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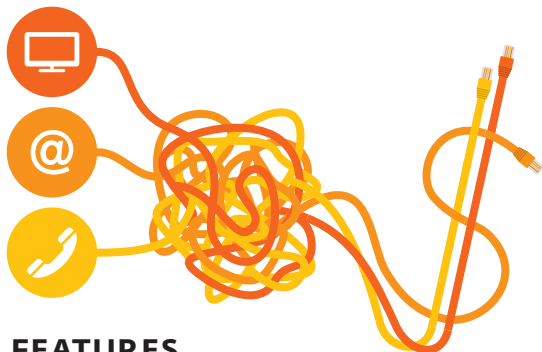
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**50**

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**\$1,700**

Buy a Husqvarna YT46LS **lawn tractor** for \$2,300 and save this much over a John Deere X310.

**\$600**

Try haggling for a better deal with your **cable company** and you could save up to this much a year.

**\$1.50**

Get Trader Joe's **dark-chocolate bars** instead of Scharffen Berger Bittersweet and save this much per serving.

## Coming in June

Gas grills, exterior paints and stains, medical care, door locks, computer security software, and dehumidifiers.

## 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.



## Watch for our annual survey

**Our Annual Questionnaire will be coming to your inbox or mailbox in April. Help us develop future articles and form the basis for our reliability Ratings. Please help us help consumers nationwide by taking the survey and sending it back.**

## 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](http://ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor).  
 • For news tips and story ideas, go to [ConsumerReports.org/tips](http://ConsumerReports.org/tips).  
 • E-mail submissions for Selling It to [SellingIt@cro.consumer.org](mailto:SellingIt@cro.consumer.org).  
 • For subscription information, go to [ConsumerReports.org/magazine](http://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

## Safe chicken

"The High Cost of Cheap Chicken" (February 2014) had a lot of useful information and good suggestions for changes to the industrial production of chicken. You advocate that consumers should select chickens raised without the use of antibiotics and imply that the overuse of antibiotics leads to an increase in multidrug-resistant bacteria. But was a lower percentage of the bacteria multidrug-resistant in the "raised without antibiotics" chicken?

—Chris Fanger Bolton, MA

**Editor's note** When we looked at bacteria found on meat from chickens raised without the use of antibiotics (labeled organic or no antibiotics) compared with bacteria from chickens with no such labeling, we found that on average those bacteria were slightly less likely to be multidrug-resistant



than those found on all conventional samples combined. Of note, samples from Perdue (without a no antibiotics label) were far less likely to contain multidrug-resistant bacteria than those from other major brands.

## Card smarts

"Costly Fees You Should Never Pay" (Money, February 2014) fails to mention credit-card foreign-transaction fees. Those unnecessary fees can be costly for travelers.

BankAmericard Travel Rewards card doesn't charge those fees and, furthermore, has a smart-card chip, which is needed for cards to work in many countries outside the U.S.

—Gary King Philadelphia

**Editor's note** To find a card without foreign-transaction fees, go to [cardhub.com](http://cardhub.com) and use the search filter for that term.

## Poison control

As an RN at the Missouri Poison Center, I read with interest "Device Can Prevent Accidental Overdoses" (March 2014), about the new flow restrictors on some bottles of pediatric liquid medications to make it harder for kids to get to the contents. While the first line of defense is keeping all medications out of sight and out of reach, you left out one very important piece of information. If an ingestion does occur, immediately contact your local Poison Control Center toll-free at 800-222-1222 (available 24 hours) for free and confidential information and treatment recommendations.

—Susan L. Nielsen St. Louis

**Correction** In the recall for the Cuisinart 7-cup food processors (Recalls, February 2014), we published an incorrect telephone number for the company. The correct number is 877-339-2534.

**SEND YOUR LETTERS TO**  
[ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor](mailto:ConsumerReports.org/lettertoeditor).

## Ask our experts

**Q** I am writing concerning "Repair or Replace?" (February 2014). You do not comment on frequency of use for appliances. Shouldn't frequency of usage be more important than years of service in determining time to replace?

—Martin Kaplan Hoschton, GA

It's true that heavy usage is related to a greater share of repairs for washing machines. Our analysis shows that washers used seven or more times per week are almost twice as likely to require repair as washers used three or fewer times per week. However, the age of washing machines is even more strongly correlated with repair. A washer that was purchased four years ago is four times as likely to require repair as a washer purchased within the past year and a half. Furthermore, for many of the products in our repair-or-replace tables, usage is not very strongly related to repair rates.

**Q** I have two homes equipped with hard-wired smoke detectors, original equipment now about 17 years old. The detectors respond appropriately to the test buttons. But the instructions on a battery-operated detector say it should be replaced in 10 years. What about mine?

—William Pohlmann Manitowoc, WI

The life expectancy of smoke detectors is generally 10 years, after which point their sensors can begin to lose sensitivity. The test button only confirms that the battery, electronics, and alert system are working; it doesn't mean that the smoke sensor is working. To test the sensor, use an aerosol can of smoke detector test spray that



**RELIABILITY** The age of a washing machine is more closely linked with repairs than is its usage.

simulates smoke. But even if the 17-year-old smoke detectors in your home can still detect smoke, we recommend changing them.

**Q** I have a new Android phone and would like to install a GPS app, but there are so many to choose from. What do you recommend?

—Dick Henley Baltimore, OH

Start with the very good navigation app built

into Google Maps, which came with your Android phone. In addition to turn-by-turn directions, it provides traffic alerts, alternate route suggestions, and points of interest along your route. To launch it, search for an address while in Maps and tap the car icon on the bottom right-hand corner.

**SEND YOUR QUESTIONS TO**  
[ConsumerReports.org/askourexperts](mailto:ConsumerReports.org/askourexperts).

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

## WINNER'S CIRCLE

### Consumer Reports honors watchdog group

The Kentucky Equal Justice Center was named the recipient of the Consumer Reports Excellence in Consumer Advocacy Award at a January ceremony. Founded in 1976, the group has worked tirelessly to represent the interests of low-income residents of Kentucky, earning important reforms and improving lives. The group played an important role in the implementation of the Affordable Care

Act in Kentucky—the state has been touted for operating one of the most effective health-insurance exchanges and has provided coverage to more than 122,000 low-income residents through expansion of its Medicaid program. The award, which comes with a \$25,000 cash prize, is given to small, nonprofit organizations that positively affect consumers through advocacy or direct actions in the marketplace.



### Cosmetic caution

A new database, at [safecosmeticsact.org/search](http://safecosmeticsact.org/search), can help you uncover shampoos, sunscreens, and other products that contain ingredients known or suspected to cause cancer, birth defects, or reproductive harm. The program is run by the California Department of Public Health. Thanks to a 2005 law, manufacturers must report any such cosmetic product sold within the state. Although the law doesn't prohibit their sale, California makes the information publicly available so that shoppers can make informed choices.

## WHERE WE STAND

### Net neutrality

**THE ISSUE** Earlier this year, a U.S. Court of Appeals overturned major elements of the Federal Communications Commission's "Open Internet" rules. The regulations had been designed to ensure that Internet service providers treat all content and sites equally.

**OUR TAKE** The court's decision leaves consumers at the mercy of a handful of providers that can now give preferential treatment to, for example, the online sites they profit from.

Consumers Union has long supported Net neutrality because industry tactics shouldn't be allowed to slow access to your favorite sites while allowing free-flowing visits to others.

The ball is back in the FCC's court. The agency recently announced plans for restoring consumer protections, and we hope they move quickly. Turn to page 24 for more on this topic.

## TAKING ACTION

### Your plastic should be more secure!

In the wake of several high-profile breaches of credit- and debit-card data from national retailers, Consumers Union is calling on lawmakers and businesses to provide stronger protections for your financial information. In February, we testified at a Senate hearing in support of a new federal standard that tackles the problem.

The payment cards used by most Americans are surprisingly vulnerable to fraud. Other countries have switched to cards with "chip and pin" technology that store and transmit encrypted data, often requiring you to authorize transactions. Although some U.S. financial institutions have pledged to make the transition within the next few years, we

need a stronger commitment from all stakeholders. A federal standard must be established to hold companies accountable for safeguarding your payments. To get involved, go to [DefendYourDollars.org](http://DefendYourDollars.org).



## FROM OUR PRESIDENT

### It's in the cards

At first glance, it might seem that there's not much common ground between the 70-something-year-old president (me) of a 70-something-year-old nonprofit (Consumer Reports) and the hip-hop icon, activist, entrepreneur, and founder of Def Jam Recordings (Russell Simmons).

So wrong. When Simmons visited Consumer Reports' Yonkers, N.Y., headquarters in mid-February and we sat down to talk, it was very clear, very fast, that we share a lot of beliefs—most critically, a commitment to protecting consumers.

Simmons is the creator of RushCards, prepaid cards that he launched a decade ago. Many of his friends, he said, "didn't have access to a bank, and they didn't have access to any plastic. My friends carried around cash all the time. This was their first chance to be able to pay their bills online."

Consumer Reports has criticized RushCards in the past for high fees and insufficient protections. Since we first evaluated them, fees have dropped



**LIKE MINDS** Consumer Reports President Jim Guest welcomes Russell Simmons.

and terms improved. In our latest report, last July, the RushCards rated Good or Very Good—in the midrange of 26 prepaid cards. Simmons said further improvements are in the works.

Simmons was impressed by Consumer Reports as an advocate for consumer rights. "You seem nonthreatening, but you're threatening. You're a bully for the people. You have a million activists who work with you!"

Consumer Reports wouldn't be nearly as successful in raising standards for consumers if we weren't allied with so many dedicated and driven people and organizations that also work relentlessly to do that. A hip-hop pioneer and the not-exactly-hip Consumer Reports agree on a lot, especially that it's only by enlisting consumers' help that the marketplace will be safer and more fair.

*Jim Guest*  
**JIM GUEST**  
President



# Up front

## Roll call: Best toilet papers

**MAJOR BRANDS** of toilet paper have been shrinking in various ways—rolls have become narrower, the number of sheets has fallen, the sheets themselves have gotten smaller—and the trend has not gone unnoticed by consumers. “Toilet paper or postage stamps?” one longtime (and now former) Charmin user asks on the company’s website. With less to use, you want to be sure the roll you buy does the job. Our tests found that some are far better than others.

The Ratings list the best choices, including White Cloud Ultra 3 Ply, a CR Best Buy sold at Walmart, and Charmin Ultra Strong. The also-rans include Scott 1000, which is neither soft nor strong; Marcal Small Steps, which is almost as harsh as Scott 1000 and doesn’t tear easily; and Cottonelle Clean Care Touch of Soft Cotton. Despite its name, it’s less soft than many of the products and costs more than almost all.

**Bottom line.** The toilet papers in the Ratings are all excellent or very good. See the test results for the attributes that matter most to you. And don’t just buy by brand: Various Scott, Cottonelle, and Charmin products scored quite differently.



### Ratings

**Excellent and very good products only** From 19 tested.

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

|                                     | Product                            | Price* | Overall score | Test results |          |                |              |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------|--------|---------------|--------------|----------|----------------|--------------|
|                                     |                                    |        |               | Strength     | Softness | Disintegration | Tearing ease |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | White Cloud Ultra 3 Ply (Walmart)  | 25¢    | 88            | ●            | ●        | ●              | ●            |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> | Charmin Ultra Strong               | 41     | 71            | ●            | ●        | ●              | ●            |
|                                     | Quilted Northern Ultra Plush       | 38     | 70            | ○            | ●        | ●              | ●            |
|                                     | Up & Up (Target)                   | 20     | 68            | ●            | ●        | ●              | ●            |
|                                     | Great Value Ultra Strong (Walmart) | 27     | 68            | ○            | ●        | ●              | ●            |
|                                     | Charmin Ultra Soft                 | 41     | 65            | ○            | ●        | ●              | ●            |
|                                     | Nice Premium Ultra (Walgreens)     | 31     | 65            | ○            | ●        | ●              | ○            |
|                                     | Cottonelle Ultra Comfort Care      | 62     | 64            | ●            | ●        | ○              | ●            |

\*Per 100 sheets.

#### Also-rans (in order of overall score)

**Good** Scott Naturals, Scott Extra Soft, Charmin Basic, White Cloud 2 Ply Comfort (Walmart), Kirkland Signature (Costco), Quilted Northern Ultra Soft & Strong

with CleanStretch, Ology Soft & Strong (Walgreens), Angel Soft bath tissue, Cottonelle Clean Care Touch of Soft Cotton.

**Fair** Marcal Small Steps, Scott 1000.

#### BY THE NUMBERS

# 46

Sheets of toilet paper used per day per American, according to Kimberly-Clark.



## Pay less for great chocolate

**IN RATING** 21 milk- and dark-chocolate bars, our trained tasters found that you can spend more than \$1 per serving for a decent bar—or pay far less for a tastier one. Two Trader Joe's bars and Hershey's Symphony milk-chocolate bar, all 60 cents per serving, are CR Best Buys. The dark-chocolate Trader Joe's is excellent, with a complex flavor and roasted notes; its milk chocolate is very good, melts smoothly, and has a balance of chocolate, milky, and

caramelized flavors. Hershey's Symphony has a nice, milky caramelized flavor.

The lower-rated dark chocolates tend to be less balanced and more astringent or bitter. The lower-rated milk chocolates tend to become thick or sticky in the mouth, have a flavor that's more cocoa than chocolate, or have off-tastes. Some samples of pricey Divine were slightly stale or had an odd, minty note.

Per serving (the recommended size is about 1.4 ounces, though not every choco-holic stops there), most bars have 200 to 250 calories. The dark chocolate has more fat than the milk chocolate (about 17 grams vs. 13 grams) but less sugar (about 11 grams vs. 22 grams). Dark chocolate appears to have a health edge over milk chocolate because it has more flavonols, which may

have cardiovascular benefits. Servings of the tested dark-chocolate bars have 3 to 6 grams of fiber, vs. about 1 gram for milk chocolate.

**Bottom line.** Overall, dark chocolate bars outsourced milk chocolate, but there are tasty choices among either type.

### Chili in your chocolate?

For chocoholics who like their fix with zip, our tasters tried two bars flavored with chili and two with bacon. Chili lovers should choose Lindt Excellence Chili Dark over Theo Congo Pili Pili Chili Dark. The Lindt has high-quality chocolate nicely blended with spice; the Theo has lower-quality chocolate with a musty off-taste and overwhelming spiciness. Bacon lovers should pick Vosges Mo's Milk Bar Hickory Smoked Bacon over Chuao Maple Bacon Milk. The Vosges has distinct milk-chocolate flavor with mild smoky notes, a slight bacon-fat flavor, and crunchy bits. The Chuao has a medicinal off-taste and gritty texture. The Lindt is least expensive, at \$1.10 per serving; the others cost \$2.25 to \$3 per serving.

### Hershey and Dove square off

We asked regular consumers—560 adult passersby at a holiday booth we operated in New York City—to taste Hershey Bliss and Dove Silky Smooth Promises chocolate squares and tell us which they preferred. Tasters could try the milk- or dark-chocolate version (or both), and we scraped the names and markings off each sample. The verdict: Dove won by a slight margin in milk and dark chocolate. For the record, our experts say that Dove's milk-chocolate squares are a little more chocolatey than Hershey's and that Dove's dark-chocolate squares have a fuller flavor than Hershey's and are slightly less sweet.



#### ■ DID YOU KNOW?

Certain chocolate producers have come under fire for hiring child workers to harvest cacao. To see which chocolate is certified as made under fair labor practices, go to [fairtradeusa.org](http://fairtradeusa.org).

## Good foods gone bad



**The sad tale** is told in many a food store:

a lowly apple that began life innocent until some company coated it in caramel; a pure low-fat yogurt that gained a topping of ... candy.

Why do companies keep turning healthful foods into health-less ones? "To appeal to more people," says New York University professor and nutritionist Lisa Young. "Once you add chocolate and flavorings to yogurt, it's not as healthy, but now my nephew, who is 9, wants to eat it. Even though the product has undergone more processing and is no longer in its natural state, people perceive it as good for them."

Product names can also make food sound more healthful than it is. "Veggie chips rarely





## Ratings

☒ CR Best Buy
 ☒ Recommended  
 All tested products Within types, in order of taste.

| Product  | Cost, serving |
|--|---------------|
| <b>DARK CHOCOLATE</b>  |               |
| <b>EXCELLENT</b>   |               |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Trader Joe's 72% Cacao 3-pack (mini bars)</b> | \$0.60        |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Godiva 72% Cacao</b>                          | 1.40          |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Chocolove Organic Fair Trade 73% Cocoa</b>    | 1.08          |
| <b>VERY GOOD</b>   |               |
| <b>Ghirardelli Intense 72% Cacao</b>   | 1.20          |
| <b>Valrhona Le Noir Amer 71% Cacao</b>   | 1.20          |
| <b>Endangered Species 72% Cocoa</b>  | 1.25          |
| <b>Lindt Excellence 70% Cocoa</b>  | 1.10          |
| <b>Green &amp; Black's Organic 70% Cacao</b>   | 1.20          |
| <b>Scharffen Berger Bittersweet 70% Cacao</b>  | 2.10          |
| <b>MILK CHOCOLATE</b>  |               |
| <b>VERY GOOD</b>   |               |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Godiva</b>                                    | 1.40          |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Dove</b>                                      | 1.08          |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Trader Joe's 3-pack (mini bars)</b>           | 0.60          |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>365 Everyday Value Organic (Whole Foods)</b>  | 1.15          |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Lindt Classic Recipe</b>                      | 0.83          |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Ritter Sport</b>                              | 0.75          |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Hershey's Symphony</b>                        | 0.60          |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> <b>Ghirardelli Gourmet Milk</b>                  | 1.00          |
| <b>GOOD</b>  |               |
| <b>Divine</b>  | 1.38          |
| <b>Cadbury Dairy Milk</b>  | 0.80          |
| <b>Hershey's</b>   | 0.58          |
| <b>Perugina</b>  | 0.90          |



### CLAIM CHECK

## Is Nest Protect up to the job?

**The claim.** The Nest Protect Smoke + CO Alarm, \$129, is claimed to do the obvious, sensing smoke and carbon monoxide. But it also connects to the Internet through a home's Wi-Fi network, has a voice alarm, can be silenced with a wave, and has an LED ring that could light an escape route. In sum, it's an "alarm you'll love."

**The check.** We set up the Nest, linking it to a Wi-Fi network using the free Nest app and user account. Then we exposed it to CO at two levels and timed how long it took to alarm and to reset to normal. We also exposed it to flaming fires and to smoldering fires.

