal inspectors working at HIMP plants, which allege that they were pressured to overlook possible food-safety concerns to keep the lines running.

And a Government Accountability Office report from August 2013 found that

Making chicken safer will require revamping the way it's raised.

the USDA never followed through on promises to thoroughly evaluate the program's performance at the plants involved in the pilot project and therefore lacked the necessary data to deem it a success. Yet despite this analysis, the USDA is moving forward on plans to expand the program. Advocates including Consumers Union, the advocacy arm of Consumer Reports, say that if these new rules are adopted, the bacteria problem will only get worse.

What needs to happen

Making chicken safer to eat will require a revamping of the way that it's raised and processed. As we went to press, the USDA announced a plan to attack the problem of salmonella in meat and chicken. We are still reviewing it. In the meantime, these are our recommendations:

- The FDA should prohibit antibiotic use in food animals except for the treatment of sick ones. To that end, Congress should pass the Preservation of Antibiot-

ics for Medical Treatment Act.

- The National Organic Program should eliminate the loophole allowing antibiotics to be used in the chicken eggs up until the first day of life in organic chicken broilers.

- The USDA should classify strains of salmonella bacteria that are resistant to multiple antibiotics and known to have caused disease as “adulterants,” so that chickens tainted with those strains can't be sold.

- The USDA's proposed rule to increase maximum line speeds and reduce the number of USDA inspectors at slaughter plants should be dropped.

- Congress should give the USDA authority to recall meat and poultry products that are tied by DNA fingerprinting to disease outbreaks. Currently, it doesn't have the authority to do so.

- The USDA should speed up its efforts to set strict levels for allowable salmonella and campylobacter in chicken parts. The agency expects to put that proposal out for public review and feedback this year. We say that the standards can't come soon enough.

Note: Support for this project was provided by The Pew Charitable Trusts. Any views expressed are those of Consumer Reports and its advocacy arm, Consumers Union, and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

Do you practice chicken safety?

Check out how your buying and cooking habits stack up against those of 1,005 respondents in a recent Consumer Reports survey.

57%

use a cutting board designated for raw meat
Tip Get two boards to prevent cross-contamination.

93%

wash their hands after handling raw poultry
Tip Wash for 20 seconds using warm water and soap every time you touch raw meat—frozen or fresh—even if it means multiple washings.

72%

wash chicken before cooking
Tip Stop. That can increase your risk of getting sick. Bacteria can spread up to 3 feet from the sink, and those areas might not get disinfected.

65%

put chicken in a plastic bag at the store
Tip It's always a good idea to prevent the juices from contaminating other food.

30%

use a meat thermometer
Tip Get one—82 percent said they cooked chicken to 165° F, the recommended internal temperature. But without a thermometer, you don't know.

32%

buy chicken last at the store
Tip Keeping chicken cold prevents bacteria overgrowth, so hit the meat section last.



Shape up at home

How to choose a machine that helps you reach your goals

I F EXERCISE WERE a pill, it would be one of the most powerful drugs ever invented. Chances are, you've heard many variations of that sentiment. It's not hype. A 2010 review of 40 studies in the *International Journal of Clinical Practice*, for example, found that being active can help prevent about 25 conditions. Other research suggests that exercise can cut the risk of colon cancer (60 percent), type 2 diabetes (58 percent), heart disease (40 percent), and Alzheimer's disease (40 percent). Another study, which compared regular exercisers with couch potatoes, concluded that each minute of physical activity added an average of 7 minutes of life span.

You'd think statistics like that would make everyone lace up their sneakers. But apparently, powerful evidence isn't powerful enough: Just 20 percent of Americans say they get the recommended amount of aerobic and strength exercises.

Why? Partly because many people overestimate how much they need to work out. But you can get benefits with just 30 minutes a day of moderate exercise or 75 minutes a week of vigorous activity. Better yet, "10 minutes three times a day is just as effective," says Carol Ewing Garber, Ph.D., associate professor of movement sciences at Columbia University and president elect of the American College of Sports Medicine. And if you can't do that, "even 5 or 10 minutes a day can make a difference."

"Convenience and proximity are key predictors of exercise," says Garber, so it makes sense that working out at home ups the odds not only that you'll become active but also that you'll also stick with a routine. Having a cardio machine makes it that much easier. The best machine for you is the one that you'll use—but how do you know which one that will be? Our tests of elliptical trainers, rowing machines, spin bikes, and treadmills can help you decide. And we consulted with experts to help you pick the machine that will best help you reach your health goals.



SPIN BIKES
Long popular in gyms, these machines are now available for home workouts.

Goal Just start

"People are more likely to be active if their mode of exercise is something they do well," says Len Kravitz, Ph.D., coordinator of exercise science at the University of New Mexico. Because everyone knows how to walk, a treadmill may be the least intimidating machine for a beginner. But if you have hip, knee, or back problems, consider an elliptical trainer, which is easier on your joints. Or think about activities that gave you pleasure earlier in life, Kravitz says. If you liked bicycling as a child, consider indoor cycling. If you remember fond days paddling on a lake, maybe give rowing a chance.

No matter which activity you choose, check with a doctor first if you're middle-aged or older before you begin exercising. And don't do too much too soon. It's unnecessary and if you're exhausted and sore afterward, you won't be eager to do it again. "People have the misconception that exercise has to be hard, but when we say 'moderate intensity,' we mean that you should notice your breathing has increased and your heart is beating faster, not feel the way you would if you were running to catch a bus," Garber says. Or count your steps: For a beginner, moderate exercise equals roughly 100 steps per minute. (You can



Walmart Sportline Step & Distance

ProForm Pro 2000

use a pedometer to track your steps. The **Mio Trace Acc-Tek**, \$30, scored best in our latest tests. **Walmart's Sportline Step & Distance**, \$5, was a CR Best Buy, but it had fewer features.) After your workout, you should have a sense of accomplishment—maybe you had to push yourself, but you did it.

What to look for if you're starting

It's easy to just jump on a treadmill or elliptical and go, so both are good choices for new exercisers. Bonus: The machines will "grow" with you; you can begin at a low speed or resistance and increase as you get fitter. Whichever machine you choose, it's good to try before you buy.



Goal Weight loss

Losing weight requires more exercise than getting fit does—about 3½ to 5 hours a week (plus diet changes). So it's important to get a comfortable machine. A treadmill can be a good choice. People tend to work out harder on them than they realize, so they end up burning more calories, research suggests. But for people who are heavy or have back, knee, or hip problems, a non-impact elliptical might be better. And competitive or easily bored types might opt for a spin bike or rowing machine. For greater benefit, mix it up. Kravitz says in his experience it helps to use multiple exercise machines, because your body never adapts to one machine, so you're always working hard and burning more calories. And variety helps avert boredom. Although most of us don't have the room or budget for several machines, you can mimic the effect. If you walk outside several days a week, opt for a home rower or spin bike. Or consider the **Xterra Trail Racer 6.6** treadmill: It has a programed workout called Fitness, which signals you to get off the machine periodically and perform five upper-body moves with dumbbells. It rated Very Good overall and at \$1,000 costs less than some other models in our tests.

What to look for in a treadmill

SPACE Treadmills are big: Most need about 7 feet by 3 feet of floor space. So if you have a smaller area, consider a machine with a folding deck, and before you buy, make sure the deck isn't too heavy for you to lift easily. Some people find that folding machines feel less stable than nonfolding ones. Both the **AFG 3.1AT** (pictured below) and the **ProForm Pro** fold, and both are CR Best Buys.

DECK SIZE Belts that are 52 inches long and 18 inches wide should be fine for walkers; runners should look for belts that are 60 inches long and 20 inches wide.

SAFETY Treadmills account for two-thirds of all emergency room visits related to home exercise machines. So make sure you have 2 feet of space on each side of the treadmill to make getting on and off easier, and 3 to 6 feet behind it so that you aren't crushed if you fall.

Unplug the machine after use if you have a small child in the house. (In fact, take care with all exercise machines if you have kids—or pets.) Always attach the security clip to your clothing—it stops the motor if you fall—and check the cord length. The one on the **TruPace M 100** was so long that users almost drifted off the deck before it stopped the machine.

TIPS. Raise the incline to 1 percent to mimic the effort it takes to run outside on a flat surface. Leaning on the handrails on a treadmill or elliptical cuts the workload on your legs, so you burn fewer calories.



AFG 3.1AT



Sunny SF-B901

Goal Kick it up a notch

Interval training, which involves alternating intense bouts of activity with slower recovery periods in the same workout, is the top fitness trend for 2014, according to an American College of Sports Medicine survey of 3,815 fitness professionals. The workouts can be challenging, but they also let you cut exercise time while maintaining or even increasing the health benefits.

During the intense period, get your heart rate to at least 80 percent of your maximum (to calculate your maximum, subtract your age from 220). Two highly rated heart-rate monitors in our previous tests are the **Mio Alpha**, \$200, and the **Polar FT7**, \$110.

You can do intervals on any cardio machine, but spin bikes—which have a weighted flywheel directly linked to the pedals—are well-suited to the technique. Intervals are the foundation of indoor cycling classes, where an instructor guides you through a “ride” that includes steady-paced flats, sprints, and hills. You can easily adjust the resistance on spin bikes. Indoor cycling is also easier on your joints than running. And for people who have been working out for a while, indoor cycling can be a welcome change of pace.



Polar FT7

What to look for in a spin bike

FIT The seat should be adjusted so that your knees are slightly bent when your foot is at the bottom of the stroke. Your forward knee should align with the ball of your foot when the pedals are level. One tester who is 4'10" couldn't lower the seat far enough on the **Diamondback 510ic** or the **Sunny SF-B901** to accommodate her. Check the handlebars, too. A 6-footer couldn't raise those on the **Livestrong LS9.9IC** high enough to avoid hitting his knees.

DISPLAY Having a display is also important; you'll probably want the feedback it provides. The **ProForm 300 SPX** and the **Sunny SF-B901** did not have displays. On the **Spinning Spinner Aero**, the display was an accessory that cost extra.

SPACE The bikes don't require a lot of room. Most of those we tested fit into a space 4 feet long by 2 feet wide.

TIPS Before buying a spin bike, take a few classes at a gym. If you're already a fan of indoor cycling, consider how you'd feel doing it alone. Owning a machine lets you vary the length of your sessions and play your own music, but if you rely on the instructor or the camaraderie of a group, you might not be happy at home. Our top-rated model, the **Diamondback 510ic**, has built-in programs, whereas the **Spinning Spinner Aero**, which rated third overall, comes with exercise DVDs. You can find group cycling-class videos on YouTube and other websites; play them on a tablet or computer and follow along. Watch a few and see whether they give you the motivation and guidance you need.

Goal Total body toning

No piece of cardiovascular equipment builds as much strength or muscle as weight machines, free weights, or exercises like squats or pushups. But if you want a little toning with your cardio, an elliptical is a good choice. Pushing the handlebars works your triceps and chest and pulling works your back and biceps.

What to look for in an elliptical

SPACE Ellipticals can take up as much space as treadmills, so you need sufficient space around the machine, as well as adequate ceiling height, because you'll be elevated. At about 120 pounds, the **TruePace E220**, \$700, is one of the lightest machines we tested, which makes it easier to move. But the frame flexed noticeably. A good choice for many people: the **AFG 3.1AE**. It rated Very Good overall and at \$1,000 was a CR Best Buy.

EASE OF SETUP In a previous survey of CONSUMER REPORTS readers, those who bought pricier ellipticals reported that they were less of a hassle to set up and more likely to be comfortable.

FEATURES The number of features—such as incline and touch-screen displays—tends to go up with price, so consider whether you need them all.

FIT. Look for a sturdy machine that matches your normal running motion. Moving handgrips should let you stand tall with your weight centered, not push your hands behind you or pull you forward.

TIPS. "To work your upper body, don't allow the handlebars to glide—really push and pull them," says Alex Willen, who tests exercise devices for CONSUMER REPORTS. To tone your thighs and butt, squat while you pedal, as shown at left. "It takes good balance, so be sure you're comfortable on the machine," Willen says.



LifeFitness
X5 GO



Goal Cross-training

It can make sense to balance your workouts by pairing exercises that involve different muscle groups. That's especially relevant for runners. "They tend to have an underdeveloped upper body, so rowing would be an excellent way for them to cross-train," says Henry Williford, head of the department of Physical Education and Exercise Science at Auburn University. Cross-training can also help prevent sport-specific injuries. Any machine that complements your normal activity can be a good choice for cross-training.

What to look for in a rowing machine

FIT Our highest-rated machine, the **Concept2 Model D**, had all of the features that make rowing fun and efficient. The foot pedals and foot-restraining straps were fully adjustable, accommodating different-sized feet and allowing for the foot and ankle to flex as needed. It operated smoothly and with little noise. It was also the only model to offer preprogrammed workouts and games. In contrast, the **Stamina ATS Air Rower** was noisy and rough feeling. The rowing mechanism on the **Kettler Favorit** is two rigid side handles, which mimic oars. Our testers found that the setup constrained rowing motion and made the machine awkward to use.

FEATURES Most exercise machines measure performance by speed or calories, but rowers often want specifics on split times, stroke rate, and projected times. The **Concept2** and **WaterRower A1 Home** models provide that data. Two models, the **H2O Seattle Wooden Rower** and the **Water Rower A1 Home** use water for resistance. Filling the water tanks can be tedious, but water adds a soothing sound—reminiscent of rowing on the Charles River, one of our engineers said. Those models are also more furniture-like in appearance.

TIPS Rowing can help you build upper- and lower-body strength. Use the proper three-step technique: Push back with your legs, and when they're straight, lean your torso back, then pull the handle to your lower rib cage. Pulling the handle first can stress your back.

5 ways to get motivated and get moving

▶ Make exercise a ritual.

There's a lot of truth to the adage: A body at rest stays at rest. A body in motion stays in motion. "Exercise quickly becomes a habit, and the more you do it, the more likely you are to continue doing it," says Carol Ewing Garber, Ph.D., president elect of the American College of Sports Medicine. "Recalling how good exercise makes you feel helps you get back on the machine the next time."

▶ **Set mini goals.** "Use the information displays on the machines to challenge yourself to do just a little more," Garber

advises. "Tell yourself, 'Let's see if I can burn 20 more calories or go another 2 minutes.' It becomes a game."

▶ **Track your progress.** People who record how often they work out, what they do, and how long their sessions last or how far they go are more likely to stick with a routine, research suggests.

▶ **Accentuate the positive.** Telling yourself that exercise feels good actually *makes* exercise feel good, according to a study from the University of Kent in England. People who were coached to say things like

"You're doing well" to themselves during their workouts on a stationary bike were able to extend how long they biked, whereas people not coached in positive self-talk showed no improvements.

▶ **Keep it entertaining.** TV watching is generally anathema to exercise experts—with this exception: "If you use an exercise machine while you watch, you can stay in front of the TV as long as you like," Garber jokes. Record a favorite program, but watch it only while you exercise. Or make a music playlist that you reserve for exercise.



Overview

Nonfolding treadmills tend to feel more stable, a feature that may be important to some runners. Folding treadmills, including the budget versions, can save space.

✓ **CR Best Buy** These treadmills offer the most performance for the price. All of them are recommended.

✓ **Recommended** These high-performing models are all fine choices and include CR Best Buys.

BEST NONFOLDING MODELS

A1 Precor \$4,000

A2 Landice \$3,800

A3 NordicTrack \$2,200

All have chest-strap heart-rate monitors, and all except **A3** have heart-rate control programs. **A1** has the highest maximum incline but the shortest running track of the group, at 57 inches. The motor in **A3** has the most horsepower, and it has a 60-inch running surface. **A1** and **A3** have a 22-inch-wide track, which may be hard for some users to straddle when standing on the side rails.

BEST FOLDING MODELS OVER \$1,000

B1 ProForm \$1,250 **CR Best Buy**

B2 Spirit \$2,000

B3 FreeMotion \$2,000

All have quick incline and speed controls and come with chest-strap heart-rate monitors, but only **B2** is equipped with a heart-rate control program. **B1** and **B3** have longer, 61-inch running surfaces, and **B3** has the highest maximum incline of the bunch.

BEST FOR TIGHT BUDGETS

C1 NordicTrack \$1,000

C2 Xterra \$1,000

C3 Sole \$1,000

All offer a chest-strap heart-rate monitor, and **C2** and **C3** have heart-rate control programs. All have quick incline and speed controls. **C3** has the shortest running surface, at 56 inches. **C1** and **C2** have a 60-inch running surface.



A2 Landice

C1 NordicTrack

Ratings Treadmills

Recommended models only From 38 tested.