**Bottom line.** We didn't feel the love. Setting up the Nest can be frustrating, but more important, it lacks a safety must for detecting fast, flaming fires: ionization technology. As a result, the Nest was not good at that task, though it excelled at detecting smoky fires and was very good with CO, as claimed. For better protection, consider the top-rated Kidde P19010, \$23, which recognizes both types of fire, plus a separate CO detector.

contain any veggies," Young says, "and fruity snacks rarely contain any fruit."

We shopped for dietary angels that lost their health halo and came up with these:

▮ **Smartfood kettle corn.** Air-popped corn is low in calories and high in fiber, says Jayne Hurley, senior nutritionist at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, a consumer advocacy group. But 2½ cups of this bagged kettle corn has 280 calories, 12 grams of fat, and 22 grams of sugar.

▮ **Oscar Mayer Deli Fresh turkey breast.** Surely meat isn't candy-ized? No, but it can have added sodium. A mere 2 ounces of this turkey has 21 percent of the daily limit.

▮ **Naked banana-chocolate protein**

**smoothie.** "30g of protein," "no sugar added," the label proclaims. But the top ingredient is grape juice from concentrate. The 15.2-ounce bottle has almost 500 calories and 34 grams (about 8 teaspoons) of sugar.

▮ **Müller Lowfat Yogurt with Choco Balls.** Hurley calls the add-ins "a sidecar full of junk." A container of this yogurt has 210 calories, 6 grams of fat, and 26 grams of sugar.

▮ **Nature Valley crunchy granola bars.** "Granola" sounds almost medicinal, right? This bar has 190 calories, 7 grams of fat, and about 12 grams of sugar.

▮ **Jif hazelnut chocolate spread.** Peanut butter is being upstaged by souped-up siblings that are often positioned as healthful. The top

ingredients in this one are sugar and vegetable oils. Moreover, a serving has only 2 grams of protein. Jif peanut butter has 7.

**Bottom line.** Avoid foods whose ingredients list is topped by white flour, refined sugar, or sodium, and foods high in fat. Choose foods without add-ons, such as fat-free yogurt, and top them with something healthful, such as fresh fruit. Public-health attorney Michele Simon, author of "Appetite for Profit: How the Food Industry Undermines Our Health and How to Fight Back" (Nation Books, 2006), suggests focusing on unprocessed, plant-based foods along with a small amount of animal protein. "Then," she adds, "you can have a treat once in a while."

## SCAM ALERT

## Take care when renting a vacation home

**Joan Coale**, a retired teacher, had no trouble renting homes abroad for vacations with her children and their families—until now. For this summer's trip to a villa in Spain, Coale was scammed out of \$3,000 when she was offered a 15 percent discount if she sent full payment in advance to a Barcelona bank. Crooks had hacked the real landlord's e-mail, intercepted Coale's messages, and tricked her into wiring them the money.

Renting someone else's home, condo, or apartment, or swapping your house with theirs is an appealing alternative to staying in hotels and motels. But it appeals to scammers, too. They might, for instance,



solicit an advance payment for an imaginary property. You arrive, and ... surprise! Or you might unwittingly rent a property in foreclosure just in time for the bank to toss you out. Sometimes the rip-off comes from a renter who boosts the price or doesn't deliver what was promised. Or the property might be in New York City, where short-term rentals are usually prohibited. Homeowners' associations can also derail your dream vacation.

### How to protect yourself

- Use a reputable listing site such as FlipKey, which conducts landlord background checks and authenticates properties, or HomeAway and VRBO, which provide a \$10,000 rental guarantee (for \$39) that protects you against Internet fraud.

HomeAway vouched for the reputation of the landlord Coale dealt with, who ultimately ate the loss and agreed to rent the house for the 15 percent discount she had gotten from the bad guys—payable when she arrives.

- Check the legality of the rental and your protections by searching the Internet for the town where you're renting and terms such as "tenant rights" and "short-term rentals."
- Use Zillow and Google Earth and Street View to make sure the property resembles the pictures on the listing site and isn't for sale.
- Get the rental agreement in writing—and read the terms. Don't understand something? Have the landlord write an explanation.
- Pay via credit card or PayPal or by using the website's payment-transfer system if it has one. Call the landlord before sending payment, and never pay via cashier's check, Liberty Reserve, MoneyGram, Western Union, or wire transfer.

## Touch-up hair color

**PROFESSIONAL HAIR COLORING** can be pricey, and some women put it off as long as possible. For those days before the next coloring, there are plenty of temporary concealers that are claimed to hide gray roots, then wash out in the shower.

In a small test, we had at least five panelists try eight of those products, picking the color that most closely matched their dyed hair, applying it to their roots, and scoring color matching, gray coverage, and ease of use. Panelists' gray-coverage scores matched scores our experts gave based on before-and-after photos.

**Bottom line.** Results will vary for individuals, but panelists said all products



were easy to use and at least good at covering roots. Oscar Blandi and Gray Away covered gray slightly better than others; and Oscar Blandi was slightly better than the rest at matching the desired color. Some panelists also praised Roux 'Tween Time. Most products covered well all day; TouchBack Pro was least likely to last.

### SAFETY NOTE

If touch-up sprays are used too close to the scalp and for more than 10 seconds or so, our tests showed, they can cause cold burn, a type of skin damage. Apply them in 2- or 3-second bursts, with the nozzle at least 3 inches from the skin, or as packaging directs. Use far from flames.



### What we tested (In alphabetical order)

| Product   | Type     | Price | Weight  | Colors |
|---|----------|-------|---------|--------|
| Alterna Stylist 2 Minute Root Touch-Up          | brush    | \$24  | 1.0 oz. | 4      |
| Claudia Stevens Cover That Gray                 | lipstick | 6     | 0.15    | 3      |
| Gray Away Root Concealer                        | spray    | 10    | 1.5     | 3      |
| Irene Gari Cover Your Gray 2-in-1               | brush    | 6     | 0.5     | 4      |
| Oscar Blandi Pronto Colore Root Touch-up        | brush    | 23    | 0.16    | 4      |
| Rita Hazan Root Concealer                       | spray    | 25    | 2.0     | 5      |
| Roux 'Tween Time                                | lipstick | 8     | 0.33    | 5      |
| TouchBack Pro by ColorMetrics                   | marker   | 30    | 0.27    | 8      |
| Similar: Touch Back Quix (\$15 for 0.13 ounces) |          |       |         |        |





## Eggs: Cracking the code

**When it's time to buy eggs**, are you chicken? There are so many choices—cage-free, organic, omega-3, vegetarian-fed, Grade AA or A, brown or white—that you might be tempted just to grab a familiar type or brand. But think twice. The seven varieties our experts tried tasted pretty much the same, some cost twice as much as others, and certain carton claims might not mean eggxactly what you think.

▮ **Taste.** We scrambled eggs from one carton of each type and served them in a randomized order. In each case, the cooked eggs were a typical yellow, with some slightly brighter than others, and all were firm. The main difference was in the balance of yolky flavor and sulfur flavor (from the white), and whether the sulfur flavor was clean or had a haylike or spinachy characteristic that comes from an older egg. America's Choice regular supermarket eggs had a slightly better flavor balance than most others; Nature's Yoke Omega 3 and

Davidson's Safest Choice Pasteurized had inconsistent quality between tastings. Freshness mattered. Though we tasted all eggs by their sell-by date, taste can diminish as eggs' age reaches that deadline.

▮ **Nutrition.** Large whole eggs have 70 calories, 4 to 5 grams of fat, 6 grams of protein, and about 185 milligrams of cholesterol. Vitamin and omega-3 content can vary with the hens' diet. Of the eggs we tested, those from hens fed vegetarian diets tended to have more of certain vitamins and omega-3s than those from hens fed a conventional diet. Nature's Yoke Omega 3 eggs listed the most omega-3s, 225 milligrams; a typical large egg has about 30 milligrams.

▮ **Bottom line.** Our small sample showed little difference in taste, but see Talk the Talk for definitions of terms that might matter when you shop. Whatever eggs you choose, look for those with a carton date far away from the purchase date.

### TALK THE TALK

## Carton claims

**Cage-free, free-range.** Hens are uncaged and inside warehouses. They can walk around, nest, and spread their wings but generally don't have access to the outdoors. As for free range, there are no standards for eggs.

**Grade.** Department of Agriculture grading is voluntary, and companies pay for it. Grades are AA, A, and B (like the kids in Lake Wobegon, all eggs are apparently above average). Grade depends on the quality of yolk and white and the shell's condition. Within any grade, size can differ. All USDA-graded eggs must have been washed and sanitized.

**Label date.** Eggs with a USDA grade shield must bear the date the eggs were placed in the carton, though the code might be incomprehensible to consumers. Federal law doesn't require an expiration or a sell-by date, but many cartons have them. Buy eggs before a listed date, and you can use them within three to five weeks from the day you refrigerate them even if the date has passed. Keep eggs in their protective carton and on an inside shelf in the fridge, not in the door.

**Omega-3.** Hens were given feed that included flax, marine algae, fish oils, and other ingredients to boost the level of omega-3 fatty acid in their eggs.

**Organic.** Eggs with a USDA organic seal come from a facility checked by accredited certifiers and from hens raised on feed grown without synthetic pesticides, fungicides, herbicides, or fertilizers. The hens are supposed to have outdoor access, but there's some question as to whether that claim is adequately enforced. Most organic eggs cost more than conventional ones partly because of the price of feed, smaller flock size, and certification costs.

**Pasteurized.** To kill pathogens, eggs are heated until just below the temperature at which they coagulate. They can be used in recipes calling for raw eggs.

**Pasture-raised.** No official standards exist; egg sellers should reveal their own.

**Vegetarian.** The hens have eaten all-grain feed with no animal byproducts.

**White vs. brown eggs.** Different breeds of hens just lay different-colored eggs. Quality, flavor, and nutrition aren't affected.

**Hormone-free, antibiotic-free.** Empty claims: No hormones or antibiotics are used in producing eggs for human consumption.



### What we tasted (In alphabetical order)

| Egg*                                 | Color, select claims   | Price, dozen |
|--------------------------------------|--|--------------|
| America's Choice                     | White, fresh.  | \$2.99       |
| Davidson's Safest Choice Pasteurized | White, hormone-free, antibiotic-free, vegetarian-fed.  | 2.99         |
| Eggland's Best                       | White, vegetarian-fed hens, 115 mg omega-3.  | 2.78         |
| Eggland's Best Organic               | Brown, vegetarian-fed hens, cage-free, 115 mg omega-3, USDA organic.                                       | 4.68         |
| Land O'Lakes All-Natural Eggs        | Brown, vegetarian-fed.   | 3.19         |
| Nature's Yoke Omega 3                | Brown, local family farms, cage-free, vegetarian-fed, certified humane raised and handled, 225 mg omega-3. | 4.59         |
| Nature's Yoke Pasture Raised         | Brown; from free-range, grass-fed hens; produced on small, sustainable farms.                              | 5.49         |

\*All large and grade A or AA.

# Big savings with new generic drugs

**CONSUMERS STAND** to reap big savings when a drug patent expires, freeing other companies to sell generic equivalents. At least that's how it's supposed to work. In reality, drugmakers can manipulate the market to maintain higher profits for as long as possible. You can still save—as long as you know how to sidestep the traps.

First off, be patient. For example, the patent on the blockbuster antidepressant Cymbalta (duloxetine), which costs about \$8.66 per 30-milligram capsule, expired in December 2013. But a month later we found the generic selling for \$6.32—only about 27 percent less. If duloxetine follows the typical pricing trajectory, you won't see significant savings for at least six months, says Stephen W. Schondelmeyer, Pharm.D., Ph.D., a pharmaceutical economics professor at the University of Minnesota. By the end of the first year, the price might drop by up to half of the original cost; by the second year, it can fall by 70 percent; by the third, it could plummet as much as 95 percent.

Why the delay? Before a company's patent on a drug expires, generics manufacturers often race to file lawsuits to challenge the patent. The company that wins gets a six-month exclusive to sell the drug, so prices don't drop until there's more competition. And, in some cases, the maker of the brand-name drug undercuts competitors by jumping into the generic market early. "They can come out with their own version—an 'authorized generic'—just before the patent expires to

## Are brand names better?

No! To gain approval from the Food and Drug Administration, the maker of the generic must demonstrate that the drug has the same active ingredient and that it is identical in strength, dosage form, route of administration, and labeling as the brand-name drug. The company must also demonstrate that people absorb the drug at the same rate. "People may think that brand-name products are better because they're more expensive, but the body does not know whether the drug came from a brand-name or a generic company," says Vinod P. Shah, Ph.D., a pharmaceutical scientist who worked for 30 years at the FDA.



keep prices higher," Schondelmeyer explains. Whoever is first wins big, he notes: Drugstores are likely to stick with one manufacturer for at least six months.

Over the next year or so, a slew of big-name drugs will become available as generics (see chart below). If you take one and don't see a notable price drop after six months of switching, ask your pharmacist about getting a cheaper version from another supplier. Below we list three other common traps and how to avoid them.

**Manufacturer co-pay coupons.** Makers of brand-name drugs try to keep customers with special deals, but it still makes sense to go generic. Even if a coupon cuts your price at the counter, your employer and insurance company still foot the bill for the full price, and that can cost you in higher premiums later on.

**New forms of old drugs.** Drugmakers sometimes discourage the use of generics by making subtle changes to the branded drug—switching from a tablet to a capsule, for example, or offering a higher or lower dose. By law, pharmacists cannot substitute a generic version if the drug is in a different dosage form or strength. So remind your doctor to write prescriptions that can be filled with a generic drug.

**Prescription versions of OTC drugs.** Doctors might write prescriptions for drugs even after they are available over the counter. But "OTC drugs are often cheaper," Schondelmeyer says. Case in point: A month's supply of 20 milligrams of the prescription heartburn drug Prilosec (omeprazole) costs \$236; the generic version, \$58; OTC omeprazole costs just \$17. Look for an OTC version of Nexium soon.

## When drug prices will drop

| Brand-name drug<br>(and generic)        | Generic availability<br>date (estimated) | Used to treat                                      | Brand<br>retail price* | Generic price per month |                  |                  |
|---|--|--|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------|------------------|
|   |  |  |                        | After<br>1 year         | After<br>2 years | After<br>3 years |
| <b>Avodart</b> (dutasteride)            | May 2015                                 | Enlarged prostate                                  | \$153                  | \$ 76                   | \$ 46            | \$ 8             |
| <b>Abilify</b> (aripiprazole)           | April 2015                               | Schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, severe depression | 900                    | 450                     | 270              | 45               |
| <b>Celebrex</b> (celecoxib)             | May 2014                                 | Osteoarthritis                                     | 138                    | 69                      | 41               | 7                |
| <b>Cymbalta</b> (duloxetine)            | December 2013                            | Depression, fibromyalgia, diabetic nerve pain      | 538                    | 269                     | 161              | 27               |
| <b>Evista</b> (raloxifene)              | March 2014                               | Osteoporosis                                       | 219                    | 110                     | 66               | 11               |
| <b>Lunesta</b> (eszopiclone)            | May 2014                                 | Insomnia   | 193                    | 97                      | 58               | 10               |
| <b>Nasonex</b> (mometasone nasal spray) | July 2014                                | Seasonal allergies, hay fever                      | 174                    | 86                      | 52               | 9                |
| <b>Nexium</b> (esomeprazole)            | May 2014                                 | Heartburn, GERD                                    | 275                    | 137                     | 82               | 14               |

\*Retail prices for 30-day supply are for the most common dosage; Lunesta is priced for a 15-day prescription. Prices are derived from data provided by Symphony Health Solutions, which is not involved in our analysis or recommendations.



# A user's guide to user reviews

**NINETY PERCENT** of consumers say that they read online user reviews before they make buying decisions, and why not? What could be more helpful than the opinion of millions of Americans about the products and services they've tried? But what sounds great in theory seems a lot less valuable in reality, because the trustworthiness of user reviews is increasingly being called into question.

Good reviews can boost sales and profits; negative ones can do just the opposite. A one-star increase in user ratings on Yelp, for example, can boost revenues by 5 to 9 percent for a restaurant, according to a 2011 Harvard Business Review study. A similar jump on Travelocity and TripAdvisor can push a hotel's room rates up 11 percent, Cornell University researchers say. That gives unscrupulous advertisers, businesses, and reviewers all the financial motive they need to game the system. Those fabrications "are the 21st century's version of false advertising," says Eric Schneiderman, New York's attorney general.

Given that reality, how can you wisely tap this often useful information? Here's our advice:

## 1 Be skeptical

You don't know whether the strangers who write the reviews have actually used the product and are telling the truth or whether they're shills paid \$1 to \$10 per review, like those uncovered in an investigation last year by Schneiderman's office. It snared 19 companies that pumped out thousands of fake consumer reviews on such websites as Yelp, Google+ Local, Yahoo Local, CitySearch, and InsiderPages.com.

Also bear in mind that user reviews, whether bogus or real, tend to skew toward the positive. Researchers at the University of Texas in Dallas and California State University in Long Beach found that people who rented movies online were five times more likely to post a positive review than a negative one. Some 67 percent of Yelp's reviews for the last quarter of 2013 were four or five stars.

## 2 Don't try to guess which reviews are true

Some well-intentioned consumer advice recommends that you try to be a truth detective and scrutinize reviews for

signs of fakery. But when Cornell researchers asked undergraduates to determine which of the 800 user reviews for 20 Chicago hotels were phony and which were real, the students showed no ability to do so. One reason: People suffer from a "truth bias" that leads them to trust what they read—until they discover evidence to the contrary.

## 3 Don't rely on reviewer reviews

Publishers of user reviews have come up with a variety of safeguards to prevent bogus write-ups. But we found them to be a mixed bag. When Nitin Jindal and Bing Liu of the University of Illinois in Chicago analyzed 5.8 million user reviews of electronics, books, music, and DVDs on Amazon.com, for example, they noticed something unusual. Many of them were from "trusted reviewers" who had written hundreds or thousands of them. The researchers concluded that such an output was "unlikely for an ordinary consumer." They also found that if a product had only one review, it was likely to be fabricated, but that reviews of products with high sales volume were less likely to be made up. A representative from Yelp told us last year that its computer algorithm for filtering out false reviews had never been objectively tested. But Liu says that he tested it himself and found that people could "probably trust" the reviews that pass for publication.

## 4 Check the criteria

Root around sites with user reviews to find out exactly how the publishers themselves manipulate, filter, and use them. OpenTable, for example, says that its reviews must "pass our standards and guidelines for publication." The site also says that the user reviews aim to benefit diners "as well as our restaurant partners." The partners are 31,000 restaurants around the U.S. that pay \$190 million in fees for the review and booking services, and get to nominate a "featured review" for placement at the top of OpenTable's ratings and review tab.



## 5 Look for verified standards

To get eBay's Top Rated Plus seal, which pushes its best merchants to the top of its rankings, sellers must maintain a good track record with known users. They must also have a significant volume of sales and adhere to pro-consumer standards, including a 14-day money-back return policy and same-day or one-business-day shipping.

## 6 Rely most on objective evaluations

Your best sources of information are those based on scientifically sampled surveys, such as those produced by the non-profit Consumers' Checkbook, which rates local service companies in seven U.S. metropolitan areas; comparative product testing, such as that done by Consumer Reports; and other objective measures, as you would find with ratings from the Better Business Bureau.

## 7 Use reviews for anecdotal wisdom

User reviews can provide helpful insight into product and service attributes that you might not have thought about on your own or that aren't spelled out in product descriptions or photos. A user might be able to tell you that, say, the bed linens you're considering aren't the shade of white advertised but are really more of an ivory, or that the jacket you're thinking about buying tends to run small, so you should order a size larger.

# Sour news about syrup

**PANCAKE SYRUP** is far less expensive than pure maple syrup, but those savings come at a price. Caramel color is often used to give the syrups their amber hue, and some types can contain 4-Mel—a potential carcinogen. This chemical has been shown to cause cancer in mice, and the International Agency for Research on Cancer, part of the World Health Organization, says that it may cause cancer in people as well.

Consumer Reports tested four brands of pancake syrup that contained caramel color and one brand of pure maple syrup as a control. In earlier tests, we measured 4-Mel levels in soft drinks from manufacturers such as Coca-Cola, Goya, and PepsiCo. (See the results of that study

## Pancake syrups can contain 4-Mel, a potential carcinogen.

at [ConsumerReports.org/cro/caramelcolor0114](http://ConsumerReports.org/cro/caramelcolor0114).) For both tests, we purchased samples in California and the New York metro area.

All of the pancake syrup samples contained 4-Mel. (See table at right.) The average levels ranged from 11.5 to 38 micrograms per  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup, the serving size specified on the label. (Though 4-Mel can form during the heating process that converts maple sap to syrup, our samples had less than 1 microgram per serving, an amount our experts deem insignificant.)

Although neither our syrup nor our soft drink test was large enough to draw conclusions about individual brands or to rec-

ommend one brand over another, the samples of Hungry Jack (J.M. Smucker) and Aunt Jemima (Quaker Oats, owned by PepsiCo) contained somewhat higher average levels of 4-Mel than the samples of other syrups. In our test of soft drinks, we found the highest 4-Mel levels in the samples of Malta Goya (Goya Foods) and Pepsi One (PepsiCo). For example, the average levels per 12 ounces in our December 2013

test for the California and New York samples respectively were 316.1 and 307.5 micrograms in Malta Goya and 39.5 and 160.8 micrograms in Pepsi One.

The amount of 4-Mel in syrups is much less of a concern than the amount in soft drinks because people tend to consume soft drinks more often, in many cases daily. On average, adults and children who eat pancake syrup regularly do so

## What we found in tests

Consumer Reports tested a total of 28 samples of pancake syrups that listed caramel color on the label and pure maple syrup (as a control). We purchased our samples at grocery stores in California and the New York tristate area in May 2012 and April through July of 2013. (The maple-syrup samples were bought in New York.) Because there was little regional variation in our samples, the table lists averages for the products purchased in both locations. Our study provides a snapshot of the market, but it was not large enough to recommend one brand over another, or to be indicative of levels that would always be found in any given brand.

*Editor's note: Consumer Reports teamed up with the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future to do the testing and risk assessment. This project was made possible by donations to the Consumer Reports' Food Safety & Sustainability Center.*

### BRAND (MANUFACTURER)

Average 4-Mel (micrograms) in  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup

|   |             |
|---|-------------|
| <b>Hungry Jack Original</b><br>(J.M. Smucker)                           | <b>38.0</b> |
| <b>Aunt Jemima Lite</b><br>(Quaker Oats)                                | <b>33.0</b> |
| <b>Aunt Jemima Original</b><br>(Quaker Oats)                            | <b>30.1</b> |
| <b>Mrs. Butterworth's Original</b><br>(Pinnacle Foods)                  | <b>21.0</b> |
| <b>Log Cabin Original</b><br>(Pinnacle Foods)                           | <b>11.5</b> |
| <b>Maple Grove Farms</b><br><b>100% Pure Maple Syrup</b><br>(B&G Foods) | <b>0.7</b>  |



## RECALL

## GM expands ignition-switch recall

General Motors has increased its earlier recall of certain 2003 to 2007 model-year vehicles because of potential problems with an ignition switch. In addition to 2005 to 2007 Chevrolet Cobalts, Pontiac G5s, and Pontiac Pursuits sold in Canada only, GM is separately recalling 2003 to 2007 Saturn Ions, 2006 to 2007 Chevrolet HHRs and 2006 to 2007 Pontiac Solstice and Saturn Sky models, bringing the total to 1,367,146. The ignition switch might inadvertently be moved out of the "run" position if attached to a key ring with added weight. If that happens, the air bags might not deploy in a crash. GM will replace the ignition switch free, but until then you should use only the ignition key with nothing else on the ring. For more details, call Chevrolet at 800-222-1020, Pontiac at 800-762-2737, or Saturn at 800-553-6000, or go to [safercar.gov](http://safercar.gov).

2006 Pontiac Solstice





about twice a week, according to our analysis of data from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey and a national survey of 974 parents conducted recently by Consumer Reports.

Two weekly servings of a pancake syrup with the lowest average level in our tests (Log Cabin Original) would pose a negligible cancer risk, defined as 1 in 1,000,000. That means that if one million people were exposed to a given level of 4-MeI daily over a lifetime, no more than one excess cancer would occur in that group as a result. Two weekly servings of any of the syrups in our tests would still be close to negligible.

But for people who have pancake syrup daily, as 4 percent of children between the ages of 1 and 5 do, according to our survey, risk increases. At the highest average 4-MeI level we found, the risk would be 10 times higher than negligible, or one excess case of cancer in 100,000 people who ate that amount daily over a lifetime. According to our experts, that's the point where risk becomes significant. And if consumed daily, none of the pancake syrups had low enough 4-MeI levels to reach the negligible risk level.

The types of caramel color that can have 4-MeI (class III and class IV) also are used in products from soy sauce to baked goods. Every little bit adds up, increasing risk.

The fact that we found little 4-MeI in some of the samples of soft drinks and pancake syrups we tested suggests that it is possible for manufacturers who use caramel color to minimize the 4-MeI in their products. Consumer Reports is urging the Food and Drug Administration to set standards for 4-MeI in foods. Companies should also be required to list the type of caramel color that they use so that consumers can avoid 4-MeI if they choose.

## RECALLS

### AUTOMOBILES

#### '10-'14 Toyota Prius

The Intelligent Power Module inside the inverter module contains transistors that might become damaged from high operating temperatures. If they do become damaged, various warning lamps will illuminate and the vehicle will have reduced power and be able to drive only a short distance. The vehicle might enter a fail-safe/limp-home mode that limits its drivability, and the hybrid system could also shut down completely.

**MODELS** 700,000 '10 through '14 Prius vehicles.

**WHAT TO DO** The dealer will update the relevant software. If the inverter fails before you receive the updated software, the dealer will replace the inverter assembly with a new one at no charge. Call Toyota at 800-331-4331 for details.

#### '14 Chevrolet Silverado and GMC Sierra

When the vehicle is idling in cold temperatures, the exhaust components can overheat, which might melt nearby plastic parts and result in an engine fire.

**MODELS** 324,970 2014 Chevrolet Silverados and GMC Sierras equipped with 4.3L or 5.3L engines.

**WHAT TO DO** The dealer will reprogram the engine control module. Chevrolet owners can call 800-222-1020 for details; GMC owners, 800-462-8782.

#### '12-'13 Toyota Tacoma, Lexus RX350, and '12 Toyota Rav4

The brake system contains a brake actuator that adjusts the fluid pressure of each wheel cylinder.

An electrical component within the actuator might



experience an increased resistance, which will illuminate various warning lights, including those for the electronic stability control, antilock brake, and traction-control systems. If that happens, those systems could become inoperative, thereby reducing directional control assistance.

**MODELS** 261,114 '12 and '13 Toyota Tacoma, and Lexus RX350 vehicles, and certain '12 Toyota Rav4 vehicles.

**WHAT TO DO** The dealer will update the software for the skid-control unit. Call Toyota at 800-331-4331 for details.

### HOUSEHOLD PRODUCTS

#### HDX and Powermate air compressors

The terminals of the pressure switch can come into contact with the motor housing and electrify the air compressors.

**PRODUCTS** About 100,000 HDX and Powermate 2-gallon electric air compressors sold nationwide at Home Depot and at [homedepot.com](http://homedepot.com) (HDX compressors only), and at Menards and other stores (Powermate compressors) from June 2010 through October 2013 for \$80 to \$120.

**WHAT TO DO** Stop using the compressor and call the importer, MAT Industries, at 855-922-2300 for a free repair.



### CHILDREN'S PRODUCTS

#### Go Gaga Squeeze & Teethe Coco the Monkey

The tail can pose a choking hazard to young children.

**PRODUCTS** 191,000 Go Gaga Squeeze and Teethe Coco the Monkey teething toys sold at Target and online from December 2012 through January 2014 for about \$13.

**WHAT TO DO** Take the monkey away from infants and contact the importer, Infantino, at 888-808-3111 to get a free replacement toy.



# 350,000

That's about the number of GE-branded dehumidifiers that were recalled recently because of a potential fire hazard, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. The units have been cited in five reports of fires that caused property damage. Consumers can get information from the maker at 866-853-2802 or at [cpsc.gov](http://cpsc.gov).





# Getting more from your store

Ratings of 55 supermarkets, plus how to shop cheaper, smarter, faster

**W**HEN IT COMES to supermarkets, biggest isn't always best. Our survey of 27,208 readers reveals that Walmart, America's largest grocer, is at the bottom of the food chain. The megastore finished last among 55 supermarkets, earning subpar scores for checkout speed, employee courtesy, and meat and produce quality. Despite the knocks, Walmart's 3,300 supercenters—180,000-foot shopping stadiums that combine a gro-

cery, a mass-merchandise store, and sometimes a pharmacy—were the destination of choice for 28 percent of respondents, many of whom were drawn by low prices. But our survey found that you don't have to settle for limp produce, helpless help, and long checkout lines.

Fourteen of the top 20 chains even had prices on a par with Walmart's, readers told us. They include the national stores Costco (the no-frills warehouse club with large-sized goods), Trader Joe's (a limited-

assortment store featuring store brands and unconventional items such as Sardinian parchment crackers), and Whole Foods (focusing on perishables, organics, and service), as well as the regional chains Raley's (West Coast), Publix (South), Wegmans (East), and Fred Meyer (Pacific Northwest and Alaska). Respondents also lauded a Ratings newcomer, Sprouts Farmers Market (160 stores in eight Western states), which showcases fresh and whole-grain food.

Store choice matters because Americans



# Shop cheaper

Your dollar will go especially far at Trader Joe's, Costco (with a \$55 annual fee), Market Basket (east Texas and Louisiana), Fareway Stores (Midwest), Stater Bros. (Southern California), WinCo (West), Aldi (mostly eastern half of the U.S.), ShopRite (Northeast), Save-A-Lot (nationwide), and Sam's Club (Walmart's nationwide warehouse club, with a \$45 annual fee). Those stores had the lowest prices, our readers said.

They ought to know. About three-quarters of respondents said they scan supermarket circulars for specials, take advantage of manufacturer coupons, and buy store brands. Here are the best ways to save:

## ▣ Compare unit prices

They're on shelf tags beneath the products and they're the only way to know for sure which package size is the best deal per quart, ounce, or sheet. Bigger is usually cheaper, but not always. At a local A&P, we spotted side-by-side packages of Hampton Farms peanuts, one 8 ounces, the other 24 ounces. The unit price tags revealed that the smaller bag cost \$2 per pound; the larger, \$2.66.

## ▣ Try store brands

They account for about a quarter of all supermarket products and sell for 22 percent less, on average, than national brands. Seventy-eight percent of respondents who bought store brands said they were just as good, and our own tests have shown that's often true. In any case, almost all chains back their brands with a money-back satisfaction guarantee. Sales remain strong even though the economy has improved. "They're not a passing fancy," says Susan Viamari, an editor for IRI, a market research company based in Chicago. But the price gap has narrowed slightly since 2010, Viamari



says, mostly because of a trend toward premium store-brand products.

## ▣ Consider warehouse clubs

They have everyday low prices, so you don't have to wait for a sale. But consider whether it makes sense for you to pay the membership fee and to buy in bulk—20 pounds of flour or 500 feet of aluminum foil, for example. Other drawbacks to club shopping: minimal service, a limited selection, and long checkout lines, according to our survey.

## ▣ Don't pay for convenience

Prepped and precut, diced, sliced, or chunked commodities from watermelon to garlic can cost extra. At a Price Chopper, portobello mushrooms were \$12.79 per pound sliced and \$4.99 per pound whole. But sometimes it works the other way; packaged products are cheaper. We saw russet baking potatoes for \$1.29 per pound sold individually but \$2.99 for a 5-pound sack.

## ▣ Capitalize on coupons

In 2013, consumers saved \$3.5 billion by using coupons for packaged goods. Manufacturers distributed more than 300 billion coupons that year but redeemed "only" 2.8 billion, according



to Charles K. Brown, vice president of marketing for NCH Marketing Services, a coupon-processing firm. Don't leave money on the table: Savings per purchase averaged \$1.62, Brown says. For all of the chatter about paperless coupons that are downloaded to smart phones, 91 percent of all coupons reached shoppers through newspaper inserts. Check the websites SmartSource.com and CoolSavings.com, too. But many coupons promote unhealthy foods. According to a recent study by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 25 percent of online coupons observed were for processed snack foods, candies, and desserts. Less than 3 percent of coupons were for produce, and only 1 percent were for unprocessed meats.

## ▣ Shop early in the sales cycle

Eleven percent of readers complained about stores being out of advertised specials. The problem was worst at Pick 'n Save, Pathmark, Meijer, and Tops. We've had the best luck finding the type of bargains prominent in circulars at the beginning of the cycle (usually Friday or Saturday).

## ▣ Be loyal

Many chains reserve their best deals for customers who enroll in loyalty- or bonus-card programs. And some have a fuel-reward component; the typical discount is 10 cents a gallon at participating gas stations for each \$50 spent at the store. Other possible perks: rebates based on purchases (usually \$5 for every \$500), coupon doubling and buy-one-get-one-free specials, coupons toward future purchases, and the ability for those 60 and older to get extra savings on certain days. More than half of our survey respondents belonged to bonus-card programs, and 84 percent were satisfied with the savings.

are heavily invested in their supermarkets, averaging 88 trips per year and spending approximately \$6,000, according to the Food Marketing Institute, a trade group. But just because people shop a lot doesn't mean they enjoy it. Fifty-six percent of our survey respondents experienced at least one problem; 31 percent had two or more. Walmart was the worst offender: Eight in 10 shoppers there had at least one gripe, mostly that there weren't enough open checkout lanes, that aisles were congested,

or that basic items were out of stock. (See "Top Gripes About Grocery Shopping," on page 20.)

Retail rancor prompted one-third of readers to quit shopping at a nearby store in the past year, mostly because of high prices, but also because of long waits, inadequate selection, or poor-quality food. High prices were a more important reason for "firing" a store now than in the years immediately after the recession. In our current survey 58 percent of respon-

dents gave a store the boot because of prices, compared with 43 percent in 2011.

Consumers' readiness to seek less expensive supermarkets doesn't surprise Jim Hertel, a partner with Willard Bishop, retail consultants in Barrington, Ill., who cites high unemployment and prices that remain at or near all-time highs. "The Great Recession also spurred consumer trial of many extreme-value formats, like Aldi's limited-assortment stores," he says. "Many shoppers found them more

than acceptable. Taken together, consumers are still nervous, and they have more alternatives.”

For quick trips, shoppers have been turning to pharmacies, convenience stores, and dollar stores, which have added refrigerated and fresh items and broadened their assortment of packaged goods. To retain customers, the historically slow-to-change supermarket industry has had little choice but to up its game. Among the tactics: Enhanced preferred-shopper programs, nutrition-awareness counseling, additional organic offerings, take-home meals, and new technology to make shopping easier.

## Dinner to go

Americans have been eating more meals at home since the recession, and supermarkets have begun offering serious competition to restaurants, says Bonnie Riggs, an industry analyst with the NPD Group, a market-research firm on Long Island, N.Y. They're filling the void with innovative dining options without “white-tablecloth” prices. Forget about rotisserie chicken and salad bars. Several Hy-Vees have a Market Grille, a restaurant with a full dinner menu. All items are made to order and served by trained wait staff. There's even patio dining during warmer months, and a Sunday brunch buffet. Wegmans has dining options ranging from casual to fancy, including market cafés, pubs, and an Italian restaurant and wine bar. Many Schnucks stores have wine experts certified by the Society of Wine Educators, and the Schnucks in Des Peres, Mo., has a beer cave with more than 500 craft brews. Some Whole Foods stores offer sit-down dining and “boutiques” with a wide range of food (sushi, seafood, tacos) and settings (a Paris café, a barbecue shack, a neighborhood diner).

The first step toward getting the most from your supermarket is to choose one that caters to your priorities, whether low prices, top-notch perishables, sparkling service, or high-quality store brands. The Ratings list many good options. The next step is to work the system so that you can shop cheaper, smarter, and faster.

## Shop smarter

Smart shopping begins with understanding how goods are priced and marketed, and how stores coax you into buying them. It also entails making healthy choices, which has become easier at many stores.

### ▶ Learn about layout

Supermarkets are organized to slow you down so that you'll buy more. The average store contains 73 product displays to stop you in your tracks. Display items, particularly on “end caps” that frame each aisle, aren't always on sale; they might just be nearing their “use by” date.

Enter most stores and you come face to face with fruit and vegetables, which indicate a store's commitment to freshness, says Jim Hertel of Willard Bishop. The scent of baked rolls, often evident the moment you step inside, stirs hunger—and more buying. Freezer and refrigerated cases without doors encourage unplanned purchases. Coffee bars and piped-in music can make you linger and buy more (depending on the music, of course!). Need meat, milk, or other staples? They're usually in back

of the store. To get there, you'll often travel the store's perimeter, the site of especially profitable—and tempting—fresh goods.

Too many hurdles, of course, and you might be out the door fast. Fifteen percent of our survey respondents complained about congested aisles. The biggest offender was Market Basket, where 35 percent of shoppers said clutter was a problem.