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

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results				
					Ergonomics	Construction	Ease of use	Exercise range	User safety

A NONFOLDING MODELS

✓	1	Precor 9.31	\$4,000	85	●	●	●	●	●
✓	2	Landice L7 Cardio Trainer	3,800	84	●	●	●	●	●
✓	3	NordicTrack Elite 9700 Pro	2,200	84	●	●	●	●	●
✓	4	Sole S77	1,900	83	●	●	●	●	●
✓	5	Smooth 9.35	1,800	81	●	●	●	●	●
✓	6	True PS300	3,000	81	●	●	●	●	●
✓	7	AFG 7.1 AT	1,700	81	●	●	●	●	●

B FOLDING MODELS

✓	1	ProForm Pro 2000	1,250	82	●	●	●	●	●
✓	2	Spirit XT485	2,000	81	●	●	●	●	●
✓	3	FreeMotion 790 Interactive	2,000	80	●	●	●	●	●
✓	4	LifeSpan TR4000i	1,700	79	●	●	●	●	●
✓	5	NordicTrack Commercial 1750	1,500	78	●	●	●	●	●
✓	6	AFG 3.1 AT	1,200	78	●	●	●	●	●
✓	7	Smooth 7.35	1,500	76	●	●	●	●	○

C BUDGET FOLDING MODELS

✓	1	NordicTrack C900 Pro	1,000	77	●	●	●	●	●
✓	2	Xterra Trail Racer 6.6	1,000	76	●	●	●	●	●
✓	3	Sole F63	1,000	73	●	●	●	●	●

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is based on ease of use, ergonomics, construction, exercise range, and safety. Models are grouped as labeled and are listed in order of precise overall score. **Ergonomics** is how well the machine accommodates users of different sizes. That includes belt size and foot-rail and handgrip design. **Construction** is our judgment of quality and the results of our durability tests. **Ease of use** is how easy it is to adjust exercise intensity, read the display, and operate monitor functions. **Exercise range** is how well each machine provides an effective workout for users of various fitness levels. **User safety** is our assessment of safety and security, including stop-button size and location, safety-key operation, the possibility of striking the motor housing, and the security of the deck when folded. **Price** is approximate retail.



B2 Spirit

Ratings Ellipticals

Recommended models only From 32 tested.

CR Best Buy
Recommended

Excellent
Very good
Good
Fair
Poor

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results					
					Ergonomics	Construction	Exercise range	Ease of use	Heart-rate features	User safety

A WITH HEART-RATE PROGRAMS

✓	1	Diamondback 1260 Ef	\$2,200	79	●	●	●	●	●	●
✓	2	Octane Fitness Q37ci	3,100	79	●	●	○	●	●	●
✓	3	AFG 18.1A XT	1,700	73	●	●	○	●	●	●
✓	4	Life Fitness X5 GO	3,150	73	●	●	○	●	●	●
✓	5	AFG 3.1AE	1,100	72	●	●	●	●	●	●
✓	6	Precor EFX 5.21	1,600	70	●	●	●	●	●	●

B WITHOUT HEART-RATE PROGRAMS

✓	1	Landice E7 Pro Sport	3,600	69	●	●	○	●	○	●
✓	2	Octane Fitness Q35c	2,000	68	●	●	●	●	●	●
✓	3	Octane Fitness Q37c	2,600	68	●	●	○	●	●	●

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is based on ergonomics, construction, exercise range, ease of use, heart-rate features, and user safety. **Ergonomics** assesses pedaling motion and how well an elliptical accommodates people of various sizes. **Construction** considers aspects that indicate good construction methods, design choices, and our perception of quality based on operating noise, feel, and ride. **Exercise range** indicates available intensities as measured by incline and the effort to pedal the machine through its resistance-level settings. **Ease of use** indicates how easy it is to use controls, read the display, and use the programs. **Heart-rate features** evaluates the heart-rate sensors, programs, and how heart rate controls the elliptical operation. **User safety** indicates aspects of safety, including pinch points, materials, stability, and static loading. **Price** is approximate retail.



A1 Diamondback

B1 Landice

Overview

A good elliptical is sturdy and easy to use, and it aligns with your natural running motion. None of the models listed in the Ratings can be folded for storage.

BEST WITH HEART-RATE PROGRAMS

- A1 Diamondback \$2,200
A2 Octane Fitness \$3,100

Both offer chest-strap heart-rate monitors and the same number of resistance levels, but **A1** features an incline feature. **A2** has more versatile handgrips.

BEST WITHOUT HEART-RATE PROGRAMS

- B1 Landice \$3,600
B2 Octane Fitness \$2,000

B1 includes a chest-strap heart-rate monitor and four stride-length settings; **B2** offers one.

Ratings Rowing machines

All tested products In performance order.

Recommended

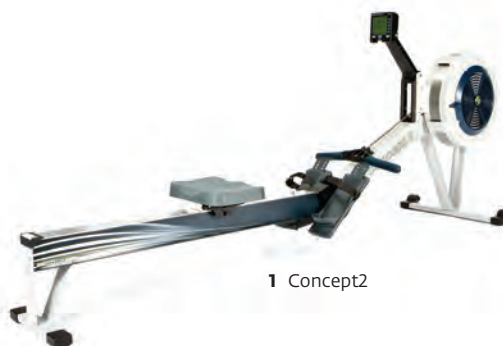
Excellent
Very good
Good
Fair
Poor

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results				Features		
					Ergonomics	Ease of use	Construction	User safety	Stands upright	Folds	Displays: Split time Displays: Time/500m Programs: Intervals

✓	1	Concept2 Model D (with PM3 monitor)	\$ 900	85	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	2	H ₂ O Seattle Wooden Rower WRX1000	1,100	72	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
	3	WaterRower A1 Home	900	72	●	○	●	●	●	●	●
	4	LifeSpan RW1000	500	70	●	○	●	●	●	●	●
	5	Stamina ATS Air Rower 35-1405C	400	59	●	●	○	●	●	●	●
	6	Kettler Favorit	400	55	●	●	●	●	●	●	●

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is based on ergonomics, ease of use, construction, and safety. **Ergonomics** assesses the pedal restraint system and potential for interference. **Ease of use** measures the clarity of the display, function and operation of the console, and adjustment of the resistance level. **Construction** considers aspects that indicate good construction methods, the sound and the feel of the rowing machine, and the result of a static load test. **User safety** assesses potential hazards, such as sharp edges, pinch points, and slippery gripping surfaces. **Price** is approximate retail.



1 Concept2

Overview

Rowing machines can provide workouts that strengthen your upper and lower body.

BEST OVERALL

- 1 Concept2 \$900

This machine includes calibration and interval programs along with numerous displays that other machines lack.

BEST FOR REAL-WORLD FEEL

- 2 H₂O \$1,100
3 WaterRower \$900

These wooden-framed machines use water for resistance, producing a sound that reminds users of rowing in a boat.

Ratings Spin bikes

All tested products In performance order.

☒ Recommended

● Excellent
● Very good
○ Good
○ Fair
● Poor

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score	Test results				
					Ergonomics	Exercise range	Ease of use	Construction	User safety
				0 100 P F G V E					
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Diamondback 510ic	\$ 800	80	●	●	○	○	●
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Livestrong LS9.9IC	1,000	73	○	○	○	○	●
	3	Spinning Spinner Aero	1,000	69	●	○	○	○	●
	4	Schwinn IC2	400	64	○	○	○	○	●
	5	Sunny SF-B901	285	61	○	○	○	○	○
	6	Horizon M4	400	58	○	○	○	○	○
	7	ProForm 300 SPX	300	58	○	○	○	○	○
	8	Stamina CPS 9300	550	57	○	○	○	○	○

Guide to the Ratings

Overall score is based on ergonomics, exercise range, ease of use, construction, and safety. **Ergonomics** assesses pedal design, configuration and adjustability of the seat and handlebars, and potential interference.

Exercise range is based on appropriate workouts for users of different fitness levels. **Ease of use** measures display clarity, console function and operation, and adjustment of the resistance level. **Construction** considers the sound and the feel of the bike, any defects, and other quality indicators. **User safety** assesses potential hazards, such as pinch points, brake operation, and stability. **Price** is approximate retail.



1 Diamondback

Overview

Spin bikes are fun and make it easy to alternate between a moderate and vigorous pace during the same workout.

BEST OVERALL

1 Diamondback \$800

It runs quietly and pedals smoothly, and it's the only tested model with exercise programs.

BEST FOR THOSE ON A BUDGET

5 Sunny \$285

It's not a recommended model but is a good value for the money.

From P90X to the Brazil Butt Lift, the skinny on exercise DVDs

In recent years, the simple exercise DVD has morphed into a complete "home fitness system," offering multiple discs with up to a dozen workouts that are combined in very prescriptive ways. They come complete with diets, making them more like plans than just exercise routines. And they cost a lot more than the \$10 or \$12 you'd spend on a workout DVD. It has been almost a decade since P90X, the leader of the trend, came on the market. The craze shows no sign of slowing down, so we decided to find out whether four leading DVD systems were worth it.



▶ P90X (Base)

Claim "Using the advanced science of Muscle Confusion, P90X ... shows you how and when to change your routine for maximum results."



Bottom line Muscle confusion is a snappy term for non-linear periodization, which simply means rotating the workouts you do so that your muscles are constantly challenged and you get better, faster toning and weight-loss results. Research suggests this approach is more effective

than doing the same exercise routine. P90X is a 90-day plan that combines strength moves, cardio, and yoga—and if you follow it faithfully, you will probably see results. But it's suitable only for those who are already very fit because the routines are intense and take about an hour a day. Note: You'll also need dumbbells, exercise bands, and a pull-up bar, which do not come with the basic system. The diet is complicated, but it provides an appropriate number of calories for the work you'll be doing.

Price \$120 plus \$20 shipping and handling. Has a 90-day money-back guarantee.

▶ Insanity

Claim You "push past your limits" and "get insane results in just 60 days."



Bottom line "Insane"? We aren't so sure, but you will see results. This is a high-intensity interval routine that involves cardio and strength moves using your own body weight. If you want to try interval training, this is a good option, but you must be very fit. You'll be working "crazy" hard for about 45 minutes, six days a week. The mainly whole-foods diet is well-balanced and can be adjusted based on your workout.

Price \$120 plus \$25 shipping and handling.

▶ Brazil Butt Lift (Base)

Claim "Triangle Training works the three major muscles of the buttocks ... from countless angles to lift, firm, and shape the perfect behind."



Bottom line Strength training with heavy weights is a better way to target your glutes, but that's not something most people

will do. The program includes low- and high-impact routines, so you don't need to be extremely fit to start. If you don't mind doing lots of squats and lunges and you like the idea of dancing your way to fitness, this may be good for you. The Brazil Butt Lift eating plan includes basic recipes with easy variations.

Price \$60 plus \$13 shipping and handling.

▶ Zumba Fitness Exhilarate



Claim "Anybody can do it" and "Lose a dress or pant size in 10 days!"

Bottom line Yes to the first part, not so fast on the second. Clothing size is unreliable as a measure of success. Zumba is OK for beginners and advanced exercisers, although it may take practice to master the moves. The diet emphasizes healthy foods but provides no nutritional information.

Price \$60 plus \$8.50 shipping and handling. Has a 30-day money-back guarantee.

The Hot List

A monthly guide to the top products our testers recommend

Your cheat sheet to the best models

Digital cameras

Shining stars. Our picks to help you keep connected and entertained, capture memories, and more.

MODEL	SCORE
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COMPACT

Olympus Stylus XZ-10, \$400	65
Canon PowerShot S120, \$450	64
Nikon Coolpix P310, \$300	60

SUPERZOOM

Canon PowerShot SX280 HS, \$280	64
Panasonic Lumix DMC-ZS30, \$400	64
Sony Cyber-shot DSC-HX50V, \$400	63
Olympus Stylus SH-50 iHS, \$280	63
Sony Cyber-shot DSC-HX300, \$430	63
Olympus Stylus SP-820UZ, \$250	62

SUBCOMPACT

Nikon Coolpix P330, \$300	63
Nikon Coolpix S6500, \$180	57

RUGGED, WATERPROOF

Panasonic Lumix DMC-TS5, \$350	58
Olympus Stylus TG-830 iHS, \$260	57
Nikon Coolpix AW110, \$280	56
Panasonic Lumix DMC-TS4, \$200	56
Sony Cyber-shot DSC-TX30, \$270	56
Fujifilm FinePix XP200W, \$230	56



Olympus Stylus XZ-10



Nikon Coolpix P330



Breville BEM800XL



KitchenAid Architect Series KHM920A



Holmes HFH436

Space heaters

MODEL	SCORE
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SMALL ROOM

Holmes HFH436, \$40	72
Lasko 6462, \$75	72
Vornado iControl, \$150	71
Bionaire BCH9212, \$75	71
Ambia ACH-120, \$60	69

Mixers

MODEL	SCORE
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STAND

Breville BEM800XL, \$300	81
KitchenAid Classic (250-watt) K45SS[WH], \$200	79
Hamilton Beach Eclectrics 6322[1], \$180	78
KitchenAid Artisan KSM150PS[WW], \$300	78

HAND

KitchenAid Architect Series KHM920A[CS], \$80	81
KitchenAid Artisan KHM7TWH5 7-Speed Digital, \$80	74
KitchenAid Ultra Power 5 KHM5AP[WH], \$50	72
KitchenAid KHM926, \$100	72
Cuisinart Power Advantage HM-50, \$40	71

Samsung
Galaxy S 4

Smart phones

MODEL	SCORE
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AT&T

Samsung Galaxy S 4 (16GB), \$200 (and similar 32GB, \$250)	81
Samsung Galaxy S 4 Active, \$200	80
LG G2, \$200	79
LG Optimus G, \$50	79
HTC One (32GB), \$200 (and similar 64GB, \$300)	79
Samsung Galaxy Note 3 (32GB), \$300	78
Apple iPhone 5s (16GB), \$200 (and similars 32GB, \$300, and 64GB, \$400)	78

SPRINT

Samsung Galaxy S 4 (16GB), \$100	79
LG Optimus G, \$0	77
HTC One (32GB), \$100	77
Samsung Galaxy Note 3 (32GB), \$250	76
Apple iPhone 5s (16GB), \$100 (and similars 32GB, \$200, and 64GB, \$300)	76

T-MOBILE

Samsung Galaxy S 4 (16GB), \$0	81
LG G2, \$0	79
HTC One (32GB), \$100	79
Samsung Galaxy Note 3 (32GB), \$0	78
Apple iPhone 5s (16GB), \$100 (and similars 32GB, \$200, and 64GB, \$300)	78

VERIZON

Samsung Galaxy S 4 (16GB), \$200	79
Motorola Droid Maxx, \$300	78
LG G2, \$200	78
HTC One (32GB), \$200	77
Samsung Galaxy Note 3 (32GB), \$300	76
Motorola Droid Ultra, \$200	76
Apple iPhone 5s (16GB), \$200 (and similars 32GB, \$300, and 64GB, \$400)	76

Price is based on a two-year service contract or handset-installment payment contract.



LG G2



LG Optimus G



HTC One



Motorola Droid Maxx



LG 60LA8600

TVs

MODEL	SCORE
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60-INCH AND LARGER

LG 60LA8600, \$2,200	75
Samsung PN60F8500, \$2,800	75
Sony Bravia XBR-65X900A, \$5,500	74
Samsung PN64F5500, \$1,800	74
Panasonic Viera TC-P65VT60, \$3,000	73
Panasonic Viera TC-P60ZT6, \$3,000	73
Samsung PN64F8500, \$3,400	73

55- TO 59-INCH

LG 55GA7900, \$1,500	74
Samsung UN55ES8000, \$2,100	74
Sony Bravia XBR-55X900A, \$4,000	74
Samsung UN55F8000, \$2,500	74
LG 55LA7400, \$1,500	73
Panasonic Viera TC-P55VT60, \$1,800	72
LG 55LA9700, \$4,000	72
Panasonic Viera TC-P55ST60, \$1,350	72

HP Officejet
Pro 251dw

Printers

MODEL	SCORE
-------	-------

INKJET

Epson Workforce Pro WP-4010, \$200	70
HP Officejet Pro 251dw, \$230	70
Canon Pixma iP7220, \$100	69
Epson Stylus Photo R2000, \$600	69
HP Officejet 6100, \$100	69

BLACK-AND-WHITE LASER

HP LaserJet Pro P1606dn, \$210	78
HP LaserJet Pro P1102w, \$100	78
HP LaserJet Pro 400 M401dw, \$380	77
Samsung ML-2955DW, \$150	75
Samsung SL-M2825DW, \$130	74

Reports

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Ratings, reviews, recommendations

Tempting tablets

Large or small, there's a new tablet out there that's just what you need. The recommended models here use the Android, Apple, and Windows operating systems, so you can take your pick.

Unique and fun features. Amazon's new Kindle Fire HDX (\$230 with special offers, Wi-Fi, 16 gigabytes, 7-inch screen) has something no rival does: free, fast tech support onscreen. Just press the Mayday button and you'll see someone who can talk you through problems or take control remotely to solve them. X-Ray, a feature that provides info about books you're reading and videos you're watching, now has links to songs in a movie or on a TV show. The display looks better and has higher resolution than on the Kindle Fire HD, but battery life is about an hour shorter. The Fire HDX is best if you have Amazon Prime, \$80 a year, which offers free movies, TV shows, and more. Amazon has its own version of the Google Play app market.

For Windows users. The Surface 2 (\$450, Wi-Fi, 32GB, 10.6-inch screen), an update of Microsoft's Windows tablet, comes close to being a fully functioning computer. It comes with Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and Outlook, as well as apps from the slowly improving Windows Store. The display is excellent, and the battery will last for a full day's work and then some. It's a bit bulkier than the other tablets and weighs 1.4 pounds. Two optional keyboards, \$80 and \$130, make it easier to get work done, and they're very thin and light.

The ultimate portable. The second-generation Apple iPad Mini (\$400, Wi-Fi, 16GB, 7.9-inch screen) is a little dynamo.

It weighs 0.7 pounds, and its battery runs for 12.4 hours, 2 hours longer than the previous model's. This version gets the excellent Retina display of the larger iPad, a sharp, crisp, and bright screen with a very high resolution of 2048x1536. Apps come from Apple's App Store.

The best Android tablet. With an improved display, Samsung's Galaxy Note 10.1 2014 edition (\$550, Wi-Fi, 16GB, 10.1-inch screen) leads the pack of Android tablets. It comes with a stylus and a batch of apps specially written for it and has handwriting recognition. You can look at more than one window at a time on the display, so you can write an e-mail while watching a video, for example. It weighs 1.2 pounds, a bit less than the first Note, but battery life is about 2 hours shorter. You get access to the full Google Play app market.