### ▶ Know the high-low game

Most stores lure customers with weekly specials on staples such as cereal, bacon, and detergent, then raise prices on other goods to offset those “loss leaders.” You're unlikely to find the specials for less anywhere else, even at warehouse clubs. If you follow the flyers, you'll see that staples go on sale at predictable intervals, so you can stock up and save. In our survey, 11 percent of stores were out of stock on an advertised special. If that happens to you, request a rain check.

### ▶ Beware of tricky signs

If you see, say, 10 containers of yogurt for \$10, know that you're rarely required to buy all 10 to get the discount. You can buy one for \$1.



#### HOW TO SAVE AT THE STORE

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





### Check your receipt

Overall, just 5 percent of our respondents said they had been overcharged in the past year. But the error rate at Shaw's, a New England chain, was twice as high.

Report frequent pricing mistakes to the Federal Trade Commission ([ftc.gov](http://ftc.gov)), your state attorney general, or your local consumer affairs office. Chains can be fined for repeated violations. The FTC recommends that retailers offer consumers a reward, such as giving them the item free if there's an overcharge. Many do just that, though they rarely volunteer the information. It's up to you to complain.

### Weigh the benefits of organics

Sales of organic products reached \$31.5 billion in 2012, according to the Organic Trade Association. They cost more than their conventional counterparts, but it's worth buying the organic fruit and vegetables that can carry pesticide residue even after washing. Consumer Reports recommends buying organic apples, bell peppers, celery, cherries, imported grapes, nectarines, peaches, pears, potatoes, red raspberries, spinach, and strawberries.

### Read nutrition labels

Shoppers tend to judge the healthfulness of products by the company they keep. Putting a creamy dip next to cut veggies, for instance, makes people feel less guilty about buying the dip. The truth is on the Nutrition Facts label. More chains are flagging healthier products with shelf tags based on Food and Drug Administration guidelines and advice from dietitians. Northeast chain Hannaford has a Guiding Stars program that assigns foods one to three stars (good, better, best) based on the amount of vitamins, minerals, fiber, and whole grains; the absence of fats and cholesterol; and added sodium and sugars. (Unrated products have less nutritional value per 100 calories.) Vons (in Southern California and Nevada) has a Simple Nutrition program; Giant (Washington, D.C., area) offers a Healthy Ideas program; and Publix (Southeast) has a Better Choice program.

### Learn about staying well

Heather Garlich, a spokeswoman for the Food Marketing Institute, says that in the 1980s, just two supermarket chains had a registered dietitian on staff. Today, 85 percent have a dietitian at the corporate level who helps influence merchandising and marketing decisions. Thirty percent have in-store dietitians. More than half of chains provide nutrition counseling.



STORE BRAND



NAME BRAND FROM REGIONAL CHAIN

## Where we saved

To compare prices, we made a grocery list and shopped for the items in various ways. We bought the same name-brand product for all but the store-brand category. (Store-brand and regional-chain prices are from Price Chopper, a mid-priced supermarket.) In each instance, we sought the best possible deal—choosing the most economical package size, using coupons, and swiping club cards. Package sizes differed, so we've listed cost based on unit prices.

**Bottom line.** Store brands and Costco vied for cheapest. Walmart.com came in third. Its shipping is free for orders of more than \$50 (\$4.97 for those less than \$50), with expedited service for as little as \$2.97. Walmart's online and in-store prices were largely the same. Walgreens, which lacks the product depth of even a small supermarket, was by far the priciest overall.

| Product                | Store brand    | Costco         | Walmart.com    | Regional chain | Walgreens      |
|------------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| Flour, lb.             | \$0.36         | \$0.48         | \$0.49         | \$0.60         | \$0.70         |
| Coffee, lb.            | 6.15           | 8.00           | 10.64          | 14.39          | 9.32           |
| Ketchup, qt.           | 1.59           | 1.26           | 2.48           | 2.99           | 3.99           |
| Laundry detergent, qt. | 1.00           | 3.67           | 3.83           | 4.26           | 4.90           |
| Tall kitchen bags, 100 | 13.11          | 8.99           | 16.55          | 10.83          | 25.76          |
| Toilet paper, roll     | 0.62           | 0.65           | 0.73           | 0.85           | 1.00           |
| Shampoo, pt.           | 3.80           | 3.00           | 4.80           | 4.44           | 5.70           |
| Diapers, 100           | 12.00          | 19.22          | 17.97          | 18.98          | 23.98          |
| Raisin bran, lb.       | 2.15           | 1.57           | 1.87           | 2.92           | 2.32           |
| Cranberry juice, qt.   | 1.74           | 1.31           | 1.57           | 1.97           | 1.14           |
| Ibuprofen, 100         | 4.40           | 4.61           | 6.48           | 7.50           | 12.98          |
| Dish detergent, qt.    | 2.67           | 2.73           | 3.11           | 3.20           | 5.11           |
| <b>TOTAL</b>           | <b>\$49.59</b> | <b>\$55.49</b> | <b>\$70.52</b> | <b>\$72.93</b> | <b>\$96.90</b> |

# Shop faster

Love supermarket shopping? We thought not. Here's how to speed up your trip and make it more efficient:

## Go mobile

Most chains have rolled out apps for iPhones and Android devices that let users create grocery lists, browse weekly circulars, view product photos, add manufacturers' coupons to an account, check off items placed in a virtual cart, scan bar codes of products at home so that they'll be added to your list, and get real-time prices. You can do many of those tasks online, too.

## Shop online

More than half of consumers buy groceries online at least occasionally, according to the Food Marketing Institute's 2012 Food Trends. Yet food purchases account for less than 3 percent of all transactions, and online supermarket shopping has been slow to grow. "Everyone has had to develop a shop-at-home option to counter the Amazon effect," says Craig Rosenblum of industry consultant Willard Bishop. "But it's a struggle for most retailers to pacify that need. They're struggling to find the best model and the right amount to charge."

Amazon.com and Walmart.com sell packaged goods, and Amazon has a fledgling service, Amazon Fresh, selling perishable foods in several West Coast markets. Walmart is testing fresh-food sales in a few cities as part of its Walmart To Go program. Nationwide online supermarkets include Netgrocer.com; FreshDirect is among regional ones. Many grocery chains have their own programs. At Safeway, customers can order online or by smart phone, but they must buy at least \$49 in merchandise. Delivery (about \$10 for orders of more than



\$150; about \$13 for less) is scheduled at a prearranged time. Other chains let you order online, then pick up the packed goods at the store.

## Try a meal to go

That won't save time in the store, but it will once you're home. More appealing fare plus consumers' desire for convenience, healthier options, and affordability help explain why shoppers bought 1.7 billion meals from food retailers in 2012. "It's like having a restaurant right in your kitchen," says chef Peter Dow of Harris Teeter in a video promoting the chain's Chef Prepared Dinner at Home lineup of ready-to-cook meals. Until now, Dow says, supermarket meals were of "average quality" and designed mainly for a long shelf life. Newer meals involve less processing and come in packaging that's more attractive and better at keeping food fresh.

## Check yourself out

At least 60 percent of supermarkets have one or more self-checkout stations to let people

scan, bag, and pay for groceries without a cashier. Theoretically, they also let you skip long lines. Fifty-six percent of our survey respondents used self-checkout during the past year, and 67 percent of them said it saved time. But about one-quarter of users complained that the checkout didn't work properly or that slowpokes held them up. One in five had a tough time figuring out how to operate the scanner and couldn't find an employee to help.

Kroger and its affiliates (Fred Meyer, Fry's, and King Soopers, among many others) have another way to get customers out fast. They have installed infrared cameras above entrances, exits, and checkouts that measure the heat radiated by shoppers' bodies. Higher heat means more customers. Information from the cameras is fed into a database that lets a manager know the number of checkouts that need to be open.

The cameras have reduced average customer waiting time to 26 seconds, Kroger claims. Before they were installed, the typical wait was 4 minutes.

## Top gripes about grocery shopping

Fifty-six percent of survey respondents had at least one complaint about their supermarket. Walmart Supercenter drew an especially high percentage of critics; Publix, in the South; Sprouts Natural Market, in the West; and Wegmans, in the East, had the lowest.

### TOO FEW OPEN CHECKOUTS

Average (all chains)

**19%**

Among the worst  
**Walmart**

How many complained

**53%**

### CONGESTED AISLES

Average (all chains)

**14%**

Among the worst  
**Market Basket**

How many complained

**35%**

### OUT-OF-STOCK ADVERTISED SPECIALS

Average (all chains)

**13%**

Among the worst  
**Pick 'n Save**

How many complained

**32%**

### LACK OF CHOICE

Average (all chains)

**8%**

Among the worst  
**Save-A-Lot**

How many complained

**27%**





# Ratings Supermarkets

In order of reader score.

Better ← → Worse  
 ● ● ● ● ●

| Store                  | Reader score | Survey results |             |        |             |
|------------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------|--------|-------------|
|                        |              | Service        | Perishables | Prices | Cleanliness |
|                        | 0 100        |                |             |        |             |
| Wegmans                | 88           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Trader Joe's           | 87           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Publix                 | 85           | ●              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| Costco                 | 84           | ○              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Sprouts Farmers Market | 84           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Market Basket          | 83           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Raley's                | 83           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Fareway Stores         | 83           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Stater Bros.           | 82           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| WinCo                  | 81           | ○              | ○           | ●      | ○           |
| Aldi                   | 81           | ●              | ○           | ●      | ○           |
| Hy-Vee                 | 81           | ●              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| Harris-Teeter          | 81           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| H-E-B                  | 81           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Whole Foods Market     | 80           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Hannaford              | 80           | ●              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| Fry's                  | 80           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Fred Meyer             | 80           | ○              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| King Soopers           | 79           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Meijer                 | 79           | ○              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Smith's Food & Drug    | 79           | ●              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| Schnucks               | 78           | ●              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| Ingles                 | 78           | ●              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| ShopRite               | 78           | ○              | ●           | ●      | ○           |
| Kroger                 | 77           | ○              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| Target/SuperTarget     | 77           | ○              | ○           | ●      | ●           |
| Save Mart              | 77           | ●              | ●           | ○      | ●           |

| Store                      | Reader score | Survey results |             |        |             |
|----------------------------|--------------|----------------|-------------|--------|-------------|
|                            |              | Service        | Perishables | Prices | Cleanliness |
|                            | 0 100        |                |             |        |             |
| Save-A-Lot                 | 77           | ●              | ○           | ●      | ○           |
| Giant (NJ, NY, OH, PA, WV) | 77           | ○              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| Big Y                      | 77           | ●              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| Piggly Wiggly              | 76           | ●              | ○           | ○      | ○           |
| Bi-Lo (GA, NC, SC, TN)     | 76           | ●              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| Weis                       | 76           | ○              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| IGA                        | 76           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Sam's Club                 | 76           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ○           |
| Ralphs                     | 76           | ○              | ○           | ○      | ●           |
| BJ's Wholesale Club        | 75           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ○           |
| County Market              | 75           | ●              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| Albertsons                 | 75           | ○              | ●           | ○      | ●           |
| Cub Foods                  | 75           | ○              | ●           | ○      | ○           |
| Giant (DC, DE, MD, VA)     | 74           | ○              | ○           | ○      | ●           |
| Winn-Dixie                 | 74           | ○              | ●           | ○      | ○           |
| Giant Eagle                | 73           | ○              | ●           | ●      | ●           |
| Vons                       | 73           | ○              | ○           | ○      | ●           |
| Price Chopper              | 73           | ○              | ●           | ○      | ○           |
| Safeway                    | 73           | ○              | ○           | ○      | ●           |
| Food Lion                  | 73           | ○              | ○           | ○      | ○           |
| Stop & Shop                | 72           | ○              | ○           | ●      | ○           |
| Jewel-Osco                 | 72           | ○              | ○           | ●      | ●           |
| Tops Markets               | 72           | ○              | ○           | ●      | ○           |
| Pick 'n Save               | 72           | ○              | ○           | ○      | ●           |
| Acme                       | 70           | ○              | ○           | ●      | ●           |
| Pathmark                   | 70           | ●              | ○           | ○      | ●           |
| Shaw's                     | 69           | ○              | ○           | ●      | ○           |
| Walmart Supercenter        | 67           | ●              | ●           | ●      | ●           |

## Guide to the Ratings

Ratings are based on 27,208 responses to a survey conducted by Consumer Reports National Research Center. Respondents told us about their experiences at one or two stores between January 2012 and June 2013. The survey reflects 48,076 visits to supermarkets, supercenters, warehouse clubs, and limited-assortment stores. The findings represent the experiences of our readers, not necessarily those of the general population. **Reader score** measures overall satisfaction with the shopping experience and isn't limited to the criteria listed in the table. A score of 100 would mean all respondents were completely satisfied, 80 would mean very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly well satisfied. Differences of fewer than 5 points are not meaningful. Scores for **service** (a combination of employee courtesy and checkout speed), **perishables** (the quality of meat and produce), **price**, and **cleanliness** are relative and reflect averages on a scale from Completely Satisfied to Completely Dissatisfied.



### SCANNER OVERCHARGES

Average (all chains)

**6%**

Among the worst  
**Shaw's**

How many complained  
**13%**

### OUT-OF-STOCK BASIC ITEMS

Average (all chains)

**6%**

Among the worst  
**Walmart**

How many complained  
**27%**

### SPOTTY PRICE LABELING

Average (all chains)

**6%**

Among the worst  
**Walmart**

How many complained  
**14%**

### CONFUSING LAYOUT

Average (all chains)

**6%**

Among the worst  
**Schnucks**

How many complained  
**12%**

# Untangling the bundle



**How to navigate the changing world of TV, Internet, and home phone service—and save money doing it**

**T**AKE A CLOSE LOOK at your cable bill. It's a confusing onslaught of charges, taxes, and add-on fees. With all of the fine print and opaque pricing, it's hard not to feel like you're getting ripped off. In the previous six years that the Consumer Reports National Research Center has conducted customer satisfaction surveys on in-home telecommunication services, providers have consistently rated below average among services we cover.

Cable TV service didn't start off that way. The industry began in the late 1940s as "community antenna television," or CATV—a way to capture over-the-air TV broadcasts where reception was good and distribute the signal to homes where reception was poor. Since then cable has evolved from a small, localized service into a gigantic industry offering not only hundreds of TV channels but also a telecommunications "triple play" of TV, telephone, and broadband Internet services.

Over the years, satellite providers and traditional telephone companies have gotten in on the game, but prices have continued to rise faster than the rate of inflation, despite the competition. According to a recent report by the Mintel Group, the average monthly cost of home communications services is \$154. In the course of a year, that works out to \$1,848—more than the average household spends on clothing, furniture, or electricity.

That's a lot of money for services that

consumers don't seem too happy with. Our latest survey of 81,848 customers of home telecommunications services found almost universally low ratings for value across services—especially for TV and Internet. Those who bundled the three services together for a discount still seemed unimpressed with what they were getting for their money. Even WOW and Verizon FiOS, which got high marks for service satisfaction, rated middling or lower for value, and out of 14 providers, nine got the lowest possible value rating.

What is it about home telecommunications that leaves such a sour taste in customers' mouths? When we asked CONSUMER REPORTS' Facebook followers to tell us their telecom stories, the few happy anecdotes of attentive service technicians and reliable service were overwhelmed by a tidal wave of consumer woe involving high prices, complicated equipment, and terrible service.

"Customer service was so bad it made

## BY THE NUMBERS

# 71%

Percentage of home Internet users who would switch providers if use of high-bandwidth services was restricted.



me really angry,” one poster said. “Slowest high-speed Internet on earth,” another said. “Cable television is a big waste of time and money,” another commented. “One of the best things my wife and I have done to enrich our marriage was to cancel cable.”

## ► Time of transition

Telecommunications services in America are in the midst of a major upheaval, and troubling signs are on the horizon for consumers. Customers increasingly prize broadband Internet as the most important information pipeline coming into their home. Yet the recent Verizon vs. FCC federal court decision threw out the FCC’s Open Internet rules.

Those rules kept Internet service providers (ISPs) from blocking, slowing down, or charging more for Netflix, Skype, and other services that can use lots of bandwidth. (See “Rethinking the Rules of the Internet,” on page 24.) The FCC must now attempt to revise its rules or choose to regulate ISPs, like telephone providers, as “common carriers.” Michael Powell, a former FCC chairman now heading the National Cable & Telecommunications Association, predicts “World War III” if the commission tries to do that. But if the FCC doesn’t act, consumers might see their access to streaming services controlled by their ISP.

The cable industry is also consolidating. In February, Comcast and Time Warner Cable announced their intention to merge, which would create an industry giant serving 32 percent of pay TV customers and 30 percent of broadband subscribers. Although the two don’t directly compete in any markets, such mega-mergers could indirectly harm consumers as fewer companies compete on price or invest in new technologies.

## ► Mixed news for hagglers

One positive finding from our survey is that consumers of telecommunications services are becoming more savvy negotiators. Four out of 10 respondents attempted to bargain with their service providers. Among the hagglers, 46 percent said their provider dropped the price by as much as \$50 per month, 31 percent got a new promotional rate, and 29 percent received additional premium channels. Even among those whose initial promotional rate had expired, 43 percent were able to negotiate a new discount.

But the high times for hagglers might be coming to an end. Cablevision CEO Jim Dolan has publicly stated that his company will stop offering repeat promotional discounts to subscribers. “The customer that has been bouncing from one company to another on promotional discounts has hit a dead end with us,” he said in an investor call last November.

Cablevision isn’t the only provider cracking down. In a recent attempt to negotiate with Verizon FiOS by phone, one of our staffers managed to get an activation fee waived but little else, despite being a new subscriber. The salesperson claimed that the company no longer aimed to compete on price. When reached for comment, a Verizon spokesman confirmed that the company strategy was not to compete on price but to offer higher-quality service. He claimed that it was not a change in policy and that sales representatives did



**“I just keep jumping through hoops to keep the promotional price, which, by the way, is higher than new customers would get.”**

—KATHLEEN M. Facebook

## Bargaining tactics that work

**Companies have been talking tough about cracking down on serial negotiators, but haggling has no downside. Here's how to do it right:**

### ► Ask for a better deal

It might sound obvious, but the first step is to call customer service and say your bill is too high. Ask whether you qualify for any promotions, including their best deal for new customers. Stress that you’ve been a loyal subscriber and want to stay—but only if they can do something for you.

### ► Fight price hikes

Even if your promotion has expired, ask whether you qualify for a new one: 43 percent of CONSUMER REPORTS subscribers in that situation negotiated a new discount. If you encounter a helpful representative, note his or her name and, if possible, extension. One Facebook contributor facing a \$20-per-month hike recontacted an agent he’d dealt with previously, who was able to cut that to \$5.

### ► Check out the competition

If your requests fall on deaf ears, see what other local providers are offering new subscribers, then ask your current provider to match it. Several Facebook followers said their company was willing to meet or beat a competitor’s price. Note that you might have to sign a contract to get the sweeter deal, so decide whether it’s worth being locked in.

### ► Threaten to disconnect

Still no luck? Call to say you’re planning to cancel your service because it costs too much. You’ll be directed to a customer-retention rep, who might be more willing to work with you. But be warned: Over the past few months, we’ve found that telecom providers are more likely to skip the discount and offer a small perk, such as faster Internet speed or a three-month freebie on a premium channel. If you’ve called a number of times in the past, you might not get concessions. One Facebook respondent said his provider offered nothing but thanks for his previous business and the comment, “Sorry you will be leaving.”

### ► Be ready to walk

At some point, you might have to switch if you can’t get what you want. Before you move to another company, check its website for the best deal and request a written quote that includes all equipment charges, taxes, and fees. Find out how long the promotional rate applies and what the bill will be after it expires. Once you put in the disconnect order, you might find that your former provider wants you back. One Facebook poster said his company offered him a better deal when he arrived to turn in his equipment, and another got a call offering the deal she wanted a day after she terminated her service.



have some latitude to offer incentives to customers on a case-by-case basis.

But even as cable companies and other telecom providers get tough, our advice is to bargain harder (see “Bargaining Tactics That Work,” on page 23). When all else fails, take inspiration from the increasing number of cord cutters and cord shavers out there who have eliminated or reduced the service they buy from cable and telecom providers. Comb through your bill (see box, below) and pare down your channel package if you don’t watch many of the channels you’re paying for. If you’re paying for faster Internet service, consider scaling back to a lower speed. Think about eliminating the monthly charge for multiroom DVR service. When you’ve decided how much you can do without, call your provider with the proposed list of cuts and see who’s willing to deal then.

## ► Anatomy of a bill

CONSUMER REPORTS analyzed typical telecom-service bills to pinpoint where you can and can’t save money. Here’s a composite bill breakdown:

**1.** Taxes and fees vary by state and might be different for cable vs. telecom providers. 911/E-911 fees for landlines and VoIP also vary by state and may be passed on to consumers. The Federal Universal Service Fund is a mandated fee for providers. The federal government collects it from phone-service providers, who are allowed to recover it from customers.

**2.** Here’s where you can wheel and deal. Customer-retention reps will often throw promotions at you in an effort to keep TV service as part of your triple play. They might cut the price of a package or give you “free” premium channels or equipment. But pay attention to the time limits on freebies. After a set period, often six to 24 months, you’ll be charged full price if you don’t cancel the extras. If you can’t get a price break, consider trimming service. Our analysis of two similar bills showed a savings of almost \$50 a month between a mid-tier and basic TV package.

**3.** The “sports surcharge” defrays the cost of sports networks such as MASN in the Washington, D.C., area, MSG in the New York metro area, and SportsNet LA in Los Angeles. Cable companies claim that they can’t keep up with the rising cost of sports networks, so it is passed on to you, whether you watch sports or not. But the charge usually doesn’t apply to basic TV packages, and certain providers now offer sports-free “economy” packages.


## Rethinking the rules of the Internet

What if the Internet were regulated like the phone company? Sounds like an odd question, but it could have implications for your rights as a consumer and what kind of service you could expect. In January a federal court decision, *Verizon vs. FCC*, struck down the FCC’s Open Internet Rules, which forbade Internet service providers (ISPs) from blocking, slowing down, or charging more for bandwidth-intensive streaming services such as Amazon Instant Video, Netflix, and Skype.

The court ruling was a significant blow to the concept of “net neutrality,” which holds that all traffic on the Internet should be treated equally. It threw ISPs into a regulatory limbo, because for the time being, the FCC seems to have no clear authority to stop traffic blocking or discrimination. At press time, the matter

was only getting murkier. Netflix called out several ISPs for slowing down its video streams, then announced that it would be voluntarily paying Comcast for faster access to that cable provider’s customers. The FCC is currently trying to revise its rules and might even decide to classify ISPs as “common carriers.” That would subject ISPs to the same regulatory scrutiny as utilities such as phone companies.

Whatever happens, keeping ISPs from meddling with Internet service seems to be a high priority for consumers. A recent CONSUMER REPORTS nationally representative poll found that 71 percent of home Internet users would attempt to switch providers if their ISP tried to block or slow down Internet service—that is, of course, assuming those customers had the option of switching to another provider.

|  <b>RAPID OVERCHARGE</b><br><b>TRIPLE-PLAY PACKAGE</b><br><i>a division of Phonycom Communications</i> |   |                 |
|---|---|-----------------|
| SELECTED RAPID-O SERVICES   |   | Charges         |
| <b>1</b>  | TV taxes and fees   | \$5.38          |
|   | Phone sales tax   | \$0.88          |
|   | E-911 fee   | \$0.70          |
|   | Federal Universal Service Fund  | \$0.39          |
| <b>TV</b>   |   |                 |
| <b>2</b>  | Rapid-O Silver TV package   | \$74.95         |
|   | HBO package   | \$14.95         |
|   | *Special six-month Rapid-O HBO promotion*   | \$-14.95        |
|   | DVR Service   | \$10.95         |
|   | Set-top box and remote  | \$6.95          |
|   | Two additional set-top boxes  | \$13.90         |
|   | *Special one-year Rapid-O box discount*   | -\$6.95         |
| <b>3</b>  | Surcharge for sports programming  | \$2.98          |
| <b>Internet</b>   |   |                 |
| <b>4</b>  | Rapid-O Basic online (15 Mbps)  | \$29.95         |
|   | Rapid-O Boost (with speeds up to 50 Mbps)   | \$0.00          |
|   | *Special Rapid-O promotion*   |                 |
| <b>Phone</b>  |   |                 |
| <b>5</b>  | Rapid-O Voice (includes online voice mail, call transfer, long-distance calling, and many other features) | \$29.95         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>  |   | <b>\$170.03</b> |

◀ Unavoidable

◀ Negotiable/  
cuttable

◀ Reprehensible/  
avoidable

◀ Negotiable/  
cuttable

◀ Negotiable/  
cuttable

**4.** Internet service is the current gotcha card for telecom providers. Fold it into a triple play and the price is reasonable, but go Internet-only and the price can jump \$30 per month. Hagglng might get you a free bandwidth boost, but don’t pay extra for speeds faster than 15 Mbps, which is fine for most online services.

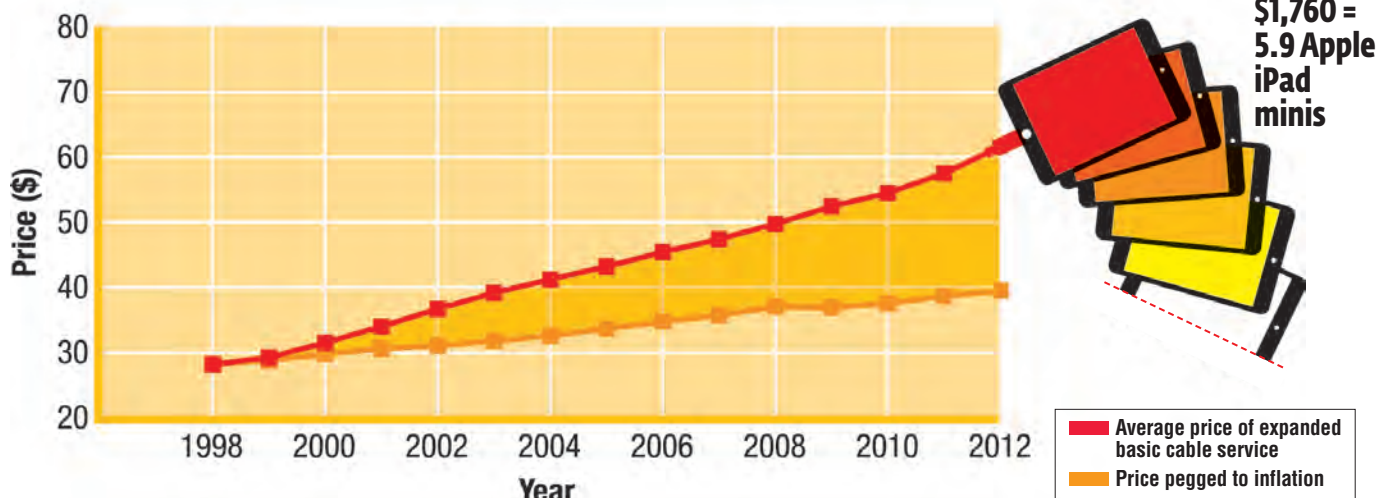
**5.** In our experience, phone service is the easiest to trim from a triple-play package. Providers might be willing to negotiate the price, but they rarely match the pricing of third-party VoIP providers such as Ooma, which costs only \$4 a month in taxes for the service after you buy the equipment.



## Cable vs. inflation

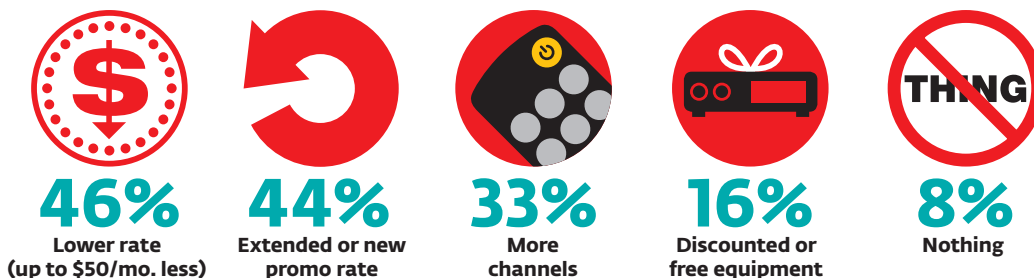
Every year since 1993, the Federal Communications Commission has published data on the average price of expanded basic cable television packages in the U.S. Expanded basic cable is a step up from the entry-level package offered by most providers. We took the FCC's pricing data from 1998 through 2012 (the most recent available), then compared that with what cable would have cost if it had been pegged

to the standard rate of inflation as defined by the Consumer Price Index (CPI). We found that over the course of those 15 years, the average American cable-watching household had forked over about \$1,760 more than it would have if the price of cable had matched inflation. That's enough to have purchased almost six iPad Minis for each household.



## So what do people get when they negotiate?

In a survey by the Consumer Reports National Research Center, we found that 92 percent of respondents who tried to negotiate for a better bundle package got some sort of deal. Here's a breakdown of the fruits of their haggling:



## Why viewers hate their cable boxes

If you could shop for your own TV set-top box, you probably wouldn't pick the frustrating device your TV service provider gave you. But you're still paying for the privilege of using it. We asked CONSUMER REPORTS' Facebook followers to tell us about their cable, satellite, and telecom-company boxes. They told us what annoyed them about the equipment but also mentioned a few devices that show changes for the better.

Here are some of the top complaints:

**Sluggish response.** Too many boxes are slow or unresponsive to commands, especially when changing channels or navigating menus. Having to regularly reboot the box isn't winning fans, either.

**Dated interfaces.** TVs, smart phones, and tablets all have slick, modern graphical menus. So why do so many cable boxes have clunky, text-based interfaces and unintuitive menus—some still in standard definition?

**Unreliable DVRs.** There's nothing like watching a cliffhanger or critical game that's missing the last few minutes of action.

**Energy waste.** New Energy Star guidelines help, but older cable boxes and DVRs sometimes suck more juice than a refrigerator.

### Boxes with promise

Certain new advanced systems offer better menus, voice control via smart phone, and the ability to watch shows on a phone or a

tablet. Many will also recommend TV shows and movies based on your viewing history.

**DirectTV Genie.** A whole-home DVR that uses one central DVR and up to three "mini" boxes that connect to other TVs in the house. It can record five shows at once.

**Dish Hopper.** A DVR that can record prime-time network shows automatically and let you skip commercials during playback.

**Comcast X1.** This whole-home system lets you record four shows while watching live TV. The company says an update this year will offer cloud-based storage in certain markets.

**TiVo.** People still love TiVo thanks to its standards-setting interface and built-in access to streaming services such as Netflix.

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## The cord cutter's triple-play

When people say they're cutting the cord on their telecom provider, they usually mean they're keeping Internet but dropping TV and phone service. But can you really duplicate the triple-play experience with just an Internet connection—and will it save you money?

**Savings vary.** The answer largely depends on what type of TV you like to watch. A \$35 antenna will get you free broadcast TV if reception is good in your area. If not, Aereo's \$8-per-month service offers local channels and an online DVR over the Internet in some areas (assuming that an upcoming Supreme Court case doesn't put it out of business). Services such as Netflix and Hulu Plus have thousands of movies and shows (although not always the latest) for about \$8 a month, but you might not be able to get series from HBO and other premium channels. Sports fans might be disappointed, too: ESPN's streaming services require a pay-TV subscription. And major leagues such as the NBA and MLB have online offerings, but each can cost upward of \$100 per year and pivotal games are often blacked out. All of those online services can be watched using a smart TV or a streaming-media device that costs \$100 or less. The home-phone part of a triple play is easily replicated with providers such as Ooma, which costs about \$4 in taxes and fees a month.

**Build your own bundle.** We got prices for triple-play service for three types of users, based on a cable company near our Yonkers, N.Y., headquarters. Then we did our best to match those packages with our own broadband-only triple plays. See if any work for you.

|                             | Cable triple play/Internet triple play  | Monthly cost |
|-----------------------------|---|--------------|
| <b>Bare bones</b>           | <b>CABLE</b> 63 TV channels; 15 Mbps broadband; home phone.   | <b>\$115</b> |
|                             | <b>INTERNET-ONLY</b> Over-the-air TV, free; 15 Mbps broadband service, \$60/month; 5,000 minutes of local and long-distance Ooma telephone service, \$4/month.  | <b>\$64</b>  |
| <b>TV &amp; movie lover</b> | <b>CABLE</b> 323 basic cable, sports, and premium channels; 15 Mbps broadband; home phone.  | <b>\$164</b> |
|                             | <b>INTERNET-ONLY</b> Aereo online TV service, \$8/month; 15 Mbps broadband, \$60/month; 5,000 minutes of local and long-distance Ooma telephone service, \$4/month; Netflix, \$8/month; Hulu Plus, \$8/month.                       | <b>\$88</b>  |
| <b>Sports fan</b>           | <b>CABLE</b> 323 basic cable, sports, and premium channels, plus NBA League Pass, \$189/year, and MLB Extra Innings, \$189/year; 15 Mbps broadband; home phone.   | <b>\$196</b> |
|                             | <b>INTERNET-ONLY</b> Over-the-air TV, free; 15 Mbps broadband service, \$60/month; 5,000 minutes of local and long-distance Ooma telephone service, \$4/month; NBA Game Time five-team League Pass, \$109/year, MLB.TV, \$110/year. | <b>\$82</b>  |



**"Cable started out at about \$11 per month. Just paid my current bill: \$155!!! You can offer all the channels you want but, I don't know about you, I can only watch one channel at a time."**

—PAM M. Facebook

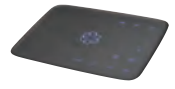
### Hardware



**RadioShack 15-254** set-top antenna (\$35)



**Roku 1** streaming-media player (\$50)



**Ooma Telo** (\$150, plus about \$50 in setup fees)

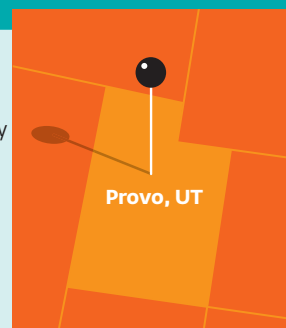
## Just how fast is Google Fiber?

Broadband speeds in the U.S. are pretty slow—averaging 9.8 megabits per second, according to the Internet research firm Akamai—compared with countries such as South Korea (22.1 Mbps) and Japan (13.3 Mbps). But a few cities have hit the broadband jackpot, thanks to Google's venture into residential Internet service. Kansas City (Kansas and Missouri); Provo, Utah; and soon Austin, Texas, are the first to get Google Fiber, a gigabit fiber-to-the-home service offering TV and Internet packages promising speeds much faster than conventional broadband.

"This one was a no-brainer for me," says Chris Vidmar, a chemical engineer who, along with his three roommates, was among the first Provo residents to get Google Fiber. They

signed up for a \$120-per-month TV and gigabit Internet plan, which is about the same as he was previously paying his cable company. Google also offers gigabit Internet service without TV for \$70 a month, and even free 5 Mbps Internet after a one-time installation fee.

Initial setup was quick and easy, but it took three additional visits by Google technicians to fix some bugs. The service promised up to 200 Mbps, although Vidmar's tests using Ookla Speedtest show that he's been averaging about 50 Mbps—still ample bandwidth for him and his roommates to stream four 1080p



videos simultaneously without a hiccup.

Vidmar says Google's wireless router lacks power, but his home has wired Ethernet ports in each room, a must to take full advantage of the service in a large house.

He notes that the TV service is missing perks such as AMC and access to HBO Go, but the DVR is excellent. "I think

anyone that can afford it would be foolish not to take part in this opportunity," he says.

Google plans to explore the possibility of expanding to 34 cities in nine metro areas, including Salt Lake City, Phoenix, San Antonio, and Atlanta.

# Ratings TV, phone, and Internet services

In order of reader score, within services.

## Overview

Here are our recommendations for the best triple-play bundles, TV service, Internet service, and home phone service.

### BEST BUNDLING CHOICES

#### 1 WOW

#### 3 Verizon FiOS

These two providers stand out for service satisfaction. WOW is a regional cable company serving several Midwestern and Southeastern states. Its high scores for all services make it a top choice in the areas it serves. FiOS received our highest rating for reliability across all three services. It also rated better than most major cable companies for TV picture and channel selection, and it got top marks for Internet speed and phone-call quality. But FiOS subscribers had more billing complaints than average.

### OTHER GOOD BUNDLING CHOICES

#### 2 SuddenLink

#### 4 Bright House Networks

If you aren't in an area served by WOW or FiOS, see whether you can get SuddenLink (serving 1.4 million home customers in the Midwest, California, and the Southeast) or Bright House Networks (serving 2.4 million in California, Florida, and a few other states). Both regional cable companies were more satisfying than most for bundles.

### TV SERVICE

#### 3 Verizon FiOS

#### 5 DirectTV

For picture quality, Verizon FiOS and DirectTV were rated tops. Both got positive marks for reliability, with Verizon getting a higher mark than its satellite rival. TV providers in general, including these, were rated low for value.