Best large tablet. Apple's iPad Air (\$500, Wi-Fi, 16GB, 9.7-inch screen) is our top-rated tablet in this size category. At only a pound, the Air is the lightest among 9- to 10-inch tablets, and it's a half-pound lighter than the previous version. It's also thinner and narrower than its predecessor. The tablet loses none of its luster in its new svelte form. The Retina display is excellent, and battery life is exceptional at 13.5 hours. The processor is twice as fast, which might not matter now, but wait till new apps come out. And you have access to Apple's great App Store.

Electronics-show news

To keep up with the latest high-tech gadgets and devices, check out our coverage of the 2014 International CES at ConsumerReports.org/ces.

Game on! PS4 vs. Xbox One

The next generation of gaming consoles is here, and it was worth the wait. The Sony PlayStation 4 is a major step up from the PS3 for gaming, and the Xbox One really is the all-in-one entertainment device Microsoft claims. Both have better visuals and smoother graphics than their predecessors. They also offer streaming video services such as Netflix and play Blu-ray discs and DVDs. But there are big differences between the dueling devices. This head-to-head comparison can help you decide whether either of the new consoles is right for you.



► Sony PlayStation 4 \$400

Highs The simple interface makes it easy to navigate the menus and find content. The impressive visuals are a big step up from those of the PlayStation 3. You can now navigate the menu and launch some apps while installing games and updates. And you no longer have to wait for a game to be fully downloaded to play it. A strong focus on sharing content with friends lends itself to a fun social experience.

Lows To fully use all of the features, you need extra accessories such as a camera, \$60, and PlayStation Vita handheld gaming device, \$200, for Remote Play. A PlayStation Plus account, \$50 per year, is required for playing games online, which wasn't the case with the PS3. You can't access and control your set-top box as you can with the new Xbox and Wii U or use the console to display personal photos or play video or music, at least for now.

► Microsoft Xbox One \$500

Highs The Xbox One is packed with features. You can use voice- and gesture-based controls through the Kinect sensor, which is included. Visuals have been improved, and enhanced rumble feedback in the controller makes games more immersive. Using Snap, a picture-in-picture feature, you can run multiple apps at once, such as gaming while

watching TV or video chatting via Skype. You can even watch live TV through the Xbox.

Lows It's the most expensive console, and the Xbox Live Gold membership required for many features costs \$60 per year. The console is large, and it could be tricky reaching the rear connections if you don't have easy access to the back of the TV and other devices.

► Bottom line. Get the Sony PlayStation 4

if you're a serious gamer and a fan of its exclusive games. The killer app might be Remote Play, so if you own a PS Vita or plan to get one, that's another reason to jump on the PS4. But casual gamers won't find many entertainment options that aren't available on the PS3 and other cheaper devices, including games such as Assassin's Creed IV: Black Flag and Call of Duty: Ghosts.

If you want one device that can handle all of your entertainment needs, including gaming, the **Microsoft Xbox One** is for you. Fans of exclusive games such as the Halo series are going to want it, too. If you own a smart TV with similar entertainment features, though, you probably don't need them from the Xbox One. And a lot of cheaper devices that connect to your TV can give you at least some of what the Xbox One offers.

A multipurpose appliance to avoid

THE KENWOOD COOKING CHEF is supposed to be four kitchen appliances in one—a stand mixer, a food processor, a blender, and an induction hot plate. The \$2,000 multitasker initially impressed us as it whipped cream into stiff peaks and produced a rich risotto without the constant manual stirring usually required of the dish. But we found serious problems with the machine's food processor. As a result, we've rated the Kenwood Cooking Chef a Don't Buy: Performance Problem.

Sold at Amazon, Bloomingdale's, and Williams-Sonoma, the Kenwood Cooking Chef is first and foremost a stand mixer. It performed extremely well in our tests of that function. Our concerns started during testing of the food-processor attachment.

Chopping, slicing, shredding, and grating were superb, but the slicing and grating discs took about 9 seconds to come to a full stop if the food processor lid was lifted during operation, and the exposed slicing disc had enough stored energy to cut through a fresh carrot several times before stopping. This is the only tested model in which we observed that problem.

We purchased a second machine and repeated the food-processor tests. This time the slicing and grating discs stopped quickly when we removed the lid, but two new problems emerged. First the plastic hub on a slicing disc broke, then one of three screws at the bottom of the drive-shaft assembly sheared off. Those problems were not safety hazards, but the fact



that two units have had problems raises concerns about performance.

If you already own the Kenwood Cooking Chef, we suggest you stop using the food processor and contact the company at 800-322-3848. The manufacturer declined to comment after learning of our findings.

Pick the right snow blower

You don't have to live in Anchorage, Alaska—this winter's snowiest city so far—to appreciate a snow blower that can muscle its way through the white stuff without breathing hard. Two new models from Ariens and Cub Cadet rivaled our fastest, farthest-throwing machines for hundreds less.

For big jobs. Figure on a large machine. Two-stage models fill the bill by combining driven wheels and an auger that scoops up snow with a separate, fanlike impeller that speeds it through the discharge chute. A second impeller in front helped the 26-inch **A5 Cub Cadet**, \$1,100, power through dense plow piles almost as quickly as the similarly equipped, 30-inch **A1** for \$400 less. Easy steering is also high on shoppers' lists. An auto-style differential on the **A3** and **A6 Ariens** helps in that realm. The A6 costs \$300 less and gives up just 2 inches of clearing width.

For moderate snow. Driven wheels and a separate impeller also help narrower, compact two-stage models handle heavy snow, though the going is notably slower. Relatively quick clearing, superb plow-pile performance, and electric start make the \$680 **B1 Craftsman** our top pick. But don't expect the steering ease and throwing distance you'll get with larger two-stage machines.

For lighter snow. Single-stage snow blowers use a rubber-tipped auger to throw snow and help move the machine, saving weight and bulk. At just \$500, the gas-powered **C3 Toro** is the clear value pick in this group. But even here, you might be better off paying a little more for a much more capable compact two-stage machine. Corded-electric models are strictly for lightly powdered walks, decks, and other small stuff.

For safer clearing. Snow blowers can make snow clearing easier than shoveling, but they bring dangers of their own. To avoid them:

- Check for branches, newspapers, pets, and debris before using a snow blower.
- Turn off the machine before trying to clear a clogged chute or auger, and use a clearing tool or broom handle—never your hands or feet.



A1 Cub Cadet

B1 Craftsman

Ratings

Recommended models only From 63 tested.

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

Recommendation	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Width (in.)	Engine (cc)	Overall score	Test results				
							Removal speed	Plow piles	Distance	Surface clean	Controls
		Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model. All two-stage gas models run on four-stroke engines.									

A TWO-STAGE GAS Best for large driveways and deep snow up to 24 inches.

✓	1	Cub Cadet 31AH57S	\$1,500	30	420	90	●	●	●	●	●
✓	2	Cub Cadet 930SWE 31AH95SU	1,600	30	357	89	●	●	●	●	●
✓	3	Ariens 921032	1,300	30	291	88	●	●	●	●	●
✓	4	Craftsman 88396 98539, Troy-Bilt Storm 3090XP 31AH55R	1,200	30	357	88	●	●	●	●	●
✓	5	Cub Cadet 31AH55T 31AH55S	1,100	26	357	88	●	●	●	●	●
✓	6	Ariens AX254 921030	1,000	28	254	87	●	●	●	●	●
✓	7	Troy-Bilt Storm 3090XP 31AH55Q MTD Pro 31AH65FH, Yard Machines 31AH65FH	1,100	30	357	87	●	●	●	●	●
✓	8	Ariens 921013	1,400	30	305	86	●	●	●	●	●
✓	9	Ariens 921022	1,000	28	250	85	●	●	●	●	●
✓	10	Toro Power Max 828 OXE 38634	1,500	28	250	84	●	●	●	●	●
✓	11	Troy-Bilt Storm 2840 31AH64Q Craftsman 98538, Yard Man 31AH65LG, MTD Pro 31AH64FG, Cub Cadet 528SWE 31AH54TT, Yard Machines 31AH64FG, Craftsman 88395	900	28	277	81	●	●	●	●	●

B TWO-STAGE GAS, LIGHTER-DUTY Can handle snow up to about 18 inches.

✓	1	Craftsman 88173 98536, Cub Cadet 524SWE 31AM53TR, MTD Gold 31AM63KE	680	24	208	73	●	●	○	●	●
✓	2	Toro Power Max 724 OE 37770	800	24	205	69	●	●	●	●	●
✓	3	Sno-Tek 920402	600	24	208	66	○	●	●	●	●
✓	4	Honda HS724WA	2,200	24	196	65	●	○	●	●	●
✓	5	Craftsman 88957 Troy-Bilt Storm 2410 31AM62N, Yard Man 31AM63KE	650	24	179	65	○	●	○	●	○

C SINGLE-STAGE GAS Best for snow up to about 12 inches.

✓	1	Toro Power Clear 621 38458 Power Clear 621 38459	650	21	163	70	●	●	○	●	●
✓	2	Cub Cadet 221 LHP 31AM2T6D Craftsman 88782	550	21	208	67	○	●	●	●	●
✓	3	Toro Power Clear 621 38451 Power Clear 621 38452	500	21	163	65	●	●	○	●	○

7 gas models that got buried

All electric snow blowers we tested scored less than 40 overall. These gas-powered models share that dubious distinction:

► Compact two-stage

- Yard Machines 31A-32AD, \$500

► Single-stage

- Troy-Bilt Squall 210 31A-2M5E, \$360
- Ariens Pro Path 938033, \$600
- Toro Power Clear 180 38282, \$440
- Ariens Pro Path 938034, \$450
- Husqvarna STE121E, \$650
- Poulan Pro PR621ES, \$450

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- How to get the best medication for what ails you
- 6 ways to save on the drugs you need
- Price comparisons for common conditions
- 12 Rx drug tips every consumer must know
- How to read a prescription drug label and so much more!

ConsumerReports
Best Buy Drugs

Reports

Smart-phone mounts 49
Best values 50
Volkswagen CC vs.
Mercedes-Benz CLA 53
Dodge Durango 56
Ford Fusion & C-Max 57
In-car electronics 58

Cars

EASY VIEWING
Windshield- or
dash-mounted models,
such as the iOttie,
worked best overall.

Affordable smart-phone mounts

FOR MANY DRIVERS, a smart phone has become an indispensable travel companion. It's used for GPS navigation, hands-free phone calls, streaming music, and more. But when you have to glance at the screen or press an occasional button while driving, simply dropping the phone back into a cup holder doesn't cut it. You need a mount that will hold the phone where you can use it with a minimum of distraction. A mount may also save you a ticket, because using hand-held devices while on the road is illegal in many states.

You can choose from a wide variety of models without spending much money. But we found that some types definitely work better than others.

We bought 11 budget-priced mounts and tried each with two phones—an Apple iPhone 4 and a Samsung Galaxy S III—in three vehicles. We looked for ease of instal-

lation and use, as well as how stable they held the phone on the road and during aggressive maneuvers at our track.

Overall, we found that models that have a suction cup and mount to the windshield or dash work best. They provide a secure fit and keep the phone where it's easy to see and use without blocking the car's controls.

Among those models, the **iOttie** stood out. It kept the phones very secure at eye level, although the sticky suction cup was hard to remove from the windshield. The **Kensington** is another good choice, but its long arm caused some vibration while driving. An infomercial star, the **GripGo**, could hold either phone securely. When new, the unit's sticky surface made it difficult to remove the phone, but it became easier over time.

The **Bracketron UCH-101-BL** and the **Macally** are designed to sit in a cup holder.

But most holders are too low or too far to the side for easy phone viewing. Plus, your drinks will be left homeless.

We found that models that clamp onto a dash vent, such as the **Arkon SM429-SBH** and the **Bracketron PHV-202-BL**, can restrict the climate system's airflow. The Bracketron was easier to install than the Arkon, but we thought that either could damage a vent if it's not handled carefully. Do a test fit before you buy.

The **Arkon Socket Mount** and the **Scosche** plug into a power outlet. But neither provided a secure fit, and in our cars each held the phone too low for easy use.

The **Arkon IPM511**, which attaches to a sun visor, was very stable and easy to install. But when it's located on the passenger visor, it's very hard to see the screen. The **Arkon IPM512** comes with a beanbag that sits on the dash, but it tended to slide around. It has a sticky hook that you attach to the dash, but you can't move it from car to car.

For a little more money, you can also buy a dedicated mount for some phones, which doubles as a charger and can bring up a special display that optimizes the phone for use while driving. Staff members have found some of them to be secure and easy to use.

The lineup we evaluated

Product	Price	Type of mount
Arkon IPM511	\$15	visor
Arkon IPM512	30	beanbag
Arkon SM429-SBH	15	vent
Arkon Socket Mount IPM521	15	power outlet
Bracketron PHV-202-BL	10	vent
Bracketron UCH-101-BL	10	cup holder
GripGo	11	suction cup
iOttie HLCRIO102	20	suction cup
Kensington K39256US	25	suction cup
Macally mCup	14	cup holder
Scosche IUH12V Powermount	21	power outlet



HOLDING STEADY
The GripGo was secure but quite, well, grippy at first.

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





Mazda6

Best new-car values

Which models give you the most bang for your buck?

WHETHER YOU'RE paying \$15,000 or \$50,000 for a car, every buyer is looking for a good deal. But it's hard to tell what you're really getting for your money. Will the car hold up well or send you to the repair shop time and again? How much will it cost you to own? And down the road, will it continue to deliver the performance you expect?

That's where our annual analysis of the best new-car values comes in. It can steer you to the keepers and help you avoid the disappointments.

Take the Toyota Prius, for example, which topped our value list for the second straight year. On paper, you might think the Honda Civic Hybrid would be a better buy, because its sticker price is about \$4,000 less and it gets similar fuel economy: 40 mpg overall vs. the Prius' 44.

But the Civic costs more to own in the long run, and it can't match the Prius' combination of fuel efficiency, versatility, roominess, and outstanding reliability. We think the Prius is worth the higher purchase price.

Just because a car is cheap to buy doesn't

mean it's a good value. The Nissan Versa Sedan, for example, is one of the least expensive cars we've tested. But we found it to be noisy and uncomfortable, and no one on our staff liked driving it. For about \$1,500

more, we'd go with a Honda Fit, which is fun to drive, cheaper to own, more reliable, and provides almost twice the value.

The same applies to SUVs. When shopping for a small SUV, you might think it

The highs and lows of our value scores



■ HIGH Toyota Prius

Price \$29,230

Cost per mile 47 cents

The Prius does a lot of things right. It's roomy, it rides well, and it handles securely. And it does it all for not much money. The Prius' 44 mpg overall is the best fuel economy of any non-plug-in car we've tested. And though it's not particularly cheap to buy, the Prius' depreciation is so low that it costs less to own over the first five years than its initial MSRP. We call that a bargain.



■ LOW Nissan Armada

Price \$55,400

Cost per mile \$1.20

Despite its high price, the Armada doesn't really give you a lot for the money. This large SUV gets only 13 mpg overall, and it has a stiff ride, a cheaply outfitted interior, and difficult access. The Cadillac Escalade, priced at almost \$10,000 more, didn't fare much better in our value scores, but at least it's fairly reliable. Our subscribers who own Armadas have reported an unusually high number of problems with them.



Subaru Legacy 2.5i Premium



BMW X1

would make sense to buy a Hyundai Tucson for its relatively low price of less than \$25,000. But in our tests we found the Tucson to be noisy and hard-riding, with limited rear visibility and roominess. It also got an unimpressive 22 mpg overall. For about \$2,000 more, the Subaru Forester, which is our top-rated small SUV, is more comfortable, provides great visibility and handling, gets an impressive 26 mpg, and has excellent reliability.

The bottom line is that real value comes from what you get for your money. To determine which models deliver the most, we analyzed more than 200 vehicles that we recently tested and are currently on sale, focusing on their road-test scores, predicted reliability, and five-year owner-cost estimates. (See “What Makes a Great Value?”) In short, the better a car performs in our tests and reliability ratings, and the less it costs to own, the better its value.

Bigger isn't better

Overall, we found that small cars have a big advantage. Their low prices and very good fuel economy keep a lid on depreciation and gas costs, the two biggest ownership expenses. Other value-rich categories include midsize cars and small SUVs.

Some of the worst values in our study are large luxury vehicles that have enormous fuel appetites and high depreciation. In those groups, even the models with the highest value scores could still rate slightly below average overall.

Most categories offer a range of values. Among luxury cars, the Lexus ES 300h hybrid gives you a lot more for your dollar than the average car, even at its hefty sticker price of almost \$45,000.

Sports-car fans looking for something fun to drive can also take heart: The BMW 135i, Ford Mustang, Honda Civic Si, Mazda Miata, and Subaru Impreza WRX, among others, all deliver above-average value.

At the lower end of our value ratings are a number of high-priced models, including the Nissan Armada, Cadillac Escalade, and Lincoln MKX SUVs, as well as the BMW 750Li, Cadillac XTS, and Lincoln MKS luxury sedans.

Hybrid honors

In several categories, hybrid models offered the most value, with their great gas mileage and low depreciation. Most of these models, like the Prius, are made by Toyota. Other top scorers included the Toyota Avalon Hybrid and the Lexus ES 300h and RX 450h. The Camry Hybrid and the Prius V wagon also scored at the top of their categories, but we don't rec-

ommend them because of poor performance in a new insurance-industry crash test. Another top value, the Toyota Highlander Hybrid, is not included because it has been redesigned for 2014.