### INTERNET SERVICE

#### 3 Verizon FiOS

Verizon FiOS was among the more satisfying of national providers and one of only two companies (with Frontier) to earn top scores for reliability and speed. Most major cable companies earned middling scores. As with TV service, scores for value were low for most providers listed.

### PHONE SERVICE

#### 1 Ooma

#### 3 Vonage

Alternative VoIP service Ooma was the most satisfying and got our highest rating for value. Vonage was higher-rated than most and got favorable marks across the board. You have to buy equipment up front for both, but monthly costs are very low.

## Telecom bundles

Better ← → Worse

| Order | Type                | Provider              | Reader score <sup>1</sup> | Survey results                             |
|-------|---------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|--|
|       |                     |                       | 0 100                     | Service satisfaction Value Billing Support |
| 1     | cable               | WOW                   | 74                        | ● ○ ○ ●                                    |
| 2     | cable               | SuddenLink            | 71                        | ○ ○ ● ●                                    |
| 3     | fiber               | Verizon FiOS          | 69                        | ● ● ● ○                                    |
| 4     | cable               | Bright House Networks | 69                        | ○ ○ ● ○                                    |
| 5     | fiber <sup>2</sup>  | AT&T U-verse          | 65                        | ○ ● ○ ○                                    |
| 6     | cable               | Cox                   | 64                        | ○ ● ○ ○                                    |
| 7     | cable               | Cablevision/Optimum   | 64                        | ○ ● ● ●                                    |
| 8     | hybrid <sup>3</sup> | CenturyLink           | 63                        | ○ ● ● ●                                    |
| 9     | cable               | Charter               | 62                        | ○ ● ○ ○                                    |
| 10    | cable               | Comcast/Xfinity       | 59                        | ● ● ● ○                                    |
| 11    | hybrid <sup>3</sup> | Verizon               | 59                        | ● ● ● ●                                    |
| 12    | cable               | Time Warner Cable     | 59                        | ● ● ○ ○                                    |
| 13    | hybrid <sup>3</sup> | AT&T                  | 58                        | ○ ● ● ●                                    |
| 14    | cable               | Mediacom              | 56                        | ● ● ○ ○                                    |

<sup>1</sup> Differences in reader scores of fewer than 4 points are not meaningful. <sup>2</sup> Phone-company service that combines fiber-optic and copper cabling. <sup>3</sup> Hybrid plan combining its own landline and DSL Internet service with satellite TV from a different provider.

## Guide to the Ratings

Ratings are based on responses from CONSUMER REPORTS subscribers who completed our 2013 Annual Questionnaire online. **Reader score** reflects overall satisfaction and is not limited to the factors listed under survey results. A score of 80 would mean all respondents were very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly well satisfied; 40, somewhat dissatisfied. Displayed scores are rounded; providers are listed in order of precise overall score. **Telecom bundles** Ratings are based on 17,837 respondents' experiences with triple-play bundles (TV, Internet, and phone with long-distance service). **Service satisfaction** is based on the average of satisfaction scores for all services in the bundle. **Value** ratings represent scores on a scale from "very poor" to "excellent." The following are relative, reflecting differences from the average of all brands, with higher ratings reflecting fewer of these types of problems: **billing** (bills that were hard to understand or had errors)

## TV service

Better ← → Worse

| Order | Type               | Provider              | Reader score <sup>1</sup> | Survey results  |
|-------|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------|---|
|       |                    |                       | 0 100                     | Value Reliability Channel selection Picture Customer support Phone/online In-home |
| 1     | cable              | Armstrong             | 74                        | ○ ● ○ ● - -   |
| 2     | cable              | WOW                   | 74                        | ○ ● ● ● - -   |
| 3     | fiber              | Verizon FiOS          | 73                        | ● ● ● ● ○ ○   |
| 4     | cable              | Wave/Astound          | 72                        | ● ● ● ● - -   |
| 5     | satellite          | DirectTV              | 70                        | ● ● ● ● ○ ○   |
| 6     | satellite          | Dish                  | 70                        | ● ● ● ● ○ ○   |
| 7     | fiber <sup>2</sup> | AT&T U-verse          | 68                        | ● ○ ● ● ○ ○   |
| 8     | cable              | Bright House Networks | 68                        | ● ○ ● ● ● ●   |
| 9     | cable              | SuddenLink            | 65                        | ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○   |
| 10    | cable              | RCN                   | 65                        | ● ○ ○ ○ - -   |
| 11    | cable              | Cox                   | 64                        | ● ○ ○ ● ○ ○   |
| 12    | cable              | Cable One             | 63                        | ● ● ● ○ - -   |
| 13    | cable              | Cablevision/Optimum   | 63                        | ● ○ ○ ○ ○ ○   |
| 14    | cable              | Charter               | 59                        | ● ○ ● ○ ● ○   |
| 15    | Cable              | Comcast/Xfinity       | 59                        | ● ○ ○ ○ ● ●   |
| 16    | cable              | Time Warner Cable     | 58                        | ● ● ○ ○ ● ○   |
| 17    | cable              | Mediacom              | 54                        | ● ● ● ● ● ●   |

<sup>1</sup> Differences in reader scores of fewer than 4 points are not meaningful. <sup>2</sup> Phone-company service that combines fiber-optic and copper cabling.

and **support** (the need to contact different help lines or getting inconsistent help for different bundled services). **Internet service** Ratings are based on 59,629 responses from subscribers with a broadband home Internet account, **TV service** Ratings on 66,311 with TV service, and **phone service** Ratings on 52,130 with home-phone service (including long-distance calling). Providers are those for which we had sufficient data to score the service. A "—" indicates insufficient data to yield a score. In phone Ratings, **type** labels independent Internet-based services as VoIP (Voice over Internet Protocol). Cable and fiber providers also use VoIP. For Internet, TV, and phone services, **survey results** reflect average scores on a scale from "very poor" to "excellent" for **value** for money, service **reliability**, and the other attributes shown. Subscribers might not be representative of the general U.S. population. Additional service provider information from SNL Kagan.



# Internet service

| Order | Type               | Provider                 | Reader score <sup>1</sup> | Survey results |             |       |                  |         |
|-------|--------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------|------------------|---------|
|       |                    |                          |                           | Value          | Reliability | Speed | Customer support |         |
|       |                    |                          | 0                         | 100            |             |       | Phone            | In-home |
| 1     | cable              | WOW                      | 76                        | ○              | ●           | ●     | ●                | -       |
| 2     | cable              | Wave/Astound             | 74                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | -                | -       |
| 3     | fiber              | Verizon FiOS             | 74                        | ○              | ●           | ●     | ○                | ○       |
| 4     | fiber              | Frontier                 | 73                        | ●              | ●           | ●     | -                | -       |
| 5     | cable              | RCN                      | 71                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | -                | -       |
| 6     | fiber <sup>2</sup> | CenturyLink              | 70                        | ○              | ○           | ○     | -                | -       |
| 7     | cable              | Bright House Networks    | 70                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 8     | cable              | SuddenLink               | 70                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 9     | cable              | EarthLink on Time Warner | 70                        | ○              | ○           | ○     | -                | -       |
| 10    | cable              | Cable One                | 68                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | -                | -       |
| 11    | cable              | Cox                      | 68                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 12    | DSL                | TDS                      | 68                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | -                | -       |
| 13    | fiber <sup>2</sup> | AT&T U-verse             | 68                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 14    | cable              | Cablevision/Optimum      | 67                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |

# Phone service

| Order | Type  | Provider              | Reader score <sup>1</sup> | Survey results |             |              |         |
|-------|-------|-----------------------|---------------------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|---------|
|       |       |                       |                           | Value          | Reliability | Call quality | Support |
|       |       |                       | 0                         | 100            |             |              |         |
| 1     | VoIP  | Ooma                  | 88                        | ●              | ●           | ●            | ○       |
| 2     | VoIP  | WOW                   | 82                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | -       |
| 3     | VoIP  | Vonage                | 81                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 4     | VoIP  | SuddenLink            | 78                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | -       |
| 5     | VoIP  | MagicJack             | 78                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | -       |
| 6     | VoIP  | Bright House Networks | 77                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 7     | fiber | Verizon FiOS          | 76                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 8     | VoIP  | RCN                   | 75                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | -       |
| 9     | VoIP  | Cablevision/Optimum   | 75                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 10    | VoIP  | Cox                   | 74                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 11    | land  | Cincinnati Bell       | 73                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | -       |
| 12    | land  | Cox                   | 73                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 13    | land  | TDS                   | 73                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | -       |
| 14    | VoIP  | Charter               | 72                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |

| Order | Type      | Provider          | Reader score <sup>1</sup> | Survey results |             |       |                  |         |
|-------|-----------|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------|-------------|-------|------------------|---------|
|       |           |                   |                           | Value          | Reliability | Speed | Customer support |         |
|       |           |                   | 0                         | 100            |             |       | Phone            | In-home |
| 15    | DSL       | Cincinnati Bell   | 66                        | ○              | ○           | ○     | -                | -       |
| 16    | mobile    | Verizon           | 66                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | -       |
| 17    | mobile    | AT&T              | 65                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | -       |
| 18    | cable     | Charter           | 64                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 19    | DSL       | CenturyLink       | 64                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 20    | cable     | Time Warner Cable | 63                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 21    | DSL       | Verizon           | 62                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 22    | cable     | Comcast/Xfinity   | 62                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 23    | mobile    | Comcast/Xfinity   | 61                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | -       |
| 24    | DSL       | AT&T              | 61                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 25    | DSL       | Windstream        | 60                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 26    | DSL       | FairPoint         | 60                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | -                | -       |
| 27    | DSL       | Frontier          | 59                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 28    | cable     | Mediacom          | 58                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | ○       |
| 29    | satellite | HughesNet         | 50                        | ●              | ○           | ○     | ○                | -       |

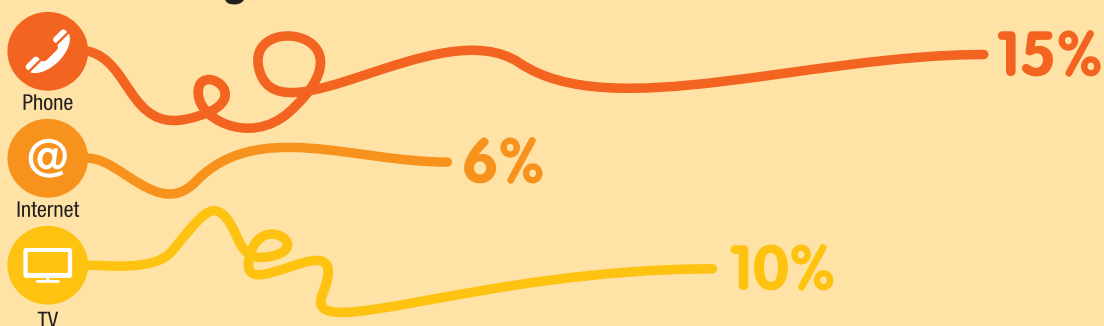
<sup>1</sup> Differences in reader scores of fewer than 5 points are not meaningful. <sup>2</sup> Phone-company service that combines fiber-optic and copper cabling.

| Order | Type               | Provider          | Reader score <sup>1</sup> | Survey results |             |              |         |
|-------|--------------------|-------------------|---------------------------|----------------|-------------|--------------|---------|
|       |                    |                   |                           | Value          | Reliability | Call quality | Support |
|       |                    |                   | 0                         | 100            |             |              |         |
| 15    | fiber <sup>2</sup> | AT&T U-verse      | 72                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 16    | fiber <sup>2</sup> | CenturyLink       | 72                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | -       |
| 17    | land               | Windstream        | 70                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 18    | land               | Verizon           | 70                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 19    | land               | FairPoint         | 70                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | -       |
| 20    | VoIP               | Time Warner Cable | 69                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 21    | fiber              | Frontier          | 69                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | -       |
| 22    | land               | CenturyLink       | 69                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 23    | VoIP               | Comcast/Xfinity   | 69                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 24    | land               | Frontier          | 68                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 25    | land               | AT&T              | 67                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | ○       |
| 26    | VoIP               | Mediacom          | 63                        | ○              | ○           | ○            | -       |

<sup>1</sup> Differences in reader scores of fewer than 6 points are not meaningful. <sup>2</sup> Phone-company service that combines fiber-optic and copper cabling.

## Which cord are we cutting?

We asked triple-play customers who had bundles for more than six months what service changes they were considering. Here's how many said they wanted to drop a service entirely.





# Your best lawn ever

Simple fixes to the most vexing lawn problems

If the lawn outside your window is giving you the blues, join the club. After a brutal winter walloped much of the country, our Facebook and Twitter feeds have been buzzing with lawn care woes from exasperated homeowners (#moles #baredspots, anyone?). Fortunately, many of the most common problems have fairly straightforward fixes, as you're about to read. And just in case your yard is already the envy of the block, our 10-page lawn package also features money-saving tips, the right and wrong ways to fertilize, plus results from our latest tests of mowers, tractors, and more.

**Problem** Lack of sunlight

**Solution** Look for lawn alternatives

Even so-called shade-tolerant varieties of turfgrass won't do well in dark corners of the yard. And pruning trees too aggressively to create sunlight can end up harming the tree. You're better off cutting your losses and replacing the sun-starved patch of grass with a shade-tolerant ground cover, such as bishop's hat or sweet woodruff. Or you might convert that part of the lawn with gravel or a perennial bed.



## Inside this section

### Lawn care

page 30

### Mowers and tractors

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### String trimmers

page 39





## Problem Crabgrass invasion

## Solution A multi-pronged defense

You're smart to tackle this pesky weed. Besides being an eyesore, crabgrass typically dies off at the first frost, promoting soil erosion. Applying corn gluten meal, a natural alternative to chemical herbicide, in early spring can help contain the problem. Follow with a spring fertilizer (see "The Do's and Don'ts of

Lawn Fertilizer," on page 32, for details). As the mowing season begins, don't cut the grass too short, since this can open the door again for crabgrass. Set the deck on your mower or tractor to around 3½ inches. Most decks have notches, not inches, so getting the height just right can take some trial and error.



## Problem Persistently thin, patchy grass

## Solution Get a soil test

Chronic lawn problems are often about the soil, not the actual grass. Having a soil test done is the best \$10 to \$15 you can spend. Home and garden centers sell DIY kits, but we recommend working with your local cooperative extension (use the national directory listed at [www.csrees.usda.gov/extension](http://www.csrees.usda.gov/extension)), whose experts will pinpoint your soil's

pH level and identify any missing nutrients. They'll also prescribe the best course of treatment, for example spreading limestone if the soil is acidic or sulfur if it's overly alkaline. It's prudent to do a soil test every few years, though if you just moved into a new home, you may want to do one annually, at least until the desired results start to come in.

## DID YOU KNOW?

Fuel with ethanol, sold at most gas stations, can cause small engines to break down prematurely by corroding their parts. You'll find ethanol-free fuel at home centers for \$5 to \$8 a quart. That's fine for string trimmers, leaf blowers, and other small devices that don't use a lot of fuel. But for mowers and tractors, the costs quickly become prohibitive. Regular fuel, with 10 percent ethanol, shouldn't damage these larger machines, as long as they're operated regularly. If your mower or tractor is going to sit dormant for an extended period, we recommend running the tank dry and draining the carburetor. And you definitely need to do this at the end of the season.

## Ways to save on lawn care



**1 Add compost.** This will improve your soil and eliminate pests and diseases, which means less money spent on fertilizer and water. Apply a quarter-inch of top-dressing compost once or twice a year, including right after your lawn has greened up. Going over the lawn with an aerator first will help mix the organic matter into the soil.

**2 Water wisely.** An established lawn needs about 1 inch of water per week in the growing season. A light daily watering will encourage shallow root systems. Instead, water thoroughly once a week, using a 1-inch deep empty tuna can as a makeshift measuring device. Early morning is best, say before 8 a.m., when evaporation rates are low and more water is absorbed into the soil. Also, don't be afraid to let grass turn brown during dry spells. Most species can easily go a month without water. It's time to water again when the grass goes from tan-brown to straw-colored.

**3 Mulch, don't bag.** Your grass clippings are a free source of slow-release fertilizer, so let the mower discharge the clippings back onto your grass

rather than bagging them. This can cut fertilizer costs by up to 30 percent. The only time to bag clippings is when your lawn is having a disease breakout, often signaled by irregular brown patches or rings in the lawn.

**4 Try low-maintenance grass.** Slow-growth, drought-resistant grass species save water, fertilizer, and time. Your local cooperative extension can help you find species that are right for your climate, soil, and lifestyle. Tall fescue is a low-maintenance alternative in the Northeast that can withstand heavy foot traffic, good for homes with active kids. Zoysia and seashore paspalum are easygoing newcomers in the South, while buffalo grass is popular west of the Mississippi.

**5 Maintain your mower or tractor.** Sharp blades cut cleaner and faster, and along with basic engine maintenance can reduce fuel costs by up to 25 percent. Dull blades also stress grass, making it more susceptible to disease. For best results, sharpen and balance the blade three times during the growing season.





## Problem Grub sightings

### Solution First assess, then address

These milky-white beetle larvae feed on grass roots, which can lead to dead spots in the lawn. Grubs also attract moles and raccoons. But a few here or there might not be a problem, says Kyle Wickings, a turfgrass entomologist at Cornell University. Ten larvae per square foot is a common threshold for treatment, however, this can vary by species. A very healthy lawn can tolerate higher densities.



If there are signs of damage, say dead or wilting turf, ask your cooperative extension for the best treatment, which will depend on the species of grub. Preventive insecticides are applied in spring, and curative

measures are done in the fall. In some regions, chemicals are illegal or must be applied by a certified pro. Organic alternatives, such as *Heterorhabditis* nematodes, are often effective.



## Problem Ugly bald spots

### Solution Start from scratch

Weeds love bare patches, so if you don't act quickly, they will. Spring's cool, wet weather is conducive to growing many types of turfgrass. Start by digging up the damaged section, plus 6 inches of surrounding, healthy lawn, cutting about 2 inches deep. Then level the soil and add a small amount of soil amendment,

such as a plant-based compost, and starter fertilizer. If you're using seed, cover it lightly with straw and keep the ground moist until germination. For sod, which is about 10 times more expensive than seed but tends to work better, cut a section to fit, press it into place, and water frequently until it takes root.

## The do's and don'ts of lawn fertilizer

**Most lawns need extra nutrients, but there's a right way to choose and use them, especially when kids and pets are present. Here's what to avoid, and what to do instead.**

**Don't** use fast-release chemical fertilizers. Though their high concentration of nutrients will green up your lawn quickly, they're tough on the environment and putting down too much could actually burn your grass.

**Don't** use bone meal, blood meal, and fish-meal fertilizers if you have pets. Dogs in particular find them very tasty, and ingestion can lead to vomiting and diarrhea. Some are also mixed with highly toxic insecticides.

**Don't** use starter fertilizer with weed control when trying to grow new grass. The seeds will not be able to germinate.

**Don't** ignore the instructions on the label, including the type of drop spreader it stipulates. That will help ensure that the fertilizer is appropriately dispersed over the lawn.

**Do** use slow-release fertilizers. They won't have an immediate impact, but that's better for the long-term health of your lawn. And using too much won't damage your grass. The same goes for organic fertilizers.

**Do** check the label. It will likely indicate how much nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium are contained, in that order. Use fertilizers with a higher nitrogen content in the spring and summer. Use a fall fertilizer that is higher in phosphorous and potassium for better root growth.

**Do** limit your fertilizer applications to twice a year. We recommend one around Memorial Day and a second after Labor Day.

**Do** keep fertilizers off areas where rain might carry them into storm drains and then into rivers and lakes.



**DIRTY TRUTH**  
A lush, verdant lawn starts with nutrient-rich soil.





**SMOOTH OPERATOR**  
Superb mulching for just \$350 helps make Toro's multispeed Recycler 20332 a CR Best Buy.

# Mowers & tractors

Our exclusive tests find time-saving choices

**W**ANT A GREAT-LOOKING lawn in less time, with less hassle? You're not alone: Faster mowing topped customer wish lists in a recent survey by Toro. And if you've yearned for a quieter walk-behind mower—or one that takes up less storage space—we have two that you might want to put on your list.

All zero-turn-radius riding mowers have rear-steering wheels that help them turn on a dime. Toro claims its TimeCutter SS4235 74627, \$2,600, also lets you blaze through mowing at a speedy pace. But you're likely to be disappointed with the results if you aren't into extra cleanup and even some reseeding. Our advice: Use the capable, 42-inch TimeCutter at more sedate speeds. Or save time by taking a bigger bite with each pass: Ariens' 523543, a CR Best Buy lawn tractor at \$1,400, offers wider, 46-inch mowing for far less.

Self-propelled, walk-behind mowers are what most people buy. A special engine helped Craftsman's 37545 gas mower, \$340, beat many electric mowers in our noise tests. Impressive mulching is part of that package, though using it for bagging and side-discharging clippings yielded mediocre results. Toro's 20339, \$380, saves space

by standing on end when it's stored. Stellar mulching also helped put it at the top of our scores for single-speed mowers, which trade the convenience and versatility of multiple ground speeds for a lower price.

Six long weeks of testing at our Fort Myers, Fla., test site also yielded other hassle-cutting technology. But some of those perks come at a stiff price in dollars and performance. Here are the details:

## Toro's TimeCutter shows the limits of speedier mowing

**Toro says customers** who traded their lawn tractors for the brand's zero-turn-radius riders sliced 45 percent from their mowing time, in part by speeding along at 5 mph instead of the 3.5 mph that we recommend—all with decent cut quality.

We pitted Toro's \$2,600 TimeCutter SS4235 74627 rider against John Deere's \$1,800 D125 lawn tractor at our test site. The Toro rider was, indeed, faster than the Deere tractor, which tops out at just 4 mph. And both mowed evenly even at higher speeds. But that's where the good news ends for those in a hurry.

Both 42-inch machines left ugly clumps on the 3½-inch-high cut grass, especially the Deere. The Toro's rear wheels, which steer by turning in opposite directions, also caused scalping and bare spots, a risk with any zero-turn-radius rider, especially at higher speeds. We've also found lever-controlled riders such as the Toro more difficult to control, especially on steep

slopes—yet another reason to resist putting the pedal to the metal when mowing.

**Bottom line.** If you hate mowing as much as the dozens of homeowners who said so in a recent Twitter search, consider saving time with a wider-cutting machine. Husqvarna's 48-inch YTH24K48FT tractor, a CR Best Buy at \$1,900, can also race back to the garage or shed in the transport mode at a speedy 7 mph once mowing is done.





**Traction with some trade-offs.** All-wheel drive isn't just for SUVs: Husqvarna's multispeed HU725AWD, \$450, and single-speed HU675AWD, \$300, now include it for hills. Both walk-behind mowers delivered added grip on steeper slopes where others lost traction. But they're also more difficult to steer and more challenging to maneuver with the engine off. Any of our 17 rear-drive picks are fine for most hills and mow better overall.

**Electrics with sticker shock.** Cub Cadet's \$4,000 battery-powered RZT-S 42Zero rider offers a 2-hour run time and slick handling with a steering wheel instead of the usual levers. Impressive mowing also helped it score well in our tests, though a

## A self-propelled gas mower is the best choice for most lawns.

relatively high repair rate in our surveys has kept Cub Cadet riders and tractors out of our picks. What's more, replacing this Zero's four batteries will set you back about \$880 plus labor once they can no longer be recharged. Friendly features and relatively capable mowing also placed the \$500 Ego LM2000 in the top spot among cordless walk-behind mowers, though others came

close for up to \$150 cheaper.

**When less really is less.** Small rear-engine riders are still around and save some space over larger tractors and riders. Cub Cadet's 30-inch CC30 costs \$1,300 and tops this group. But bigger and better tractors cost little more and take up only a bit more room. And if you think MTD's \$150 1000023290 gas push mower sounds like a deal, think again: You get a no-frills model that delivered so-so mowing, can't mulch or bag, and has wheels that you must unbolt and reattach to raise or lower its deck.

### How to choose

A self-propelled gas mower is the best choice for most lawns. Consider a push gas or an electric mower for smaller, flatter areas. And unless you love the exercise, figure on a lawn tractor or riding mower if your lawn is a half-acre or more. Here's what else to think about as you shop:

**Consider your mowing.** Many mowers handle some mowing modes better than others. For instance, Ariens' deep-deck, self-propelled walk-behind mowers were superb at bagging clippings yet only so-so at sending them out the side. And unless you're ready to spend hundreds of dollars for a mulching and bagging kit, we suggest buying a lawn tractor or riding mower based mainly on how well it scored in our side-discharge tests.

**Check features and controls.** Many tractors and riders include an infinitely variable, foot-controlled hydrostat transmission, though the mechanical drive on Ariens' low-priced 523543 works similarly and feels almost as smooth. Among walk-behind mowers, we also like Honda's Smart Drive, which puts two control tabs beneath your thumbs, and Toro's Personal Pace system, which lets you speed up by pushing in the handlebar. Both have an edge on the less smooth, pivoting speed control on the Cub Cadet SC 500 EZ (called MySpeed), Troy-Bilt TB-360 (In-Step), and Craftsman 37591 (My Stride).

**Look beyond the specs.** Mower brands often tout larger or higher-torque gas engines. But as with horsepower for riders, neither ensures better mowing. And don't assume more blades are better. Having two on Kobalt's \$400 KM2040X-06 cordless walk-behind mower yielded middling results. Lawn tractors and riders with three blades also tend to trade cut quality for added mowing width, though one—the 54-inch, \$3,300 Cub Cadet RZT L54—proved to be this year's exception.

### Features that count: Gas and electric mowers



**ONE PUSH DOES IT** A single lever adjusts cut height on more top picks.

**Easy starting.** Most gas mowers need no priming or choking. Exceptions: Toro (B3) and Yard-Man (B5).

**Blade-brake clutch.** Stops only the blade when you release the handle so that you don't need to restart the engine when clearing debris. On Ariens (A12), Honda (A4), and Toro (A6).

**Premium engine.** These have overhead valves for added efficiency. On all gas models except Snapper (A11, B4), Toro (A6, A8, B1), Troy-Bilt (A7, A10), and Yard Machines (C3).

**One-lever height adjustment.** Raises and lowers all four wheels at once. On the gas Ariens (A12, A14, C5), Craftsman (A17), Snapper (A9, A13), Troy-Bilt (A10, A16), and Yard-Man (B5), and on all electric models except Toro (D7).

**Rear-wheel drive.** Adds traction over front-drive uphill and when bagging. On all

self-propelled mowers except Snapper (A11, B4), Toro (B1, B2, B3), and Troy-Bilt (A7). Certain new Husqvarnas are all-wheel drive.

**Electric starting.** A battery eliminates pull-starting gas engines. On the Ariens (A14), Cub Cadet (A15), Honda (A2), Lawn-Boy (B6), Snapper (A13), Troy-Bilt (A7), and Yard-Man (B5).

**Same-sized wheels.** Models so equipped are easier to tip back than those with high rear wheels, which are found on Craftsman (A17, C2), Ego (D1), Kobalt (D6), Lawn-Boy (C4), Neuton (D4), Snapper (A11), Toro (B1, B3), Troy-Bilt (A16), and Yard Machines (C3).

**Washout port.** Accepts a hose atop the deck for cleaning built-up clippings beneath. On all self-propelled models except Ariens (A12, A14), Honda (A1, A2, A4, A5), Lawn-Boy (B6), and Yard-Man (B5). Among push models, only on Craftsman (C2) and Cub Cadet (C1). No electric models have it.



## Overview

Our recommended models and CR Best Buys score highly in our tests and come from reliable brands (where data are available). We focus below on top picks with special strengths, value, or both.

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

✓ **Recommended** These offer top performance and often specific strengths.

### TOP SELF-PROPELLED MOWERS

**A3 Toro** \$520 **CR Best Buy**

**A5 Honda** \$400 **CR Best Buy**

**A6 Toro** \$400

**A7 Troy-Bilt** \$340 **CR Best Buy**

**B1 Toro** \$380

Paying more for **A3** buys an aluminum deck with stellar mowing in all three modes. Among the other multispeed mowers, choose **A5** for its bagging, **A6** for its blade-brake clutch, and **A7** for its low price and electric start. **B1** tops our single-speed picks and offers unique stand-up storage. Also consider the all-wheel-drive Husqvarna HU725AWD and HU675AWD for steep slopes, the quiet Craftsman 37545 if you'd rather not wear ear protection.

### FOR SMALLER OR FLATTER LAWNS

**C1 Cub Cadet** \$250 **CR Best Buy**

**C2 Craftsman** \$220 **CR Best Buy**

**D2 Black & Decker** \$400

**D3 Black & Decker** \$450

**E1 Black & Decker** \$240

Among push gas mowers, choose **C1** for its consistently smooth mowing, **C2** if you mostly side-discharge clippings. Among battery mowers, pick **D2** for its impressive mulching, **D3** for its driven wheels and smoother side-discharging. Willing to live with a cord? **E1** is still a cut above the others in this group.



## Ratings Lawn mowers

**Recommended models only** From 90 tested.

| Rec. Rank | Brand & model  | Price | Specs                                       | Overall score                 | Test results   |
|-----------|--|-------|---|-------------------------------|--|
|           | Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model. |       | Deck size (in.)<br>Engine cc/<br>volts/amps | 0<br>100<br>P   F   G   V   E | Mulching<br>Bagging<br>Side-discharge<br>Handling<br>Ease of use |

### A GAS SELF-PROPELLED, MULTISPEED Best for most lawns, these blend ease and performance.

|      |                             |       |    |       |    |   |   |   |   |   |
|------|-----------------------------|-------|----|-------|----|---|---|---|---|---|
| ✓ 1  | Honda HRX217VKA HRX217K4VLA | \$600 | 21 | 190cc | 83 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 2  | Honda HRR2169VLA            | 500   | 21 | 160   | 83 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 3  | Toro 20381 20382            | 520   | 21 | 159   | 82 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 4  | Honda HRR2169VYA            | 480   | 21 | 160   | 82 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 5  | Honda HRR2169VKA            | 400   | 21 | 160   | 81 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 6  | Toro Recycler 20333 20334   | 400   | 22 | 190   | 75 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 7  | Troy-Bilt TB-280ES 12AGA26G | 340   | 21 | 190   | 73 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 8  | Toro Recycler 20332         | 350   | 22 | 190   | 73 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 9  | Snapper SP90 12AVC37Z       | 350   | 21 | 175   | 72 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 10 | Troy-Bilt TB-320 12AVC35U   | 330   | 21 | 190   | 72 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 11 | Snapper SP80 12AVB27W       | 300   | 21 | 190   | 71 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 12 | Ariens 911177               | 460   | 21 | 159   | 71 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 13 | Snapper 12ALC37Y788         | 400   | 21 | 175   | 71 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 14 | Ariens Razor 911179 911175  | 400   | 21 | 159   | 70 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 15 | Cub Cadet SC 500 EZ         | 500   | 21 | 159   | 70 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 16 | Troy-Bilt TB-360            | 370   | 21 | 190   | 70 | • | • | • | • | • |
| ✓ 17 | Craftsman 37591             | 380   | 21 | 159   | 70 | • | • | • | • | • |

Ratings continued on next page

## Best blowers for leftover leaves (and cleaner walks)

### PREMIER PLUG-IN

**Toro Ultra Blower Vac 51609, \$75.** This latest version of a longtime winner matches gas blowers for sweeping hefty piles and loosening pesky fragments. Superb vacuuming, infinitely variable speeds, and a tough metal impeller add to its appeal.

### TOP VALUES FOR LARGER YARDS

**Husqvarna 125B, \$150.** A gas handheld blower-only machine, it offers the most sweeping and loosening power for the price. It should also meet most local noise regulations for gas mowers.

**Ryobi RY08420, \$200.** A gas backpack

blower at a handheld price? Yes—and one with stellar sweeping and loosening power to boot. But wear hearing protection (and warn the neighbors about the noise!).

**Powermate P-WB-163150, \$350.** This wheeled blower costs about half the price of most models and delivers superb sweeping. Its only trade-off is a bit less loosening power than the best we tested.

### KINDEST TO THE NEIGHBORS

All of these blowers scored Excellent for noise at 50 feet and should meet all noise regulations:



Echo PB-250LN

**Stihl BGE 61, \$110.** A top corded handheld model that gives up little in overall performance.

**Echo PB-250LN, \$170.** Among the quietest handheld blowers, with superb loosening power for pesky fragments.

**Husqvarna 356BT, \$480.** This gas backpack blower doesn't scrimp on power, though you pay for it.

**Troy-Bilt TB672, \$400.** The quietest wheeled blower we tested—and among the lowest-priced.

# Ratings Lawn mowers

Recommended models only From 90 tested.

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

| Rec. | Rank | Brand & model  | Price | Specs           | Overall score         | Test results |          |         |                |             |
|------|------|--|-------|-----------------|-----------------------|--------------|----------|---------|----------------|-------------|
|      |      | Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model. |       | Deck size (in.) | Engine cc/ volts/amps |              | Mulching | Bagging | Side-discharge | Handling    |
|      |      |  |       |                 |                       |              |          |         |                | Ease of use |

## B GAS SELF-PROPELLED, SINGLE-SPEED Suitable for most lawns, but they sacrifice flexibility.

|   |   |                       |       |    |       |    |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|-----------------------|-------|----|-------|----|---|---|---|---|
| ✓ | 1 | Toro 20339            | \$380 | 22 | 190cc | 67 | ● | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 2 | Toro 20370            | 280   | 22 | 149   | 66 | ● | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 3 | Toro 20371            | 300   | 22 | 149   | 65 | ● | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 4 | Snapper SP70 12A-A27X | 280   | 21 | 190   | 63 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 5 | Yard-Man 12A-18M7     | 250   | 19 | 173   | 60 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 6 | Lawn-Boy 10734        | 330   | 21 | 149   | 60 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

## C GAS PUSH For smaller, flatter lawns and for trimming larger ones.

|   |   |                          |     |    |       |    |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|--------------------------|-----|----|-------|----|---|---|---|---|
| ✓ | 1 | Cub Cadet SC100 11A-A92J | 250 | 21 | 159cc | 71 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 2 | Craftsman 37432          | 220 | 21 | 149   | 67 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 3 | Yard Machines 11A-B96N   | 240 | 21 | 190   | 67 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 4 | Lawn-Boy 10730           | 240 | 21 | 149   | 65 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 5 | Ariens Razor 911173      | 350 | 21 | 159   | 65 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

## D ELECTRIC BATTERY Best for lawns small enough to mow within the 15- to 45-minute run time.

|   |   |                                 |     |    |     |    |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---------------------------------|-----|----|-----|----|---|---|---|---|
| ✓ | 1 | Ego LM2000                      | 500 | 20 | 56V | 62 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 2 | Black & Decker CM1936 CM1936ZF2 | 400 | 19 | 36  | 59 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 3 | Black & Decker SPCM1936         | 450 | 19 | 36  | 59 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 4 | Neuton CEM6X4X                  | 400 | 19 | 36  | 59 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 5 | Black & Decker CMM1200          | 430 | 19 | 24  | 58 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 6 | Kobalt KM1940-06                | 350 | 19 | 40  | 58 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
| ✓ | 7 | Toro 20360                      | 420 | 20 | 36  | 56 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |

## E ELECTRIC CORDED Best for smaller, more open lawns where the cord isn't a concern.

|   |   |                      |     |    |     |    |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|----------------------|-----|----|-----|----|---|---|---|---|
| ✓ | 1 | Black & Decker MM875 | 240 | 19 | 12A | 56 | ○ | ○ | ○ | ○ |
|---|---|----------------------|-----|----|-----|----|---|---|---|---|

1 Self-propelled electric. 2 Mulching and bagging only.



D1 Ego

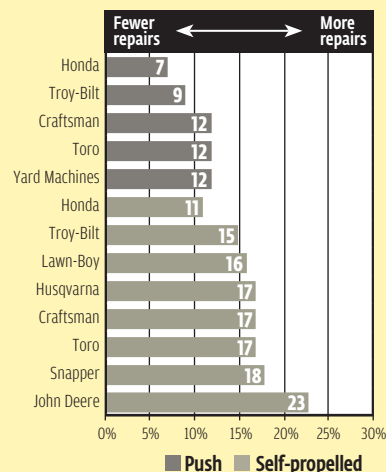
D3 Black & Decker

## Most and least reliable

### 32,800 readers sound off

Choosing a mower brand with a good repair history can improve your odds of getting a reliable model. That's why we survey thousands of readers each year about their experiences. For the self-propelled mowers most people buy, Honda was among the more reliable brands, and John Deere was among the least reliable. (No push-mower brand stood out either way.)

#### LAWN MOWERS



Source: Consumer Reports Annual Reliability Survey. Our findings are based on 26,727 self-propelled and 6,111 push mowers bought new between 2009 and 2013. Differences of fewer than 6 percentage points aren't meaningful, and data are adjusted to eliminate differences linked solely to mower age. Models within a brand may vary, and changes in design or manufacture may affect future reliability.