Our value ratings on page 52 provide an easy shortcut to models that deliver the best combination of performance and reliability for the lowest owner costs: in short, cars that give you the most for your money.

What makes a great value?

To determine which vehicles give you the most for your money, we look at three important things when calculating our value ratings for each model:

Road-test score. The road-test score reflects how good a vehicle is overall. Each car's score is the result of more than 50 tests and evaluations performed at our test track and on public roads. We measure performance, comfort, convenience, fuel economy, fit and finish, cargo space, and more. Ratings are based on a 100-point scale and range from a high of 99 for the Tesla Model S electric luxury car to a low of 20 for the crude, off-road-ready Jeep Wrangler. If a car doesn't perform well enough, we can't recommend it.

Predicted-reliability score. We forecast how well new models are likely to hold up based on their recent history. The information comes from our latest Annual Auto Survey, in which subscribers told us about problems they've experienced with 1.2 million vehicles in the past 12 months. If a model has a below-average reliability score, we won't recommend it no matter how well it performed in our road tests. For example, the V6 Honda Accord earned

an impressive 90 points in our testing, but owners reported more problems with it than for the average model, so we can't recommend it. New or redesigned models for which we don't have survey data, such as the Chevrolet Impala, are not included in our value study.

Five-year owner costs. Estimates of owner costs include all major expenses incurred during a typical five-year ownership cycle, including depreciation, fuel, insurance premiums, interest on financing, sales tax, and maintenance and repairs. In the chart on page 52, they are shown as cost per mile.

Depreciation is by far the largest factor, accounting for almost half of all owner costs over the first five years; our analysis assumes the cars will be traded in after five years. Fuel is the second largest expense. We use the national average of 12,000 miles per year to calculate costs. Maintenance and repair costs come from our Annual Auto Survey.

We excluded electric cars (such as the Chevrolet Volt, Nissan Leaf, and Tesla Model S) from our analysis, because of the lack of data on their depreciation and on maintenance and repair costs.



Subaru Forester

Best and worst for the money

Here you can see the models with the highest and lowest value scores in several major categories. Models are ranked by value score, above or below the average car, which is represented by a score of 1.0. Scores are calculated based on a model's five-year ownership costs, shown here as cost per mile, road-test score, and predicted-reliability rating. A vehicle with a score of 2.0 is twice as good a value as the average car, and one that scores a 0.5 is half as good. The best values in each category are all recommended models. The models with the lowest value scores are listed below the gray lines.



Honda Fit

Make & model	Price	Value score	Cost per mile	Test score	Predicted reliability
--------------	-------	-------------	---------------	------------	-----------------------

COMPACT/SUBCOMPACT CARS

		Worse	Average	Better			
		0	0.5	1.0	1.5	2.0	
Toyota Prius Four*	\$29,230						0.47 79 ●
Honda Fit (base)*	16,915						0.43 68 ●
Scion xB	18,360						0.50 68 ●
Volkswagen Golf (2.5)	20,565						0.53 85 ●
Toyota Corolla LE Plus	20,652						0.48 72 ●
Volkswagen Golf TDI (MT)	25,730						0.50 88 ○
Honda Civic EX	21,605						0.50 71 ●
Honda Civic Hybrid	25,140						0.48 66 ●
Subaru Impreza Premium	21,345						0.55 82 ●
Subaru Impreza Sport Premium	22,345						0.54 79 ●
Hyundai Accent sedan GLS	16,050						0.49 65 ●
Hyundai Elantra SE	19,410						0.52 80 ○
Chevrolet Cruze LS (1.8L)	18,375						0.55 69 ●
Dodge Dart Limited (1.4T)	24,490						0.62 61 ●
Volkswagen Beetle 2.5L (MT)	20,835						0.52 60 ●

MIDSIZED CARS

Subaru Legacy 2.5i Premium	24,189						0.59 81 ●
Mazda6 Sport	23,590						0.56 85 ●
Honda Accord LX (4-cyl.)	23,270						0.54 90 ○
Hyundai Sonata GLS (2.4L)	21,800						0.55 89 ○
Volkswagen Passat TDI SE	28,665						0.54 80 ○
Kia Optima LX (2.4L)	21,885						0.59 81 ○
Chevrolet Malibu 1LT (2.5L)	26,030						0.60 84 ○
Chrysler 200 Limited (V6)	27,825						0.69 52 ○
Nissan Altima 3.5 SL	31,610						0.70 84 ●

LARGE CARS

Toyota Avalon Hybrid Limited	42,501						0.69 86 ●
Toyota Avalon Limited (V6)	40,670						0.79 85 ●
Nissan Maxima 3.5 SV	33,700						0.77 83 ●
Hyundai Azera	37,185						0.79 81 ○
Buick LaCrosse (Leather, eAssist)	34,935						0.72 78 ○
Dodge Charger SXT Plus (V6)	34,510						0.78 75 ●
Buick LaCrosse Premium I (V6)	37,555						0.80 74 ●
Ford Taurus Limited (3.5, V6)	37,885						0.80 64 ●

LUXURY CARS

Lexus ES 300h	44,017						0.70 82 ●
Acura TSX (4-cyl.)	29,675						0.66 84 ●
Buick Verano Leather (2.4L)	27,750						0.63 73 ●
Infiniti G37 Journey	37,225						0.78 95 ●
Acura TL (base)	36,465						0.76 82 ●
Acura ILX (2.0L)	30,095						0.65 77 ●
Lexus ES 350	43,702						0.82 80 ●
Lincoln MKS (base, 3.7L)	50,070						1.00 60 ●
Cadillac XTS Premium	57,200						1.13 79 ●
BMW 750Li	97,525						1.77 74 ○

SPORTS CARS/CONVERTIBLES

Mazda MX-5 Miata Grand Touring	31,150						0.61 89 ○
Honda Civic Si	23,175						0.58 70 ○
BMW 135i	37,650						0.78 97 ○

Make & model	Price	Value score	Cost per mile	Test score	Predicted reliability
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SPORTS CARS/CONVERTIBLES cont.

		Worse	Average	Better			
		0	0.5	1.0	1.5	2.0	
Ford Mustang Premium (V6)	\$28,880						\$0.64 76 ○
Subaru Impreza WRX	26,088						0.67 84 ○
Chevrolet Camaro coupe 2SS (V8)	35,425						0.77 71 ●
Dodge Challenger R/T (V8)	35,015						0.81 67 ●
Chevrolet Camaro convertible 2SS (V8)	43,510						0.89 65 ●

WAGONS/MINIVANS

Mazda5 Grand Touring	24,820						0.62 88 ●
Volkswagen Jetta SportWagen TDI (MT)	28,085						0.53 81 ○
Toyota Venza (V6)	34,209						0.70 77 ●
Subaru Outback 2.5i Limited	34,698						0.70 73 ●
Toyota Sienna XLE (FWD)	35,810						0.75 80 ●
Honda Odyssey EX-L	38,055						0.78 86 ○
Kia Sedona EX	33,990						0.84 77 ●
Dodge Grand Caravan R/T	37,295						0.82 74 ●
Chrysler Town & Country Touring-L	37,505						0.87 74 ●

SMALL SUVs

Subaru Forester 2.5i Premium	26,814						0.59 88 ●
Honda CR-V EX	26,455						0.59 77 ●
Subaru XV Crosstrek Premium	24,215						0.57 75 ○
Mazda CX-5 Touring (2.5L)	28,090						0.63 76 ●
Volkswagen Tiguan SEL	37,020						0.80 76 ○
Ford Escape Titanium (2.0T)	36,600						0.76 79 ●
Ford Escape SE (1.6T)	28,040						0.64 75 ●

MIDSIZED SUVs

Nissan Murano SL	36,330						0.76 78 ●
Hyundai Santa Fe Sport (4-cyl.)	28,370						0.61 74 ○
Honda Pilot EX-L	36,980						0.77 73 ●
Hyundai Santa Fe GLS (V6)	36,290						0.71 83 ○
Mazda CX-9 Grand Touring	38,615						0.85 76 ●
Nissan Pathfinder SL	40,470						0.88 69 ●
Ford Explorer XLT (V6)	39,275						0.91 65 ●
Jeep Wrangler Unlimited Sahara	36,340						0.79 20 ●

LUXURY/LARGE SUVs

BMW X1 xDrive28i (2.0T)	38,795						0.80 74 ●
Acura RDX	36,605						0.79 79 ●
Lexus RX 450h	53,576						0.96 88 ●
Lexus RX 350	47,381						0.92 79 ●
Chevrolet Traverse LT	39,920						0.85 80 ○
Acura MDX Tech	49,460						0.96 79 ●
Lincoln MKX (3.7L)	50,235						0.99 64 ●
Cadillac Escalade (base)	64,905						1.40 61 ○
Nissan Armada Platinum	55,400						1.20 61 ●

PICKUPS

Honda Ridgeline RTS	30,825						0.76 79 ●
Nissan Frontier SV (V6)	30,110						0.75 67 ●
Toyota Tundra SR5 (5.7L V8)	34,738						0.83 69 ●
Nissan Titan SV (5.6L V8)	36,905						0.89 66 ●
Ford F-250 Lariat (6.7L V8)	54,765						1.16 65 ●

LUXURY COMPACT CARS

Volkswagen CC vs. Mercedes-Benz CLA250

VW upends Mercedes in a face-off of stylish sedans

YOU MIGHT ASK, "Is it really fair to pit a Volkswagen against a Mercedes-Benz? Wouldn't that be a one-sided duel?" Well, yes. As it turns out, one car is clearly more inviting than the other, but it's the less expensive Volkswagen CC that provides the more luxurious and engaging driving experience.

Each of these compact luxury sedans was designed to blend the sleek, stylish look of a two-door coupe with some of the convenience and practicality of a four-door sedan. And true, each is visually appealing in its own distinctive way. But the sloping rooflines and high window sills that help give the cars their eye-catching look also hurt their practicality. The rear seats in both are cramped and uncomfortable, it's difficult to climb in and out, and rearward visibility is very limited, with large blind spots.

Where the CC really succeeds is from the driver's seat. With agile handling and a taut, supple, and composed ride, the CC is fun to drive. Its 200-hp turbocharged four-cylinder engine provides ample power, although the initial takeoff can be a bit uneven. Fuel economy of 26 mpg overall is commendable.

The CLA is fairly agile, with good cornering grip, but it lacks the CC's balance and sporty character. Uncharacteristic for a Mercedes, the ride is too stiff, with short, quick motions making the car feel jittery. Unlike the CC, the

CLA's turbo four-cylinder feels a bit lethargic in everyday driving, but it ultimately posts good acceleration figures. At 28 mpg overall, it's pretty frugal at the pump. Overall, the CLA falls short on providing a well-rounded driving experience, and its tight quarters count against it. At \$36,500 it may be affordable for a Mercedes but is not a good value for what you get.

With its test score of 81, the Volkswagen CC ranks near the top of this class, just below the

Acura TSX, and the CLA's 63 score anchors it at the bottom of our Ratings. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that the Volkswagen CC and Buick Regal (also a German design) feel closer to a Mercedes than does the CLA.

Neither car is recommended. The CC scores high enough, but its reliability is below average. The CLA scored too low in our tests to be recommended, and it's too new for us to have reliability data.

Ratings Luxury compact cars

In performance order.

Recommended

Excellent
Very good
Good
Fair
Poor

Rec.	Rank	Make & model	Price as tested	In this issue	Overall road-test score	Predicted reliability	Overall mpg
					0 100 P F G V E		
✓	1	Acura TSX (4-cyl.)	\$29,675		84	⊖	25
	2	Volkswagen CC Sport (2.0T)	32,800	•	81	⊖	26
✓	3	Buick Regal Premium 1*	34,485		79	○	23
✓	4	Acura ILX (2.0L)	30,095		77	⊖	28
✓	5	Volvo S60 T5	35,100		77	○	23
✓	6	Buick Verano Leather (2.4)	27,750		73	⊖	24
✓	7	Mercedes-Benz CLA 250	36,500	•	63	new	28

*Powertrain changed since last test.

Why some models are not recommended. The Volkswagen CC has had below-average reliability. The Mercedes-Benz CLA scored too low in our tests and is too new to have reliability data.



Volkswagen CC



Mercedes-Benz CLA250



Volkswagen CC

ROAD-TEST
SCORE
81

This sleek four-door coupe version of the previous Volkswagen Passat sedan is enjoyable to drive, with agile, responsive handling and a taut, composed ride. But overall, it emphasizes style over function. The sporty design and handsome, well-finished interior make the CC feel more upscale and distinctive than most midsize sedans. But the sloping roof and low stance result in a snug interior, with limited visibility and difficult access.

A recent freshening increased seating capacity from four to five people, slightly improving the car's practicality, but the rear seat is still tight. In addition, an automated manual transmission replaced the traditional automatic, improving fuel economy, and it works well with the punchy 200-hp turbocharged four-cylinder engine.

One of the CC's highlights is its dynamic prowess. It carves through curves with little body lean, and the steering is quick and well-weighted, with decent feedback. When pushed to its handling limits at our track, it was very secure and forgiving, posting a commendable speed through our avoidance maneuver and instilling confidence in our drivers. Though the ride is somewhat firm, particularly at low speeds, it's compliant enough to buffer most bumps.

The turbo four-cylinder works well once underway, but it isn't particularly energetic at very low revs. We measured 26 mpg overall on premium fuel, which is par for this class.



FAMILY FRIENDLIER The CC added a fifth seating position for 2013, making the car a bit more practical.

The new transmission is one of the better dual-clutch transmissions on the market. It provides sporty, direct shifts that are mostly smooth, although part-throttle downshifts aren't always prompt. It performs best if you're driving the car fairly hard. You can also opt for a stronger 280-hp V6 engine that's very smooth and can be paired with all-wheel drive, but that combo pushes the CC's price to more than \$43,000.

Even our lower-level Sport version provides a meticulously finished interior. A nice touch: The glove compartment can be chilled to keep beverages and snacks cool. But you might have to pay more than you'd expect to add some common features, such as a sunroof.

Though the car isn't spacious, its driving position provides ample room even for taller drivers. The firm, deeply sculpted front seats provide a wide range of power adjustments. But slipping into or hoisting yourself out of the low-slung CC takes some agility. The rear seat is not very roomy, and head room is tight.

The low roofline, high deck, and small back windows compromise rear visibility. A backup camera would be a big help, and thankfully, it is standard on 2014 CC models.

The radio is easy to manage, with big knobs and a helpful preset display on its touch screen. But navigating some secondary menus is a bit tedious.

Bluetooth is standard, but some staffers found that their iPhone paired easily and



NEW SHIFT
The automated manual transmission shifts responsively but can stumble at low speeds.



Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Agility, ride, fit and finish, fuel economy
LOWS	Visibility, access, tight rear seat
TRIM LINE	Sport
DRIVETRAIN	200-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine, six-speed automated manual transmission; front-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	None
TESTED PRICE	\$32,800

More test findings

BRAKING	Very good performance, with short stopping distances and a firm, linear pedal feel.
HEADLIGHTS	The bi-xenon low beams provide good side visibility and very good intensity but lack sufficient forward visibility. The bi-xenon high beams are better.
ACCESS	Some ducking is needed to get under the low-slung roofline. And watch out for the frameless windows.
VISIBILITY	Limited to the rear because of a high deck and tiny rear window.
CABIN STORAGE	Moderate.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	The center-rear restraint is not tall enough even when fully raised to provide adequate protection.
CHILD SEATS	The rear-center head restraint may prevent taller forward-facing seats from sitting fully back against the seatback, and removal of the restraint requires a tool. Lower LATCH anchors in the rear outboard seats are difficult to access.



Scan for video.

others had more difficulty.

The CC comes with a connector for older iPhones and iPods; Android and other devices need a separate cord. Apple users can tether their device and use the radio touch screen or steering-wheel controls to navigate the device.

The trunk is large and well-finished, and the rear seatbacks can fold for extra cargo space.

Best version to get. The best value is basic Sport trim, which is well-equipped, including standard navigation. Adding a sunroof or real leather requires \$4,100 more for the Executive trim. For \$43,310, the top-trim V6 Executive 4Motion adds V6 power and all-wheel drive. But that price puts it in the territory of more prestigious cars such as the BMW 3 Series.

Mercedes-Benz CLA250

ROAD-TEST
SCORE
63

You can really feel the desire when Janis Joplin pleads, "Oh, Lord, won't you buy me a Mercedes-Benz?"

But if the Mercedes had been the new CLA four-door coupe, she might have reconsidered. The CLA looks like the real thing, with the proud three-pointed star on the grille and the sexy styling of the posh and costly CLS. But that's where the resemblance ends.

Once you're behind the wheel, the CLA just doesn't deliver the Mercedes driving experience that its image leads you to expect. Rather than a comfortable, quiet, and sporty rear-wheel-drive sedan, the CLA is a cramped, noisy, front-wheel-drive compact with a stiff ride, impaired visibility, and exceptionally difficult access. It also lacks the handling finesse and refinement we expect at this price.

The CLA is pretty agile in corners. Turn-in response is quick, and the body stays nice and flat. The steering is well-weighted, although it falls short on feedback. When pushed to its handling limits, the CLA proved secure and forgiving, and posted a high speed in our avoidance maneuver. But it tends to run wide when pushed and lacks the balance and sporty character of other Mercedes sedans. The 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine is mated to a seven-speed automated manual transmission. All-wheel drive will be optional down the road. We recorded an impressive 28 mpg overall on the required premium fuel.

If you really hammer the gas pedal, the CLA accelerates pretty quickly, but many of us complained that it felt sluggish off the line in normal driving. That's partly because the car defaults to Eco mode at every restart, which reduces throttle response and adjusts shifting to eke out better fuel economy. A start/stop system shuts off the engine to save fuel at traffic lights. But restarts aren't always smooth. You can disable the system at a modest penalty to fuel economy.

Inside, the CLA is well-crafted, although several staffers thought the center screen, perched atop the dash, looked like an

afterthought. Drivers have ample knee and foot room, but taller drivers might find head room tight. The aggressively contoured 14-way adjustable sports seats are great if your body fits within the bolsters. Cushioning is firm and supportive. But several drivers complained that the fixed head restraint sat too close to the back of their head. Save the rear seats for young kids. Their cushions offer decent comfort, but an average adult's head will brush the ceiling.

The sleek coupelike styling hinders the view out. The glass area is too short to the sides, and a high rear deck and thick roof pillars limit rear visibility. A backup camera comes only in the \$2,370 Multimedia package, which is a bit galling because it's standard on every \$18,000 Honda Civic.

As in other Mercedes models, controls take some getting used to, but they aren't as complicated as in Audi and BMW models. The climate controls are mounted low on the dash, and the audio controls are a bit spread out. A smart phone is easy to pair and reconnected each time we got in the car. Voice-command capability for the audio system is optional.

Because our car came with run-flat tires, no jack, spare tire, or inflator kit was included.

Best version to get. The CLA's big draw is its low base price of \$29,990, for which it comes reasonably equipped. But you need to add the \$2,300 Premium 1 package to get features you'd think would be standard, such as heated seats, automatic climate control, satellite radio, and iPod control. We'd skip the \$1,500 interior package, with leather upholstery, because the standard MB-Tex leatherette feels a lot like the real thing. Overall, a decently equipped CLA will probably cost close to \$37,000, which is about \$4,000 less than a comparably equipped C-Class. But if you can do without the cachet, many alternatives might fit the bill better, such as a Volkswagen CC, a Buick Regal, and even a loaded Ford Fusion, any of which would cost about \$3,000 less than a similarly equipped CLA.



Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Styling, braking, fuel economy, fit and finish
LOWS	Ride, noise, cramped interior, uneven power delivery, visibility, access, small trunk opening
TRIM LINE	250
DRIVETRAIN	208-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged four-cylinder engine; seven-speed automated transmission; front-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	Panoramic sunroof, heated seats, Harman/Kardon stereo, automatic climate control, walnut trim, HID headlights, mountain gray paint
TESTED PRICE	\$36,500

More test findings

BRAKING	Excellent, with very short stops on wet and dry surfaces.
HEADLIGHTS	Optional HID headlights provide very good illumination to the sides, but the low beams projected only a fair distance straight ahead.
ACCESS	Difficult, with short door openings, a low roof, high sills, and low seats.
CABIN STORAGE	Minimal overall, but the front doors have generous built-in storage.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	The center-rear restraint must be raised to provide adequate protection for an adult.
CHILD SEATS	The seat contour and nonremovable head restraints make it difficult to secure forward-facing and some rear-facing seats. At least the two outboard LATCH anchors are easy to access.



Scan for video.



LIMITED VIEW The CLA's sloping roofline seriously impedes on the driver's rearward and side visibility.





Dodge Durango

ROAD-TEST
SCORE
83

The midsize Durango SUV is another impressive example of Chrysler's recent resurgence. Past Durangos were rather mediocre, but the current one is a luxurious, refined, and capable SUV that now rates at the top of its category.

The Durango, which shares the same platform as the Jeep Grand Cherokee, does an impressive job of combining workhorse utility with ample creature comforts. The interior is spacious, quiet, and well-finished, with room for seven adults. The ride is supple and composed, and handling is responsive for a vehicle this big. Yet the Durango also comes ready to haul the load, providing plenty of cargo room and towing capability. It's larger than most midsize SUVs, however, so it can be a bit of a handful to maneuver and park.

A thorough freshening for 2014 brought a host of improvements, including an excellent new eight-speed automatic transmission. Coupled with a 290-hp,

3.6-liter V6, it transforms the driving experience, making our test vehicle notably quicker and more responsive than the last V6 Durango we tested. It also boosts fuel economy slightly, to 18 mpg overall, which is decent but not among the best in the class.

Most buyers should be happy with the V6 engine. The Hemi V8 delivers smooth, effortless acceleration and a nice exhaust burble. But it costs a hefty \$2,795 extra and reduces overall gas mileage by about 3 mpg.

Also new is a revised dash with Chrysler's optional Uconnect 8.4-inch touch-screen infotainment system. It combines connectivity with easy, intuitive operation and is among the best of its type.

Inside, drivers sit high in big, supportive front seats. The second row can be ordered with individual captain's chairs or a three-position bench. Either way, outboard passengers have a roomy and comfortable seat, but the bench's cushion is a bit low. Two adults can fit in the third row, but it's not the place for a long trip.

We found the Durango to be an excellent choice for towing. It's rated to tow up to 6,200 pounds with the V6, more than its rivals, and up to 7,400 pounds with the V8.

One of the Durango's few downsides is so-so rear visibility. The optional backup camera and the blind-spot monitoring system with cross-traffic alert would help.

We can't recommend this freshened model because it's too new for us to have reliability data.

Best version to buy. The midrange Limited trim should satisfy most buyers. It includes lots of desirable features, including heated leather seats and steering wheel, and the Uconnect 8.4 infotainment system. We would also add the optional Safety/



Tested vehicle

HIGHS	Ride, quietness, transmission, interior room, access, front-seat comfort, usable third seat, towing capacity.
LOWS	Rear visibility, maneuverability
TRIM LINE	Limited AWD
DRIVETRAIN	290-hp, 3.6-liter V6 engine; eight-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive
MAJOR OPTIONS	Navigation and Power Liftgate Group, Safety/Security and Convenience Group (HID headlights, power steering column, blind-spot monitor), tow package, sunroof
TESTED PRICE	\$43,525

More test findings

BRAKING	Very good in dry conditions; a bit long in the wet.
HEADLIGHTS	Good visibility and intensity from optional HID lamps. Automatic high beams work very well.
ACCESS	It's a bit of a climb, but flat door sills and big doors help.
VISIBILITY	Limited to the rear. Get the optional backup camera and blind-spot monitoring system.
CABIN STORAGE	Plentiful and easy to access.
HEAD RESTRAINTS	Second-row center restraint is not tall enough.
CHILD SEATS	Many rear-facing seats won't fit in the third row.



Scan for video.

How they compare

Rec.	3-ROW SUVs	0	100
		P	F G V6 E
✓	Hyundai Santa Fe GLS (V6)	83	
	Dodge Durango Limited (V6)	83	
✓	Chevrolet Traverse LT	80	
✓	Acura MDX Tech	79	
✓	Buick Enclave CXL	77	
✓	Mazda CX-9 Grand Touring	76	
✓	Honda Pilot EX-L	73	
✓	Ford Flex SEL	69	
	Nissan Pathfinder SL	69	
	Ford Explorer XLT (V6)	65	



YOUR CHOICE

The electronic instrument panel, which you can customize, lets you view a lot of information.

Security and Convenience package and the Navigation and Power Liftgate package. To get active cruise control and forward-collision monitoring requires opting for either the top-of-the-line Citadel trim or the R/T with Technology package. Those versions come with 20-inch wheels, which slightly reduce ride comfort. We would opt for the V6 only if we often towed a heavy trailer.

Ford Fusion & C-Max

A new Fusion engine and software tweaks have little impact on mpg

FORD HAS A CONUNDRUM on its hands. The fuel economy we measured when we first tested its C-Max and Fusion hybrids last year was very good, placing them among the most fuel-efficient cars in their classes. The Fusion sedan got a stellar 39 mpg overall, and the C-Max wagon netted 37. But the results were far below the 47 mpg EPA estimates printed on the cars' window stickers. We found the same situation with the Lincoln MKZ, which is an upscale sibling of the Fusion.

We weren't the only ones to notice the gap; owners have reported lower-than-expected gas mileage online, and Ford said that it has seen a relatively high level of customer dissatisfaction with fuel economy for the C-Max.

A few months ago, it came to light that the company had never actually tested the C-Max's fuel economy for the EPA. It used a legal loophole in the EPA's regulations to simply use the Fusion's mpg results for both cars because they share the same powertrains.

Ford then lowered the C-Max's EPA combined estimate to 43 mpg, promised to up-



ELECTRONIC TUNING
New software for the C-Max Hybrid boosted fuel economy by less than 1 mpg on the highway.



Scan for video.

date its hybrids to improve their real-world fuel economy, and offered software updates to existing owners for their cars. Ford also gave C-Max owners money for the difference in fuel consumption.

Because we still own our tested C-Max, Fusion, and MKZ hybrids, we had the software updates applied to our cars and retested them to see whether they improved. We conducted our tests, which use a different criteria than the EPA's, immediately before and after the cars' software was updated. We saw only minor differences for all three cars. Each improved by less than 1 mpg in our highway test, which we conduct at 65 mph. The EPA's highway test is conducted in a lab and averages 48 mph.

The new software causes the hybrids to run on their electric motors more often and up to higher speeds as a way of reducing

gasoline consumption. But with the same-sized batteries, the cars' engines still have to run just as hard and often to recharge those batteries and provide the needed power.

Ford has said it will make other changes to new 2014 C-Max Hybrids to improve highway gas mileage, including more aerodynamic front and rear spoilers, fender lips, and underbody trays, but those changes have not yet been rolled out.

Performance lag

We also tested a new non-hybrid 2014 Ford Fusion SE, which now has a smaller, 1.5-liter turbocharged EcoBoost four-cylinder engine in place of the original turbocharged 1.6-liter used in 2013 Fusions. Ford says the new engine is, "expected to offer efficiency without sacrificing performance."

Despite having 8 more horsepower (181 vs. 173 on regular fuel) the new engine can't match either the efficiency or the performance of the previous one, we've found. In our tests, the Fusion's fuel economy dropped from 25 mpg overall with the previous 1.6-liter engine to 24 mpg with the new 1.5-liter. The difference was greater on the highway, with our new Fusion dropping a significant 3 mpg, from 37 mpg to 34. Yet with the new engine the car maintains the same EPA fuel economy estimates of 23 mpg city and 36 highway for a combined figure of 28 mpg. Performance lagged in our tests as well; acceleration was slightly slower across the board.

Overall, we found that although the new engine doesn't make any notable changes to the Fusion's driving experience, the car's excellent ride and handling and its quiet cabin still make it a competitive choice in this class.



NO GAIN The Fusion's new 1.5-liter engine dipped in both mpg and performance.

High-tech headaches

Drivers find infotainment systems complicated and trouble-prone

TODAY'S CARS ARE coming loaded with in-dash electronics that provide smart-phone connectivity, turn-by-turn navigation, multiple audio sources, and more. But for car buyers, the wow factor is often short-lived because of the complicated touch screens and troublesome control systems that come with those features.

In our latest auto-reliability survey, conducted last spring, in-car electronics generated more problems from 2013 models than any other problem area, with Cadillac, Ford, Honda, and Lincoln vehicles accounting

for the most complaints. By contrast, Audi, BMW, Chrysler, and Lexus systems were relatively trouble-free.

To find out what was going wrong, in October the Consumer Reports National Research Center re-contacted thousands of people who owned a 2011, 2012, or 2013 vehicle from one of the four most troublesome brands and asked about their specific problems and overall satisfaction with their infotainment systems.

The majority of the 3,148 respondents reported frustrations. Sixty percent said they had problems learning how to operate the

system during the first few weeks of ownership, with little variation among the systems. In addition, one-third reported experiencing at least one system malfunction, such as an unresponsive touch screen or a problem with voice controls.

The survey also found that age played a significant role in respondents' experience with their systems. Almost 70 percent of drivers who are 65 and older reported having difficulty learning to operate their systems. That number dropped to 52 percent for owners ages 45 to 64, and to 37 percent for drivers between 18 and 44.



TRICKY CURVE

Most respondents said their infotainment systems were hard to learn to use.



ELECTRONIC BUGS The MyFord Touch system suffered from unresponsive screens, freezes, and Bluetooth pairing problems.



LUXURY LETDOWNS One in five respondents with the Cadillac Cue system reported problems.

On a positive note, almost half of the respondents who initially had difficulty said they became a lot more proficient over time. Still, a similar number said they became only a little more adept at using their system, and one in 10 said the systems had not gotten easier to use.

What went wrong

In our October survey, more than a third of respondents who owned a car with an infotainment system experienced one or more problems with their car's audio, communication, or navigation functions.

Looking only at 2013 models, 32 percent of owners with the MyFord/Lincoln Touch systems reported problems, and 30 percent of those with HondaLink did. Only a fifth of Cadillac owners said they had problems with their Cue system.

The most common malfunctions for the Ford and Lincoln communication systems involved voice controls and Bluetooth connectivity, used for hands-free phone calls and streaming music. Other owner complaints centered around radio, CD and DVD players, and touch screens. Due to a smaller number of Cadillac and Honda respondents, we don't have that level of detail for their systems.

Overall there were fewer problems reported for GPS navigation, backup-camera, and MP3 player systems.

The age curve was reversed for drivers reporting the most problems. In the youngest group, 46 percent of owners experienced some kind of malfunction, and only 36 percent of those ages 45 to 64 reported the same. That may be because younger owners are more tech savvy and likely to use and rely on more of their systems' features.

Infotainment satisfaction

Overall, owner satisfaction with the systems is relatively low compared with other satisfaction surveys we've conducted. Among Honda owners, only 61 percent were highly satisfied with their car's infotainment system. Similarly, only 56 and 52 percent were highly satisfied with the Cadillac

and Ford/Lincoln systems, respectively.

If you're considering a car with an infotainment system for the first time, one notable finding to consider is that your overall satisfaction may depend on how comfortable you are with technology in general. About

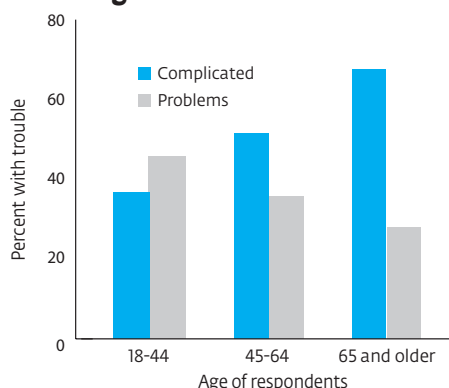
80 percent of owners who didn't consider those systems to be initially complicated reported high overall satisfaction. That contrasts with only 10 percent of owners who found them to be very complicated. Ease of use does matter. And in the long run, so does reliability.

Electronic troubles

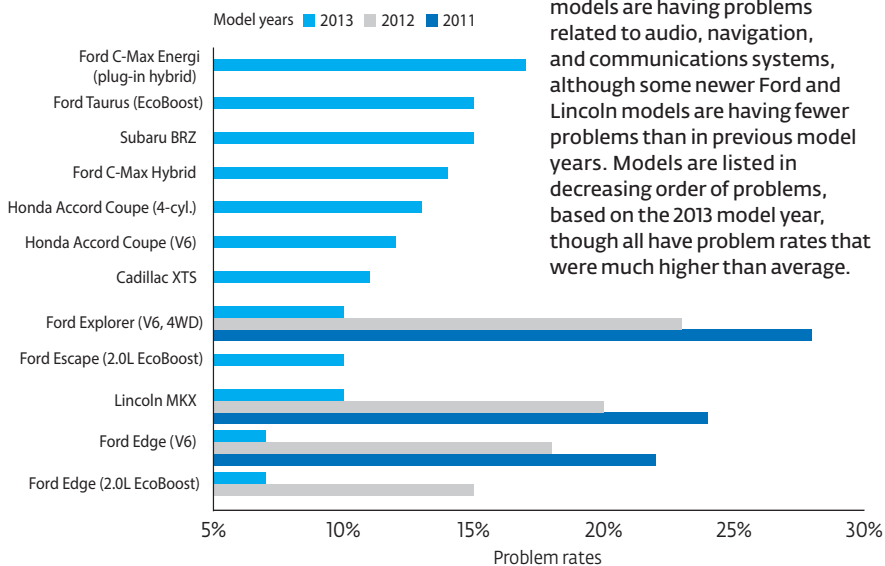
Our October survey revealed that older drivers found their infotainment systems more complicated to use, but younger drivers reported more problems with using them.



► The age factor



► More systems have problems



Our latest annual auto-reliability survey shows that more 2013 models are having problems related to audio, navigation, and communications systems, although some newer Ford and Lincoln models are having fewer problems than in previous model years. Models are listed in decreasing order of problems, based on the 2013 model year, though all have problem rates that were much higher than average.

Compare



VERSION	Volkswagen CC	Mercedes-Benz CLA	Dodge Durango	Ford Fusion
TRIM LINE	Sport	250	Limited	SE
PRICE: BASE/TESTED ^①	\$31,710/\$32,800	\$29,900/\$36,500	\$38,395/\$43,525	\$23,855/\$27,720
DRIVETRAIN				
Engine	2.0-liter 4-cyl. (200 hp) turbo	2.0-liter 4-cyl. (208 hp) turbo	3.6-liter V6 (290 hp)	1.5-liter 4-cyl. (181 hp) turbo
Transmission	6-speed sequential	7-speed sequential	8-speed automatic	6-speed automatic
Drive wheels	Front	Front	AWD	Front
TIRES TESTED				
Model & size	Continental ContiProContact, size 235/45R17 94H	Continental ContiProContact SSR, size 225/45R17 91H	Michelin Latitude Tour, size P265/60R18 109T	Goodyear Eagle LS 2, size 235/45R18 94V
RATINGS				
PERFORMANCE				
Acceleration	●	●	●	●
0 to 60 mph, sec.	7.5	6.6	8.3	9.2
45 to 65 mph, sec.	5.0	4.2	6.0	6.1
Quarter-mile, sec.	15.8	15.2	16.4	17.0
Transmission	●	●	●	●
Routine handling	●	●	○	●
Emergency handling	●	●	●	●
Avoidance maneuver, speed, mph	52.0	54.0	48.0	52.5
Braking	●	●	●	●
From 60 mph, dry/wet, ft.	133/141	124/137	134/150	125/137
Headlights	●	●	○	○
COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE				
Ride	●	●	●	●
Noise	●	○	●	●
Driving position	●	○	●	●
Front-seat comfort	●	●	●	○
Rear-seat/third-row comfort	○	●	●/○	●
Access	○	○	●	●
Controls and displays	●	○	●	●
Interior fit and finish	●	●	●	○
Trunk/cargo area	○	○	●	○
PREDICTED RELIABILITY	●	New	New	New
FUEL				
Overall mpg	26	28	18	24
City/highway mpg	18/35	19/39	12/25	16/34
Type	premium	premium	regular	regular
Capacity, gal./Cruising range, miles	18.5/480	13.2/370	25.0/455	16.5/400
Annual cost, 12K miles	\$1,720 @ \$3.70/gal.	\$1,575 @ \$3.70/gal.	\$2,315 @ \$3.50/gal.	\$1,730 @ \$3.50/gal.
SAFETY				
CRASH TESTS				
IIHS moderate/small-overlap frontal	Good/Marginal	NA/NA	Good/NA	Good/Acceptable
IIHS side	Good	NA	Good	Good
IIHS rear	Good	NA	Good	Good
IIHS roof strength	Good	NA	Good	Good
NHTSA front, driver/passenger	NA/NA	NA/NA	NA/NA	●/●
NHTSA side, driver/rear	NA/NA	NA/NA	●/●	○/●
NHTSA rollover 2WD/4WD	●/●	NA/NA	NA/○	●/●
AIR BAGS				
Side, front/rear	std./no	std./no	std./no	std./no
Head protection	standard	standard	standard	standard
SPECIFICATIONS				
DIMENSIONS AND WEIGHT				
Length/width/height, in.	189/73/56	182/70/57	200/76/71	192/73/58
Wheelbase, in.	107	106	120	112
Turning circle, ft.	38	37	41	38
Ground clearance, in.	4.5	3.5	8.5	5.0
Curb weight, lb. (% front/rear)	3,420 (59/41)	3,335 (61/39)	5,105 (50/50)	3,505 (59/41)
Maximum load, lb.	925	860	1,200	850
Luggage, suitcases+duffles/cargo volume, cu. ft.	3+1	2+2	44.0	3+2
Towing capacity, lb.	2,000	NR	6,200	1,000
INTERIOR ROOM				
Front shoulder room, in.	55.0	55.0	58.0	57.5
Front leg room, in.	43.0	44.5	42.0	42.0
Front head room, in. ^②	3.0	2.5	4.0	5.0
Rear shoulder room, in.	54.0	52.0	57.0	54.5
Rear leg room, in.	27.5	27.5	28.0	29.0
Rear head room, in. ^②	2.0	0.0	5.0	3.0
Third-row shoulder room, in.	—	—	49.0	—
Third-row leg room, in.	—	—	26.0	—
Third-row head room, in. ^②	—	—	0.0	—

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



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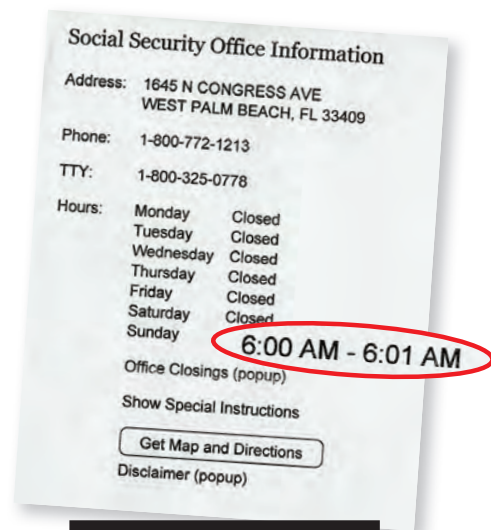
Easy care

Eventually the khaki pants with this label should be able to stand on their own.



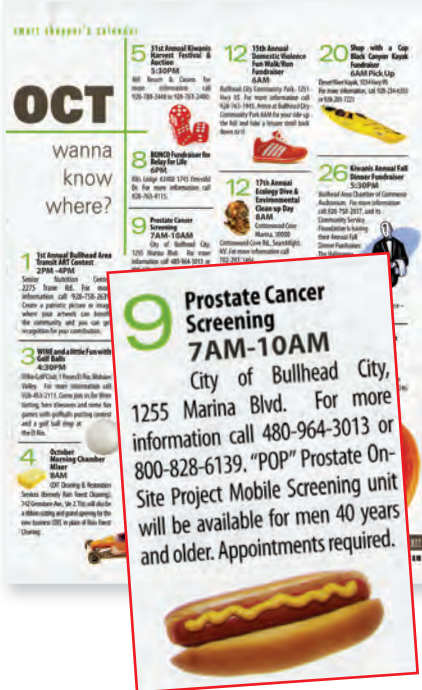
Drying off? Call a doc.

This warning appeared on this scary and technically complex exercise product, which you use "to improve your grip on the mat."



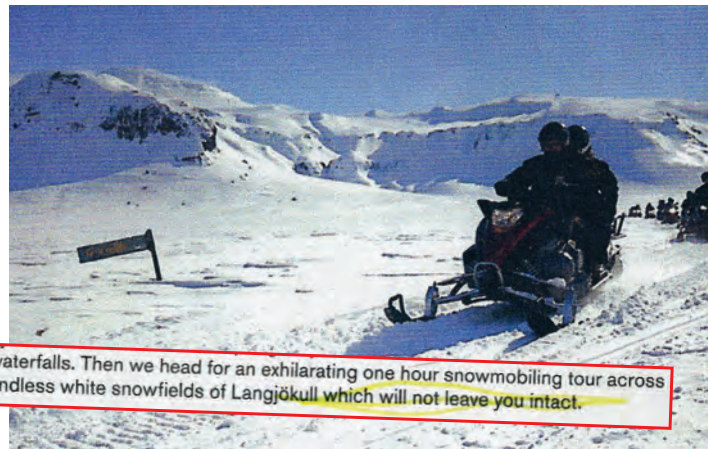
Talk about a shutdown

No doubt the office crams a lot of work into that minute.



Frankly speaking

This calendar paired an image with each activity listed: a sneaker with a walkathon, for instance. Someone with a quirky sense of humor must have picked the pic for prostate screening.



Thrilled to pieces

"We decided to pass on this excursion," wrote a couple from Brooklyn.

Golden Cocoon Award

The 14 headbands that a reader received from Dick's Sporting Goods arrived individually or in pairs, she said, "requiring this ungodly amount of packaging."



State of confusion

"Call me picky," said an Indiana reader, "but I don't think I want to take a professional engineer license-renewal course from a company that cannot tell the difference between Illinois and Indiana."

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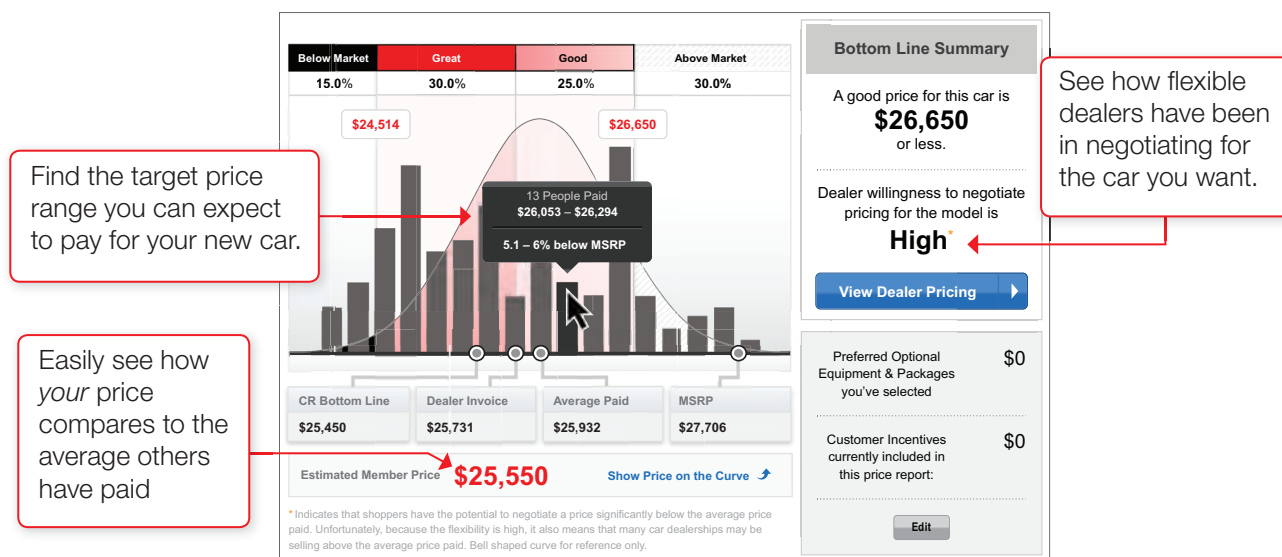
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Contact info	32D

How to use the Canada Extra section

Every month, Canada Extra provides Canadian pricing and availability information about products tested for that issue. The Ratings in this section are based on this month's reports, but they narrow your choices to the products that are sold in Canada.

You can use this section in either of two ways: Start with the main report, read about the products that interest you, and turn to this section to find whether they're sold—and for what price—in Canada. Or start here, find products sold in Canada whose price and overall score appear promising, and read more about them in the main report and full Ratings chart; page numbers appear with each Canadian report. (For some products, the Canadian model designation differs slightly from the one used in the U.S.)

In most cases, the prices we list here

are the approximate retail in Canadian dollars; manufacturers' list prices are indicated by an asterisk (*). Check marks identify CR Best Buys or recommended products in the U.S. Ratings. "NA" in a chart means that information wasn't available from the manufacturer. We include, in the Contact Info list on page 32D, the manufacturer's phone number and Web address in Canada so that you can call or go online to get information on a model you can't find in the stores. (Many products that aren't available in Canadian stores can be bought online.)

We appreciate your support, but we don't take it for granted. Please write to CanadaExtra@cu.consumer.org and tell us what you think. We can't reply to every e-mail message or implement every suggestion, but with your help we'll try to keep growing to serve your needs.

☒ **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.

Snow blowers

Report and Ratings, page 47

Recommended models only, from 63 tested.

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Width (in.)	Engine (cc)	Overall score
						0 100 P F G V E

A TWO-STAGE GAS Best for large driveways and deep snow up to 24 inches.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Cub Cadet 31AH57SZ	\$1,600	30	420	90
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Cub Cadet 31AH977U	2,070	30	357	89
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	4	Craftsman 31AH55LH	1,350	30	357	88
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5	Cub Cadet 31AH55SA	1,200	26	357	88
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	7	Troy-Bilt 31AH65KH	1,150	30	357	87
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	8	Ariens 921013	1,600	30	305	86
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	9	Ariens 921022	1,120	28	250	85
	10	Toro Power Max 828 OXE 38634	1,500	28	250	84
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	11	Troy-Bilt Storm 2840 31AH64FG	1,050	28	277	81

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Width (in.)	Engine (cc)	Overall score
						0 100 P F G V E

B TWO-STAGE GAS, LIGHTER-DUTY Can handle snow up to about 18 inches.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Craftsman 31AS63EE	\$ 700	24	208	73
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Toro Power Max 724 OE 37770	1,100	24	205	69
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Sno-Tek 920402	580	24	208	66

C SINGLE-STAGE GAS Best for snow up to about 12 inches.

<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	1	Toro Power Clear 621 38458	650	21	163	70
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	2	Cub Cadet 31AM2T6D	660	21	208	67
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	3	Toro Power Clear 621 38451	500	21	163cc	65

Ranges

Report, page 26; Ratings, page 27

Recommended models only, from 173 tested.

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
				0 100 P F G VG E

A 30-INCH SMOOTHTOP DOUBLE OVEN

✓	2	Maytag YMET8885XS	\$2,100	83
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B 30-INCH SMOOTHTOP SINGLE OVENS

✓	4	GE Café CBC980SNSS ^②	3,000	86
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✓	6	GE PB920STSS	1,900	85
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D 30-INCH INDUCTION SINGLE OVEN

✓	2	Samsung FTQ307NWGX	2,400	89
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E 30-INCH GAS AND DUAL-FUEL DOUBLE OVENS

✓	1	LG LDG3037ST	2,400	75
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✓	2	KitchenAid KDRS505XSS ^③	2,900	71
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Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price	Overall score
				0 100 P F G VG E

F 30-INCH GAS SINGLE OVENS

✓	1	LG LRG3097ST	\$2,400	74
---	---	--------------	---------	----

✓	2	LG LRG3095ST	2,000	72
---	---	--------------	-------	----

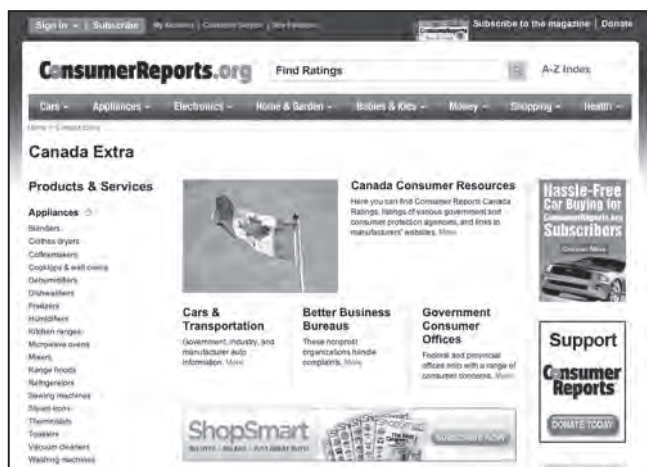
H 36-INCH PROFESSIONAL DUAL-FUEL SINGLE OVEN

✓	2	GE Monogram ZDP364NDPSS	NA	72
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^② Has cooking drawer. ^③ Dual-fuel model.

Canada Extra on the Web

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



Treadmills

Report, page 37; Ratings, page 40

Recommended models only, from 38 tested.

		Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Rec.	Rank			
				0 100 P F G VG E

A NONFOLDING MODELS

✓	1	Precor 9.31	NA	85
✓	2	Landice L7 Cardio Trainer	\$3,500	84
✓	4	Sole S77	NA	83
✓	5	Smooth 9.35	2,100	81
✓	6	True PS300	NA	81
✓	7	AFG 7.1 AT	1,800	81

		Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Rec.	Rank			
				0 100 P F G VG E

B FOLDING MODELS

✓	4	LifeSpan TR4000i	\$1,900	79
✓	6	AFG 3.1 AT	1,200	78
✓	7	Smooth 7.35	1,700	76

C BUDGET FOLDING MODELS

✓	1	NordicTrack C900 Pro	1,600	77
✓	3	Sole F63	NA	73

Ellipticals

Report, page 37; Ratings, pages 41

Recommended models only, from 32 tested.

		Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Rec.	Rank			
				0 100 P F G VG E

A WITH HEART-RATE PROGRAMS

✓	2	Octane Fitness Q37ci	\$3,300	79
✓	3	AFG 18.1AXT	1,800	73
✓	4	Life Fitness X5 GO	3,500	73
✓	5	AFG 3.1AE	1,100	72
✓	6	Precor EFX 5.21	NA	70

		Brand & model	Price	Overall score
Rec.	Rank			
				0 100 P F G VG E

B WITHOUT HEART-RATE PROGRAMS

✓	1	Landice E7 Pro Sport	NA	69
✓	2	Octane Fitness Q35c	\$2,200	68
✓	3	Octane Fitness Q37c	2,800	68

Autos

Report and Ratings, pages 53-57 and 60

All of the tested vehicles are available in Canada.

Make & model	Price range	Acceleration (sec.)				Fuel economy (liters per 100 km)		
		0-50 km/h	0-100 km/h	80-100 km/h	500 meters	City driving	Highway driving	Overall
LUXURY COMPACT CARS								
Volkswagen CC	\$36,050-\$49,690	3.2	7.9	3.7	18.1	13.1	6.7	9.1
Mercedes-Benz CLA	33,390-65,900	2.8	7.0	3.5	17.4	12.3	6.0	8.4
3-ROW SUV								
Dodge Durango	39,995-54,295	3.2	8.8	4.3	18.8	18.9	9.4	13.0
MIDSIZED CAR								
Ford Fusion	22,499-41,399	3.4	9.7	4.3	19.5	14.4	6.9	9.7

Contact info

How to reach manufacturers in Canada.

AFG

888-879-7983
afgfitnessstore.ca

Ariens

920-756-4688
ariens.com

Craftsman

Contact local Sears
sears.ca

Cub Cadet

800-965-4282
cubcadet.ca

GE

888-261-2008
geappliances.ca

KitchenAid

800-807-6777
kitchenaid.ca

Landice

800-526-3423
landice.com

LG

888-542-2623
lg.ca

Life Fitness

800-527-6063
lifefitness.com

LifeSpan

877-654-3837
lifespansfitness.com

Maytag

800-807-6777
maytag.ca

NordicTrack

888-308-9616
nordictrack.ca

Octane Fitness

888-628-2634
octanefitness.com

Precor

877-535-3285
precor.com

Samsung

800-726-7864
samsung.ca

Smooth

866-639-7775
smoothfitness.ca

Sno-Tek

Contact local Home Depot
homedepot.ca

Sole

866-780-7653
solefitness.ca

Toro

800-544-5364
toro.ca

Troy-Bilt

800-668-1238
mtdcanada.com

True

800-426-6570
truefitness.com

Special report for California residents

How does your doctor compare?

- ▶ **Exclusive:**
Patients rate 170 physician groups
- ▶ **How to get**
the best care
- ▶ **Quiz:** Does
your physician
measure up?

**GUIDE TO
CALIFORNIA
PHYSICIANS**
PAGE 9



February 2014

Dear CONSUMER REPORTS readers,



We are pleased to present a special insert on California primary care and specialty physician groups in the February 2014 edition of CONSUMER REPORTS. The Ratings shown in the following pages come from data provided by the California Healthcare Performance Information System (CHPI), a nonprofit collaborative of health care purchasers, plans, providers, and consumers that is on the cutting edge of providing reliable, meaningful, and fair information about physicians to consumers.

The data we present here focus on patients' experiences with their doctors. Our hope is that by making this important information accessible, we can help Californians use it when choosing physicians and improve their care.

California primary care and specialty doctors deserve applause for their support in the collection of these data, making it public, and collaborating with CONSUMER REPORTS and CHPI to make it widely available to consumers. They are among the first in the nation to do so.

Sharing performance data among providers is important for several reasons. First, it generates conversations among doctors about techniques that lift the quality of care they provide to patients. And making this information available to patients leads to one of the most powerful forces driving improvement—educated health care consumers.

We are able to do this project not only because of the data provided by CHPI and its participating provider groups but also because of collaboration with the California HealthCare Foundation. That nonprofit organization has agreed to present the Ratings on its website, at calqualitycare.org. In addition, CHCF is helping CHPI and CONSUMER REPORTS pilot a project that allows consumers to rate their own doctors through a short online survey, available at ConsumerReports.org/cro/caldocs. Your survey responses will be part of a research project to study how best to get consumer input into doctor performance. Your identity, of course, will not be disclosed.

Finally, I would also like to thank the Massachusetts Health Quality Partners, which helped develop portions of the content in 2012. We hope you find this information useful.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "John Santa".

John Santa, M.D.
Medical Director,
Consumer Reports Health



How does your doctor compare?

We rate primary and specialty care groups across the Golden State

LOOKING FOR RELIABLE information about physicians? Good luck. Doctor ratings are often little more than glorified popularity contests. The top-doctor lists found in magazines or on websites, for example, tend to be based on reputation or anecdotal reports, not hard data. And though advice from family and friends can be helpful, it is hardly comprehensive or scientific.

That's why we've teamed with the California Healthcare Performance Information System, a nonprofit collaborative of health insurance plans, health care providers, businesses, and consumers. The organization is on the cutting edge of providing reliable, meaningful, and fair information about physicians to consumers.

Using a comprehensive survey, they recently asked 58,873 California adults, all of whom had health insurance, about their experiences with their doctors. The findings provide important information

about how well physicians communicate with patients, coordinate medical care, and provide access to routine and urgent care, as well as how patients rate their care overall. The survey also asks patients about their experiences with the office staff, such as nurses, receptionists, and the people who handle billing and insurance questions.

Of course, medical care is complex, and patient experience is only one measure of quality. For example, it's important to know how well a doctor helps patients manage conditions such as arthritis, diabetes, high blood pressure, and high cho-

lesterol. But patient experience can affect those clinical measures, too.

What we found

These Ratings have information on 170 physician groups across the state. Together, the groups provide about 90 percent of the health care received by Californians.

The good news is that scores for physician groups in California have been on the upswing in recent years. And wherever you live in the state, you're probably close to at least one high-scoring group. The flip side: Some low-scoring groups are probably near you, too. Moreover, almost every group has room for improvement.

Use the Ratings starting on page 9 to see how your doctor's group fared in the survey. On the following pages we give some highlights from the survey, and use questions from it to help you assess your relationship with your doctor and tell you how to improve it if necessary.

High- and low-scoring groups are found in all parts of the state.

How good is your doctor?

Below are some of the most important questions in the survey. Most of them match up with the measures in the Ratings chart. The questions are divided into five categories:

- Communication
- Coordinating your care
- Working with the office staff
- Getting timely care
- Staying healthy

Use the questions below to score your doctor. Then check the Ratings to see how your experience compares with those of other patients in the same group, as well as how your doctor's group stacks up against other groups across the state.

Communication

Clear and honest communication with your doctor and other health care providers can help you keep healthy and, if you get sick, recover faster, too. Research suggests that patients who take an active role in the doctor-patient relationship by asking questions, stating symptoms clearly, and interrupting when necessary have better outcomes. The ideal is shared decision-making: cooperation between an informed patient and the doctor.

1 How often did your doctor explain things in a way that was easy to understand?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **79 percent**

What to do Take detailed notes. Repeat your doctor's instructions back in your

own words to make sure you got them right. If you're confused, say so. And consider taking a friend or relative to your appointment. If there are complicated instructions that need to be followed every day, ask your doctor to write the instructions down.

2 How often did your doctor listen carefully to you?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **80 percent**



What to do Ask your doctors to repeat what you've told them, to make sure they hear you. If you would like your doctor to make more eye contact, or sit when he or she talks with you, say so.

3 How often did your doctor show respect for what you had to say?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **84 percent**

What to do A doctor might focus on the benefits of a particular treatment, and you might be more concerned about side effects or alternatives. Tell your doctor what's important to you. If you don't think your feelings are being respected or taken into consideration, speak up.

4 How often did your doctor spend enough time with you?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **74 percent**

What to do Doctors are busy, so visits can feel rushed. To maximize your time, prepare a list of questions and concerns in advance, listing the most important first. Ask whether other health providers on staff can help you with the less pressing questions. If you want to raise a new

Help us rate California doctors

The Ratings that start on page 9 of this report are based on a survey developed by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services and the California Healthcare Performance Information System (CHPI). In the survey a random sample of patients are asked about the care they get from their doctors. It provides the best data available about patients' experiences with their physicians. But it has some limitations. First, it's long, which limits the number of people willing to complete it. Second, it focuses on physician groups, not individual doctors, in part because of the expense of gathering all of the information.

To try to overcome those problems, we are

working with two partners, the California HealthCare Foundation and CHPI, on a pilot project to see whether we can simply gather enough information on individual physicians directly from patients.

That's where you come in. We've created an online tool that allows you to identify your doctor, then complete a survey that asks important questions about your experience with him or her.

Your answers will be confidential. And the results will help us as we work to develop more complete California doctor Ratings.

To participate in the survey and rate your doctor, go to ConsumerReports.org/cro/caldocs.

health concern during your visit, mention that to the office staff when you make the appointment so that they can schedule enough time. Research suggests that doctors who don't rush their visits with patients are less likely to write unnecessary prescriptions and more likely to spend time talking about preventive care and self-help measures.

5 How often did your doctor give you easy-to-understand information about your health questions and concerns?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **78 percent**

What to do If you don't understand something, don't be afraid to say so. Ask your doctor to explain in different words, to use a picture or diagram to explain, or to just slow down. If you still have concerns when you get home, ask for a follow-up appointment, perhaps on the phone or with a nurse practitioner or a physician's assistant. He or she might be able to spend more time with you.

6 How often did your doctor seem to know the important information about your medical history?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **69 percent**

What to do Go prepared. Take a list of the drugs you regularly take; any chronic diseases, surgeries, or procedures you have had; and important points of your personal and family medical history. If your doctor doesn't ask about those things, bring them up on your own. Chances are your doctor will note that information in an electronic health record. Ask whether you can access that information through a secure website, or health portal, when you are home, so you can review it.

Coordinating your care

It's your doctors' job to make sure that all of the providers in the office are familiar with the details of your care. And they need to know about the care you get from other health care providers. That is essential to prevent duplicated tests or prescriptions, drug interactions, and missed appointments. In addition, such coordination assures that you get the information you need about follow-up care from all of the doctors you see.

7 How often did your doctor seem informed and up-to-date about the care you received from other doctors?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **54 percent**

What to do Make sure your doctor knows about the care you get from other health care providers, including other physicians as well as acupuncturists, chiropractors, herbalists, and other alternative health care practitioners. Explain why you saw them, what happened during the visit, and what treatments or drugs were prescribed. Make sure those providers communicate with your primary care doctor, too. Ask for copies of letters or reports that the specialist plans to send to your primary care provider. Electronic health records can help doctors share information, but patients need to be involved.

8 When your doctor ordered a blood test, X-ray, or other test, how often did someone from the office follow up to give you those results?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **63 percent**

What to do Ask when to expect your test results. Call the doctor's office if you do not get results by that time. Find out how you will get the test results. That could be by phone, by letter, or online with a secure patient portal. If you don't know whether your group has a patient portal, ask. Also ask for a written copy of your test results. File it with your other health information.

Working with the staff

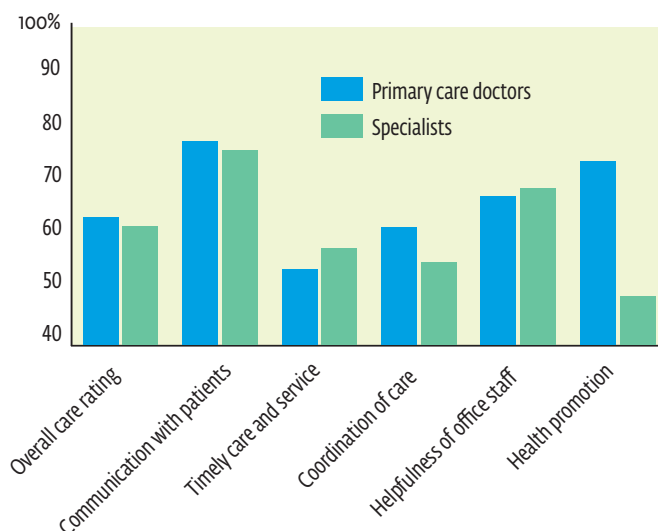
Your experience in a doctor's office depends not just on the doctor but also on

Specialists vs. primary care doctors

Physician-group staffs in California usually include both primary care doctors, who are responsible for most of patients' basic care, and specialists, who focus on heart disease, diabetes, cancer, or other complicated health problems. Primary care doctors in general fared better than specialists in most measures we looked at, as shown in the chart below.

That was most notable for questions related to health promotion, such as talking with patients about weight and exercise, and coordinating care. And patients tended to rate their care from the primary care doctor as slightly better overall.

But specialists tended to do better when it came to access to providers and the helpfulness of the staff.



the rest of the office staff. That includes other health care providers, such as nurse practitioners and physician's assistants, as well as the receptionist and the person who handles billing and insurance. Most California patients gave the staff high marks, but our Ratings show that there's plenty of room for improvement.

9 How often were clerks and receptionists at your doctor's office as helpful as you thought they should be?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **62 percent**

What to do Let the staff know, politely but firmly, if you expect them to be more helpful. If you don't get the help you think you need, follow up with the office manager or doctor.

10 How often did the clerks and receptionists treat you with courtesy and respect?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **76 percent**

What to do If you have a disagreement or other unpleasant interaction with someone in the office, make sure your doctor or the office manager knows about it. Remain calm and polite, but don't be shy. Will an apology make you feel better, or will you find it so difficult to work with the staff member in the future that you would want to be seen by a different provider? Let them know how you feel.

Getting timely care

You shouldn't have to wait weeks to schedule an appointment for routine care. And

once you get there, you shouldn't have to put up with long delays. If you have a pressing medical question, your doctor or someone in the office should be able to squeeze you in or at least take a phone call.

11 When you phoned your doctor's office to get an appointment for care you needed right away, how often did you get an appointment as soon as you needed?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **60 percent**

What to do If you want an appointment on short notice but can't be seen by your doctor, ask whether another physician or a nurse practitioner or physician's assistant could see you instead. Those professionals can handle many common medical problems.

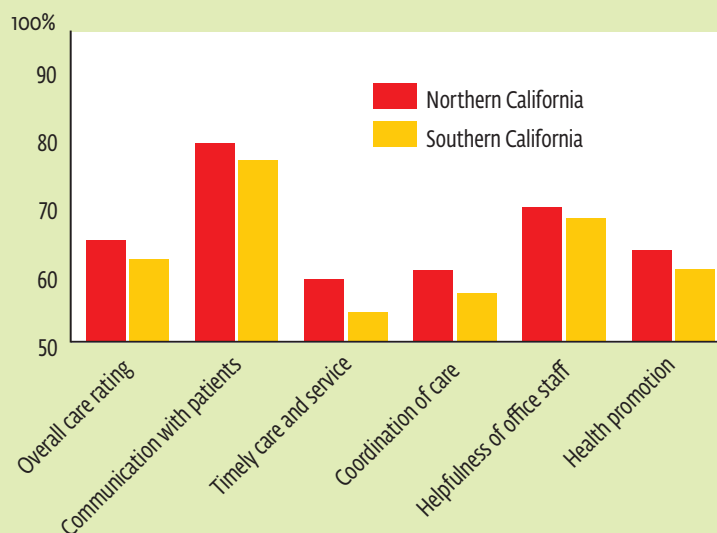
A tale of two states How Northern and Southern California differ

Physician groups in Northern California performed better, on average, than those in Southern California in all important measures in these Ratings. The differences aren't large, but they are consistent, as shown in the chart at right.

Researchers at the California Healthcare Performance Information System divided the state roughly in half. The southern portion included the 10 counties up through and including San Luis Obispo, Kern, and San Bernardino counties. The northern part encompassed the state's other 48 counties.

The biggest difference between groups in the North and South centered on access to care, including questions about how long it took patients to get appointments or answers to their medical questions, and how long patients had to wait in the office before seeing a doctor. On average, 59 percent of physician groups in Northern California got top marks on those questions, compared with 54 percent of groups in Southern California.

Overall, 65 percent of patients in the northern part of the state gave their group a top score when it came to the overall care rating, compared with 62 percent of patients in the southern part of the state. Why the difference between the regions? One important factor is that groups in the North, for a variety of reasons, tend to have more resources, says Cheryl Damberg, Ph.D., a senior principal researcher at the RAND Corporation, a nonprofit research organization based in Santa Monica, Calif. She has studied variation in the performance of California physician groups since 1996.



Those resources have allowed the groups to, for example, hire additional staff and invest in technology that can foster better communication between physicians and patients, Damberg says.

Damberg also notes that within the Los Angeles and San Diego regions, some groups perform as well as those in Northern California. They tend to be larger organizations that have invested in the same kinds of technology and quality improvements that are more common in the North.



12 When you made an appointment for a check-up or routine care with your doctor, how often did you get an appointment as soon as you needed?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **65 percent**

What to do Make appointments for routine care or follow-up visits as soon as you can—weeks or months in advance. If you know you'll be late or need to cancel, call right away—they might be able to move someone else up or take another patient.

13 When you phoned your doctor's office during regular office hours, how often did you get an answer to your medical question that same day?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **58 percent**

What to do If it's a pressing question, make sure the office staff understands how important it is. If the question can wait, consider using the group's secure online health portal, if available, to send your question in writing.

14 When you phoned your doctor's office after regular office hours, how often did you get an answer to your medical question as soon as you needed?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **61 percent**

What to do Ask how the office handles problems that arise after business hours. Some nearby groups team up to offer expanded hours for urgent care. Larger groups might keep staff on duty in the evenings and on weekends for patients who can't come during business hours.

15 How often did you see your doctor within 15 minutes of your appointment time (include time spent in the waiting room and the exam room)?

- ☐ Never ☐ Usually
☐ Sometimes ☐ Always

Respondents who said Always **36 percent**

What to do Make sure that office staff knows that you have arrived. Ask whether they expect a long wait; if so, let them know how long you can wait before you will have to leave. If the group routinely keeps you waiting too long, look for another group.

Staying healthy Let's talk prevention

Quality health care includes preventing disease, not just treating it. Two important things for staying healthy: eating right and exercising regularly. But your mental health is important, too. Below are the state averages for four survey questions that address how well California physician groups perform in those categories.

1 Did you and your doctor talk about a healthy diet and healthy eating habits?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

Respondents who said Yes **56 percent**

What to do If you're worried about your weight or diet, tell your doctor. And don't be offended if he or she brings it up. Diseases related to unhealthy eating and excess weight—including heart disease, certain cancers, stroke, high blood pressure, osteoarthritis, osteoporosis, and type 2 diabetes—are among the leading causes of death. Ask about support, such as a referral to a certified nutritionist or a registered dietitian.

2 Did you and your doctor talk about the exercise and physical activity you get?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

Respondents who said Yes **67 percent**

Make sure you ask about advice tailored to your needs. For example, people with arthritis might benefit from exercises that are different from those recommended for someone who has diabetes or who needs to lose weight. Talk with your doctor about what makes the most sense for you, and if necessary, ask for referrals to a physical therapist. Your doctor might know about community resources, such as gyms or fitness programs, near you.

3 Did anyone in your doctor's office ask you if there was a period of time when you felt sad, empty, or depressed?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

Respondents who said Yes **25 percent**

What to do Answers to simple questions about emotional health can be surprisingly useful for identifying people who are at risk of depression, research shows. And serious depression, which affects about 15 million Americans each year, is not only debilitating on its own but can also worsen other diseases and

conditions. So if you have experienced a prolonged period of sadness or depression, and your doctor doesn't ask about it, make a point of bringing it up.

4 Did you and anyone in your doctor's office talk about things in your life that worry you or cause you stress?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

Respondents who said Yes **31 percent**

What to do Stress can be as bad for your heart as excess weight, lack of exercise, and smoking. It can contribute to diseases such as type 2 diabetes, chronic pain, and depression. It can also undermine your immune system, which could make you susceptible to infection, and lead to unhealthy behaviors, such as excessive eating and drinking. So talk with your doctor about the stresses in your life, such as long hours at work, family troubles, or financial difficulties.



What's behind the Ratings

These Ratings of physician groups are published with the California Healthcare Performance Information System. CHPI's patient-experience data measure physician groups, not individual doctors. The current data include information on 170 groups that cared mainly for adults. The groups usually have primary care doctors and specialists.

How are groups rated?

The measures reported here are based on survey responses from almost 59,000 adult patients across California. The survey asked about aspects of their health care experience, such as how well doctors communicate with patients and access to care. These Ratings show results on four of those measures as well as patients' overall rating of the care they received.

How should I use these Ratings?

Use them to see how your doctor's group fared, or to look for groups in your area that have scored particularly well. In either case, look first at a group's overall care rating. Then look at its scores for individual aspects of performance, such as communicating with patients, coordinating care, and getting timely appointments. Those measures can help you assess certain aspects of patient care. No single measure reveals everything about the quality of care at a doctor's office. Different groups might excel in different areas. But a low score can point out certain aspects of care that a doctor's office might need to improve.

How are the scores determined?

The bar in the Ratings chart shows a group's overall care rating. It indicates the percentage of patients that gave a group a 9 or 10, on a 0-to-10 scale, on the overall care they receive. For the four specific performance measures, CHPI rates each on a scale of 0 to 100. The scores on all measures are then divided into four categories, with 4 being best. Groups that score a 4 are in the top 10 percent compared with other groups in the same category statewide. Those that score a 3 are in the top half but not in the top 10 percent. A score of 2 indicates that the group is in the bottom half but not the bottom 10 percent. Those with



a 1 are in the bottom 10 percent. Some groups are missing scores for measures because we publish Ratings for performance measures only if we have enough data to provide statistically reliable results.

Where can I get details?

Go to CHPI's website, at chpi.org, where you can find the project background and survey instruments used to create these Ratings on the "Patient Assessment Survey" page. CHPI also reports and collects other information, such as clinical quality data, and you can find more information about those activities at the website.

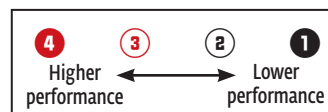


The California Healthcare Performance Information System is a nonprofit organization that measures the quality and affordability of care and reports performance ratings to inform the public and encourage improved health care in California. CHPI's work is guided by a collaborative of California purchasers, plans, providers, and consumers. CHPI has been recognized by the federal government as a Medicare Qualified Entity.

Ratings of physician groups

In collaboration with CHPI

Based on patient experience In rank order, within regions.



Medical group	Overall care rating	Components of care			
	0 100	Communication with patients	Timely care and service	Coordination of care	Helpfulness of office staff
SACRAMENTO/NORTH					
Northern California					
NorthBay Healthcare Group	70	4	4	3	3
Woodland Healthcare	66	4	3	4	2
Hill Physicians Medical Group - Solano	64	3	3	3	3
Sierra Nevada Medical Associates	64	3	3	3	3
Humboldt IPA	59	2	3	3	3
Sacramento					
Sutter Medical Group	71	3	3	3	3
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - North Valley Service Area	68	3	4	4	3
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - South Sacramento Medical Center	67	3	3	4	2
Hill Physicians Medical Group - Sacramento	65	3	3	2	3
UC Davis Medical Group	65	3	3	3	3
Mercy Medical Group/Dignity Health MF	63	3	2	3	2
Sutter Independent Physicians	61	2	3	3	3
SAN FRANCISCO/BAY AREA					
Palo Alto Medical Foundation	73	4	3	4	3
Palo Alto Medical Foundation - Mills Peninsula Division/Mills Peninsula Medical Group	71	3	3	3	3
John Muir Health	70	3	2	2	3
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - San Jose Medical Center	70	4	3	4	3
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - Santa Rosa Medical Center	70	3	4	4	3
Meritage Medical Network	70	3	4	3	3
Sutter Pacific Medical Foundation	70	4	4	3	4
Brown & Toland Physicians - Brown & Toland Physicians	68	3	3	2	3
Hill Physicians Medical Group - East Bay	68	4	4	4	4
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - Greater Southern Alameda Area	68	3	4	3	2
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - South San Francisco Medical Center	68	3	4	4	3
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - Santa Clara Medical Center	67	3	4	4	3
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - Napa Solano Service Area	66	3	3	3	2
Hill Physicians Medical Group - San Francisco	65	3	3	3	2
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - San Francisco Medical Center	65	2	3	3	2
Brown & Toland Physicians - Alta Bates Medical Group	64	3	3	2	3

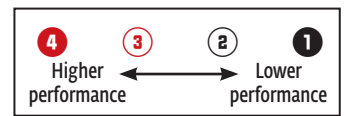
Medical group	Overall care rating	Components of care			
	0 100	Communication with patients	Timely care and service	Coordination of care	Helpfulness of office staff
SAN FRANCISCO/BAY AREA continued					
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - Diablo Service Area	64	3	3	3	3
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - San Rafael Medical Center	63	2	3	4	3
Sutter East Bay Medical Foundation	63	3	3	2	4
Affinity Medical Group	62	3	3	3	3
Chinese Community Health Care Assoc.	62	2	2	2	2
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - East Bay Service Area	62	3	3	3	2
Bay Valley Medical Group Inc.	61	2	4	2	2
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - Redwood City Medical Center	60	3	2	3	3
San Jose Medical Group	60	3	2	3	3
Santa Clara County IPA	60	3	3	2	3
Physicians Medical Group of San Jose	58	2	2	3	2
CENTRAL COAST					
Valley Care IPA	72	4	4	4	4
Physicians Choice Medical Group of Santa Maria	64	3	3	3	3
Sansum Clinic	63	3	3	3	3
SeaView IPA	63	2	3	3	3
Coastal Communities Physician Network	60	2	4	3	3
Physicians Medical Group of Santa Cruz	59	2	2	3	2
Santa Barbara Select IPA	59	2	3	3	3
Physicians Choice Medical Group of San Luis Obispo	54	2	3	2	3
CENTRAL VALLEY					
Sutter Gould Medical Foundation	74	4	3	3	4
Key Medical Group Inc.	68	3	3	3	3
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - Fresno Medical Center	66	3	3	3	3
Omni IPA/Medcore Medical Group	65	3	4	2	2
GEMCare	63	3	4	3	3
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Kern County	62	3	2	3	4
Central Valley Medical Group	61	2	-	-	-
Kaiser Permanente Medical Group - Central Valley Service Area	61	2	4	4	3
Sante Community Physicians IPA	61	3	3	3	3
Hill Physicians Medical Group - San Joaquin	60	2	2	2	2
AllCare IPA	57	2	3	3	2
Bakersfield Family Medical Center	54	2	2	2	2

A dash (-) indicates not enough data to rate.

Ratings of physician groups

Medical group	Overall care rating	Components of care			
	0100	Communication with patients	Timely care and service	Coordination of care	Helpfulness of office staff
LOS ANGELES					
San Fernando/San Gabriel Valley					
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Baldwin Park	72	3	3	3	3
St. Vincent IPA	72	4	4	3	4
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Panorama City	69	3	3	3	3
UCLA Medical Group	69	4	2	3	2
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Antelope Valley	68	4	3	3	4
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Downey	68	3	3	3	3
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Los Angeles	65	3	2	3	3
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Woodland Hills	65	4	2	3	3
HealthCare Partners - Physician Associates	64	2	4	2	3
Diamond Bar Medical Group	63	—	—	—	—
HealthCare Partners - IPA Division	63	2	3	3	2
HealthCare Partners - Group Division	62	3	3	3	3
Family Care Specialists IPA	60	2	—	—	—
Facey Medical Group	59	2	2	3	2
Axminster Medical Group	58	2	2	2	1
Greater Covina Medical Group	58	2	2	2	3
High Desert Medical Group	58	1	1	2	2
Pacific Independent Physicians Association	58	2	2	3	2
Prospect Medical Group - Nuestra Familia Medical Group Inc.	58	—	—	—	—
Regal Medical Group	58	2	2	1	2
Physicians' Healthways IPA	57	1	3	2	1
Allied Physicians of California	56	2	2	2	2
Angeles IPA	54	1	—	—	—
Lakeside Medical Organization	53	1	2	1	1
Prospect Medical Group - Prospect Healthsource Medical Group Inc.	52	1	2	1	2
High Desert Medical Group - California Desert IPA	51	1	—	—	—
Sierra Medical Group	51	1	1	1	1
West Side					
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - South Bay	73	4	3	3	4
St. Vincent IPA	72	4	4	3	4
Cedars-Sinai Health Associates	70	3	3	3	4
Cedars-Sinai Medical Group	69	4	2	4	4
UCLA Medical Group	69	4	2	3	2

Medical group	Overall care rating	Components of care			
	0100	Communication with patients	Timely care and service	Coordination of care	Helpfulness of office staff
West Side continued					
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Downey	68	3	3	3	3
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - West Los Angeles	66	3	3	3	3
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Los Angeles	65	3	2	3	3
HealthCare Partners - IPA Division	63	2	3	3	2
HealthCare Partners - Group Division	62	3	3	3	3
Memorial HealthCare IPA - Long Beach	62	3	3	2	3
UCLA Medical Group - Santa Monica Bay Physicians	62	3	2	2	2
Family Care Specialists IPA	60	2	—	—	—
Good Samaritan Medical Practice Association	60	2	2	2	2
Axminster Medical Group	58	2	2	2	1
Prospect Medical Group - Nuestra Familia Medical Group Inc.	58	—	—	—	—
Regal Medical Group	58	2	2	1	2
Physicians' Healthways IPA	57	1	3	2	1
Angeles IPA	54	1	—	—	—
Prospect Medical Group - Prospect Healthsource Medical Group Inc.	52	1	2	1	2
Centinela Valley IPA	51	—	—	—	—
Eastern Los Angeles County					
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Baldwin Park	72	3	3	3	3
St. Vincent IPA	72	4	4	3	4
PIH Health Physicians - Group Division	69	3	2	2	2
Pomona Valley Medical Group	65	3	2	2	2
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Los Angeles	65	3	2	3	3
Alamitos IPA	64	2	2	2	2
HealthCare Partners - IPA Division	63	2	3	3	2
HealthCare Partners - Group Division	62	3	3	3	3
Pioneer Medical Group	62	2	1	2	2
Family Care Specialists IPA	60	2	—	—	—
Good Samaritan Medical Practice Association	60	2	2	2	2
Lakewood IPA	60	2	4	3	2
PIH Health Physicians - IPA Division	60	2	2	2	2
Citrus Valley Physicians Group	59	2	3	2	2
AltaMed Health Services	58	—	—	—	—
Pacific Independent Physicians Association	58	2	2	3	2
Prospect Medical Group - Nuestra Familia Medical Group Inc.	58	—	—	—	—
Regal Medical Group	58	2	2	1	2



Medical group	Overall care rating	Components of care			
	0 100	Communication with patients	Timely care and service	Coordination of care	Helpfulness of office staff

Eastern Los Angeles County continued

St. Mary IPA	58	2	2	2	2
Physicians' Healthways IPA	57	1	3	2	1
AppleCare Medical Group St. Francis	56	2	–	2	1
Angeles IPA	54	1	–	–	–
AppleCare Medical Group	54	2	3	2	2
Prospect Medical Group - Prospect Healthsource Medical Group Inc.	52	1	2	1	2

Torrance and South Bay

Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - South Bay	73	4	3	3	4
St. Vincent IPA	72	4	4	3	4
UCLA Medical Group	69	4	2	3	2
HealthCare Partners - IPA Division	63	2	3	3	2
HealthCare Partners - Group Division	62	3	3	3	3
Lakewood IPA	60	2	4	3	2
Torrance Hospital IPA	60	3	3	2	2
Axminster Medical Group	58	2	2	2	1
Prospect Medical Group - Nuestra Familia Medical Group Inc.	58	–	–	–	–
Regal Medical Group	58	2	2	1	2
Physicians' Healthways IPA	57	1	3	2	1
AppleCare Medical Group St. Francis	56	2	–	2	1
Angeles IPA	54	1	–	–	–
Prospect Medical Group - Prospect Healthsource Medical Group Inc.	52	1	2	1	2
Centinela Valley IPA	51	–	–	–	–

INLAND EMPIRE

Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Fontana	72	3	2	2	4
San Bernardino Medical Group	70	3	3	4	4
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Riverside	69	4	2	2	4
Redlands Yucaipa Medical Group	68	3	3	3	4
Riverside Medical Clinic	66	2	1	2	3
Beaver Medical Group	64	3	2	3	3
Family Practice Medical Group of San Bernardino	64	–	–	–	–
Loma Linda University Health Care	64	3	1	2	2
Riverside Physician Network	64	2	2	2	2
Inland HealthCare Group	63	3	–	–	2
Desert Oasis Healthcare	60	2	2	2	2
United Family Care	60	2	1	2	2
Pinnacle Medical Group	57	2	1	2	2

Medical group	Overall care rating	Components of care			
	0 100	Communication with patients	Timely care and service	Coordination of care	Helpfulness of office staff

INLAND EMPIRE continued

Upland Medical Group	57	2	3	1	2
PrimeCare	56	1	2	1	2
High Desert Primary Care Medical Group	55	2	1	2	1
Temecula-Hemet Community Medical Group	55	2	–	2	1
Alliance Desert Physicians	53	2	–	2	1
Choice Medical Group	53	2	2	2	2
Hemet Community Medical Group	53	2	1	1	2
High Desert Medical Group-Heritage Victor Valley	52	2	1	2	1
Empire Physicians Medical Group	51	1	2	1	2
Menifee-Hemet Community Medical Group	51	2	–	–	–

ORANGE COUNTY

Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - Orange County	72	4	2	3	4
St. Joseph Heritage Healthcare - St. Joseph Heritage Medical Group	72	4	2	4	3
St. Joseph Heritage Healthcare - St. Jude Heritage Medical Group	72	3	1	3	2
St. Joseph Heritage Healthcare - St. Joseph Hospital Affiliated Physicians	70	3	3	2	2
Edinger Medical Group	68	3	3	3	3
MemorialCare Medical Group	67	3	2	3	3
St. Joseph Heritage Healthcare - St. Jude Affiliated Physicians	65	3	3	2	2
Greater Newport Physicians IPA	64	2	3	3	3
Orange Coast Memorial IPA	64	3	3	3	3
Monarch HealthCare	63	2	3	3	2
Affiliated Doctors of Orange County	62	2	2	2	3
St. Joseph Heritage Healthcare - Mission Hospital Affiliated Physicians	61	2	3	3	2
Anaheim Memorial IPA	59	–	–	–	–
Arta Health Network/Healthcare Partners	59	2	–	1	3
Prospect Medical Group - Genesis Healthcare of Southern California	59	2	2	2	2
Prospect Medical Group - Prospect Professional Care Medical Group	59	2	3	2	3
Prospect Medical Group - Prospect Medical Group	57	2	2	2	2
Prospect Medical Group - Prospect Northwest Orange County Medical Group	57	2	–	2	2
Prospect Medical Group - Gateway Medical Group	56	2	2	2	2
Noble AMA IPA	54	2	2	2	2
AMVI Medical Group	51	1	2	1	1

A dash (–) indicates not enough data to rate.

Ratings of physician groups

Medical group	Overall care rating	Components of care			
	0 100	Communication with patients	Timely care and service	Coordination of care	Helpfulness of office staff
SAN DIEGO/IMPERIAL					
Sharp HealthCare/Sharp Rees-Stealy Medical Centers	73	4	2	3	4
UCSD Medical Group	73	3	2	3	3
Scripps Clinic Medical Group	69	3	3	4	3
Scripps Coastal Medical Center	69	3	3	4	4
Encompass Medical Group Inc.	68	3	—	—	—
Sharp Community Medical Group - Inland North	68	3	3	3	4
Arch Health Partners	67	3	3	3	3
Mercy Physicians Medical Group	65	2	4	3	3
Sharp Community Medical Group - Grossmont	65	2	3	2	3
Sharp Community Medical Group - Metro San Diego	65	3	3	3	3

Medical group	Overall care rating	Components of care			
	0 100	Communication with patients	Timely care and service	Coordination of care	Helpfulness of office staff
SAN DIEGO/IMPERIAL continued					
Sharp Community Medical Group - Graybill	64	2	—	—	—
Sharp Community Medical Group - Coronado	63	2	2	3	2
Kaiser Permanente - Southern California Permanente Medical Group - San Diego	63	3	2	3	3
Greater Tri-Cities IPA	62	3	4	4	3
Sharp Community Medical Group - Chula Vista	62	2	3	2	2
Mid-County Physicians Medical Group	61	3	2	3	4
Primary Care Associates Medical Group	61	2	2	3	2
Imperial County Physicians Medical Group	60	2	—	2	—
San Diego Physicians Medical Group	60	3	2	2	3
MultiCultural Primary Care Medical Group	53	1	—	1	2

A dash (—) indicates not enough data to rate.