## And the worst mowers we tested are ...

Even the lowest-rated tractors and riders we tested still performed passably. But several mowers left ugly clumps in their wake and scored just 40 or less:

▶ **Murray M22500, \$170** This gas push mower can't bag, was just mediocre in the side-discharge mode, and left lots of visible clippings when mulching. Want to change cutting height after a long vacation? Grab a wrench—you'll need it to unbolt and reattach all four wheels.

▶ **Earthwise 50120, \$160** Sure, it's cheap even for a plug-in mower. But it's hardly a bargain, with subpar mulching and bagging. Side-discharging wasn't much better, with lots of leftover clippings.

▶ **Earthwise 60318, \$380** Most self-propelled cordless mowers cost more, and for good reason. This one clogged and left clippings when bagging and was hard to maneuver.



Earthwise 60318





**FINGERTIP CONTROL**  
Pull-up tabs adjust deck height on the top John Deere (A1).

## Features that count: Tractors and riders

**High-back seat.** Adds back support. On all shown lawn tractors except John Deere (A8), and on all zero-turn-radius riders except Husqvarna (C6). Of the rear-engine riders, only Troy-Bilt (D1) has it.

**Infinite drive speeds.** Let you vary speed smoothly without the shifting required for gear- or disk-drive systems. On all tractors and riders except Troy-Bilt (D1).

**Electric power takeoff.** Engages the blades with an electric switch instead of a manual lever. Found on all shown lawn tractors and riding machines except Ariens (A10), Craftsman (A9, A11), John Deere (A6, A8), Snapper (A7), and Troy-Bilt (D1).

**Easy mode changes.** Most models require a blade change to mulch, and some to bag. John Deere (A4, A6, C3), Snapper (A3), and Troy-Bilt (C2, D1) do not. The Toro (C5) mulches without the need to change blades, but adding the mulch plate can be a hassle.

**Visible fuel gauge.** Lets you check fuel levels without the need to leave your seat. On Craftsman (A9, B3, B4, C4), Husqvarna (A2, B2, C6), John Deere (A6, A8, B1), Snapper (A3, A7), Toro (C5), and Troy-Bilt (C1, C2, D1).

**Washout port.** Accepts a hose atop the deck for cleaning built-up clippings beneath. On all tractors and riders except Craftsman (A9), John Deere (A5), and Troy-Bilt (D1).

### ► CLOSE-UP

## Can this mower be saved?

User reviews and tweets are full of gripes about mowers that don't start or mow like they used to. When does tossing a mower make more sense than fixing it? Our latest survey of almost 30,000 subscribers (see "Repair or Replace?" February 2014) suggests ditching most broken mowers after six years, based on typical prices and repair costs. But the more you spend, the longer it usually pays to repair what you have, especially for pricier zero-turn-radius riders.

Here are some common problems that are cheap and easy to repair and prevent. A rule of thumb: Replace any machine if repairing it will cost more than 50 percent of the cost of a comparable new model.

**Problem: The mower won't start.** Old gasoline that oxidized over the winter is often to blame. Try removing it and adding fresh fuel. Always add a stabilizer to gas before fueling; certain additives might also help keep ethanol from harming internal parts. Changing the spark plug and air filter—plus the fuel filter on riders—annually also helps improve starting and running. Have an electric start? Be sure to trickle-charge the battery between mowing seasons.



**KEEPING THE FLAME** Yearly spark-plug changes help mower engines start more easily and run more efficiently.

**Problem: Uneven mowing with clumps.** Sharpen the blade three times a year (about \$10). And hose out the underside of the deck after every mowing to keep built-up clippings from compromising airflow. For tractors, also check that the deck is level if mowing is uneven.

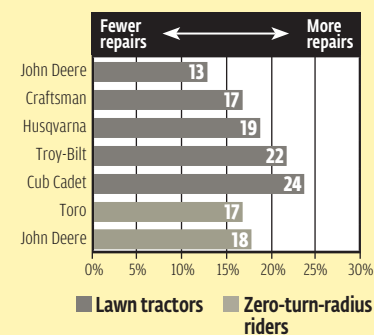
**Problem: Your mower needs a push.** For self-propelled mowers, check the belt that transfers power from the engine or motor to the wheels. Replace it if it's broken, slipping, or showing cracks or other damage. Also ensure that the drive system is adjusted to fully engage.

## Most and least reliable

### 16,000 readers talk tractors and riders

Choosing a lawn tractor or zero-turn-radius riding mower from a brand with a good repair history can improve your odds of getting a reliable model. That's why we survey thousands of readers each year about their experiences. The results show that John Deere was among the more reliable tractor brands and on a par with Toro among riders. We lacked enough responses to include Cub Cadet among rider brands, but data we have suggest that it would be repair-prone.

#### LAWN TRACTORS



Source: Consumer Reports Annual Reliability Survey. Our findings are based on 14,774 tractors and 1,590 zero-turn-radius riders bought new between 2009 and 2013. Differences of fewer than 6 percentage points aren't meaningful, and data are adjusted to eliminate differences linked solely to age. Models within a brand may vary, and changes in design or manufacture may affect future reliability.

## Guide to the Ratings

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



A1 John Deere



A10 Ariens



C1 Troy-Bilt

## Overview

Our recommended models and CR Best Buys score highly in our tests and come from reliable brands (where data are available). We focus below on top picks with special strengths, value, or both.

- ✓ **CR Best Buy** These blend value and performance, and are recommended.
- ✓ **Recommended** These offer top performance and often specific strengths.

## TRACTORS THAT TOP OUR LIST

- A1 John Deere \$3,000
- A2 Husqvarna \$2,300 **CR Best Buy**
- A7 Snapper \$1,600 **CR Best Buy**
- A10 Ariens \$1,400 **CR Best Buy**

Top scores and quality features make **A1** well worth its price. Three 46-inch models for less: **A2** offers tool-free blade changes, **A7** a large, rear-mounted fuel tank and a much lower price. **A10** costs even less and has a foot-control transmission that feels like a pricier hydrostat drive; its maker is addressing early complaints about front-wheel alignment with a new steering link.

## FOR WIDER MOWING

- B1 John Deere \$2,000 **CR Best Buy**
- B2 Husqvarna \$1,900 **CR Best Buy**
- B4 Craftsman \$2,000 **CR Best Buy**

**B1** and **B2** offer similar performance and a 48-inch cut; the Husqvarna can reach a blistering 7 mph when you're done mowing and want to get back to the garage or shed. **B4** mows even wider and bags even better.

## FOR TIGHTER TURNS OR LIMITED STORAGE SPACE

- C1 Troy-Bilt \$2,300 **CR Best Buy**
- D1 Troy-Bilt \$1,000

Zero-turn-radius riders offer rear-steering wheels that let them turn on a dime, though most are difficult to control on steep slopes. Among them, **C1** offers superlative mowing at a relatively low price. Several models from Cub Cadet trade the usual control levers and caster-style front wheels for a steering wheel and steerable front wheels, which make them more stable on slopes. But a high repair rate in our surveys has kept the brand off of our list of picks. Also consider the 30-inch **D1** if every inch of storage space counts.

# Ratings Tractors and riders

Recommended models only From 54 tested.

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

|      |      | Brand & model  | Price   |               | Specs           | Overall score     | Test results  |                |          |         |          |             |
|------|------|--|---------|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|---|----------------|----------|---------|----------|-------------|
| Rec. | Rank | Similar models, in small type, are comparable to tested model. | Machine | Bag/mulch kit | Deck size (in.) | Engine power (hp) | <div><div></div><div>0100</div><div>P   F   G   V   G   E</div></div> | Side-discharge | Mulching | Bagging | Handling | Ease of use |
|      |      |  |         |               |                 |                   |   |                |          |         |          |             |

## A LAWN TRACTORS Best for most large lawns; models with tight turning are footnoted.

|   |    |                              |         |             |    |    |    |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|----|------------------------------|---------|-------------|----|----|----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| ✓ | 1  | John Deere X300              | \$3,000 | \$500/\$150 | 42 | 19 | 78 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 2  | Husqvarna YT46LS             | 2,300   | 320/50      | 46 | 22 | 76 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 3  | Snapper NXT2346              | 2,800   | 430/80      | 46 | 23 | 76 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 4  | John Deere X310              | 4,000   | 520/90      | 42 | 19 | 75 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 5  | John Deere X304 <sup>1</sup> | 3,600   | 520/90      | 42 | 17 | 75 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 6  | John Deere D125              | 1,800   | 350/50      | 42 | 20 | 75 |  | ● | ● | ○ | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 7  | Snapper 960440007            | 1,600   | 300/NA      | 46 | 20 | 74 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 8  | John Deere D110 D120, D130   | 1,700   | 340/30      | 42 | 20 | 74 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 9  | Craftsman 28856 <sup>1</sup> | 1,600   | 310/53      | 42 | 24 | 72 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 10 | Ariens 523543                | 1,400   | 300/50      | 46 | 20 | 71 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 11 | Craftsman 28885              | 1,300   | 410/53      | 46 | 21 | 70 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ○ |

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

|   |   |                              |       |        |    |    |    |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|------------------------------|-------|--------|----|----|----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| ✓ | 1 | John Deere D140 D150 D160    | 2,000 | 350/35 | 48 | 22 | 69 |  | ○ | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 2 | Husqvarna YTH24K48FT         | 1,900 | 350/50 | 48 | 24 | 69 |  | ○ | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 3 | Craftsman 28861 <sup>1</sup> | 2,800 | 410/53 | 54 | 26 | 68 |  | ○ | ○ | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 4 | Craftsman 28858 <sup>1</sup> | 2,000 | 410/53 | 54 | 26 | 68 |  | ○ | ○ | ● | ● | ● |

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

|   |   |   |       |         |    |    |    |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|-------|---------|----|----|----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| ✓ | 1 | Troy-Bilt Mustang 42" 17WFCACS            | 2,300 | 430/50  | 42 | 22 | 82 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 2 | Troy-Bilt Mustang 50" 17WFCACP            | 2,800 | 470/50  | 50 | 25 | 79 |  | ● | ● | 2 | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 3 | John Deere Z235                           | 2,500 | 400/100 | 42 | 20 | 73 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 4 | Craftsman 25001                           | 2,300 | 200/40  | 42 | 24 | 72 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 5 | Toro TimeCutter SS4235 74627 SS4235 74624 | 2,600 | 500/140 | 42 | 20 | 71 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ✓ | 6 | Husqvarna RZ4623                          | 2,600 | 430/50  | 46 | 23 | 70 |  | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |

## D REAR-ENGINE RIDER This is a compact alternative to a tractor, but it gives up some performance.

|   |   |                          |       |        |    |      |    |  |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|--------------------------|-------|--------|----|------|----|--|---|---|---|---|---|
| ✓ | 1 | Troy-Bilt TB30R 13BC26JD | 1,000 | 200/30 | 30 | 11.5 | 58 |  | ● | ● | ○ | ○ | ○ |
|---|---|--------------------------|-------|--------|----|------|----|--|---|---|---|---|---|

<sup>1</sup> Tighter turning than most tractors. <sup>2</sup> Side-discharging and mulching only.



# String trimmers

12 CR Best Buys  
begin at just \$70

**H**ARD STARTING and noise are among the gripes about string trimmers we recently found on Twitter. Gas trimmers that fire up with fewer pulls, plus a growing list of powerful electric models—many of them cordless—address both concerns. But most of the machines are still loud enough to require hearing protection. And a few left us in the rough when it came to taller grass.

**New top gas trimmers.** Gas trimmers are still the leaders for power and mobility. Stihl's new FS 38, \$130, which costs \$20 less than the old FS 45, adds a padded handle and an engine certified to meet its emissions ratings for 125 hours, compared with just 50 hours for the old model. It aced our trimming, tall-grass, and edging tests, and started easily, a trouble area with the FS 45 that was cited in user reviews. Willing to sacrifice some edging and handling performance for a lower price? Homelite's UT33600A, \$70, costs a little more than half as much and includes a line spool that loads with the twist of a crank.

**Two cordless picks go the distance.** Lower prices and 15 minutes or more of run time per charge have helped put battery-powered trimmers in more garages and sheds. Stellar trimming and edging helped Ryobi's RY24210A, \$130, edge out trimmers that cost far more. A swiveling head and a wheel also make edging along walks and driveways easier. Toro's 51488, \$190, trades some trimming performance for added power in tall grass, along with a speed control that you can dial for added run time. Also consider the Core CGT400, \$250, if you put a premium on quietness.

**Some trimmers worth skipping.** So-so edging helped put the Poulan Pro PP025, \$100, among the also-rans for gas trimmers. The bottom-heavy Toro 51480, \$55, lost points for unwieldy handling. And although some cordless models were impressive in tall grass, almost half—including the new GreenWorks 21282 and the Ryobi P2060, both \$100—were subpar.

## Ratings

Recommended models only From 79 tested.



● Excellent  
● Very good  
○ Good  
○ Fair  
● Poor

☑ CR Best Buy  
☑ Recommended

|      |      | Brand & model | Price | Weight (lb.) | Engine cc/amp/volt | Overall score           | Test results |        |            |          |             |       |
|------|------|---------------|-------|--------------|--------------------|-------------------------|--------------|--------|------------|----------|-------------|-------|
| Rec. | Rank |               |       |              |                    | 0 P   F   G   V   E 100 | Trimming     | Edging | Tall grass | Handling | Ease of use | Noise |

### A GAS-POWERED MODELS These offer mobility and unlimited run time but require more upkeep.

|   |    |                                |       |      |       |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|----|--------------------------------|-------|------|-------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ☑ | 1  | Stihl FS 38                    | \$130 | 10.5 | 27 cc | 83 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 2  | Stihl FS 45                    | 150   | 10.5 | 27    | 82 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 3  | Husqvarna 223L <sup>1</sup>    | 260   | 10.5 | 25    | 82 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 4  | Echo SRM-230 <sup>1</sup>      | 290   | 12.5 | 23    | 82 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 5  | Stihl FS 40 C-E                | 190   | 11.0 | 27    | 81 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 6  | Echo SRM-225 <sup>1</sup>      | 220   | 12.0 | 21    | 80 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 7  | Stihl FS 56 RC-E <sup>1</sup>  | 240   | 12.5 | 27    | 78 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 8  | Echo GT-225 <sup>2</sup>       | 160   | 10.0 | 21    | 77 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 9  | Craftsman 71102 <sup>2</sup>   | 100   | 11.0 | 25    | 76 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 10 | Husqvarna 128LD <sup>1</sup>   | 200   | 13.5 | 28    | 76 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 11 | Hitachi CG22EABSLP             | 180   | 9.5  | 22    | 76 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 12 | Troy-Bilt TB22 EC <sup>2</sup> | 100   | 11.0 | 25    | 75 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 13 | Craftsman 79102                | 100   | 11.5 | 25    | 75 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 14 | Troy-Bilt TB32 EC <sup>1</sup> | 130   | 12.5 | 25    | 75 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 15 | Toro 51954                     | 140   | 11.5 | 24    | 75 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |

### B LIGHT-DUTY GAS MODELS These are more suited for light trimming.

|   |   |  |    |      |       |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|--|----|------|-------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ☑ | 1 | Homelite UT33600A  | 70 | 10.0 | 26 cc | 73 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 2 | Weed Eater Featherlite SST25CE <sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> | 90 | 10.0 | 25    | 69 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 3 | Homelite UT32650 <sup>1</sup>                            | 95 | 10.0 | 26    | 67 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |

### C CORDED ELECTRIC MODELS These provide unlimited run time within range of a power outlet.

|   |   |                               |     |     |        |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|-------------------------------|-----|-----|--------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ☑ | 1 | GreenWorks 21142 <sup>1</sup> | 90  | 9.5 | 10 amp | 71 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 2 | Stihl FSE 60                  | 110 | 8.5 | 5.3    | 70 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 3 | Black & Decker GH1100         | 70  | 7.0 | 7.2    | 68 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 4 | Black & Decker GH2000         | 70  | 7.0 | 7.2    | 68 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |

### D CORDLESS ELECTRIC MODELS These offer push-button starts and easy upkeep but limited run time.

|   |   |   |     |      |         |    |   |   |   |   |   |   |
|---|---|---|-----|------|---------|----|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ☑ | 1 | Ryobi RY24210A <sup>1</sup> <sup>3</sup>        | 130 | 8.0  | 24 volt | 74 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 2 | Stihl FSA 65 <sup>4</sup>                       | 510 | 8.0  | 36      | 72 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 3 | Toro 51488 <sup>1</sup>                         | 190 | 9.5  | 48      | 70 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 4 | Black & Decker LST136 <sup>1</sup> <sup>3</sup> | 170 | 7.0  | 36      | 66 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 5 | Ryobi RY40210 <sup>1</sup> <sup>3</sup>         | 170 | 9.0  | 40      | 66 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |
| ☑ | 6 | Core CGT400 <sup>1</sup>                        | 250 | 11.5 | 21      | 61 | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● | ● |

<sup>1</sup> Straight shaft; others are curved. <sup>2</sup> Fixed-line head; others are automatic or bump-feed. <sup>3</sup> One line; others have two. <sup>4</sup> Price includes battery and charger, sold separately.

## Guide to the Ratings

**Overall score** is trimming, edging, cutting tall grass and weeds, handling, ease of use, and noise at ear. Displayed scores are rounded; models are listed in order of precise overall score. **Trimming** is speed and neatness for grass. **Edging** is speed and neatness of trimming a vertical line along a walk. **Tall grass** is cutting power in 2-foot growth. **Handling** includes responsiveness and balance. **Ease of use** is starting, feeding line, controls, and handle comfort. **Noise** is at ear. **Weight** is to nearest half-pound, without fuel. **Engine cc** (cubic centimeters), **amps** (for corded electric motors), and **volts** (battery-powered electric motors) are from the manufacturer. **Price** is approximate retail.



## A mighty storm

**WHO** Greg Rasp

**WHERE** Bellbrook, Ohio

**WHAT** A near-miss tornado and baseball-sized hail severely pummeled his home's facade, windows, roof, and deck

**HOW MUCH** \$75,000 in damage

# How to win your insurance claim

Readers' tips for saving time and money, and getting the best protection

**W**HEN A STORM slams through your front door or another catastrophe strikes, the whim of fate can determine the severity of damages you suffer. But when it comes to how easily you can pick up the pieces, your destiny may have been decided a decade or more ago—when you chose your home insurer.

Greg Rasp of Bellbrook, Ohio, survived a close call with a tornado and hail in May 2011, then got too little attention from State Farm. It took the nation's largest home insurer two weeks to send an adjuster, and they were slow to pay Rasp's \$75,000 claim, leaving him out of pocket for thousands of dollars. State Farm rated in the middle of the pack, according to the latest Consumer Reports National Research Center survey of more than 9,900 subscribers who filed homeowner's insurance claims from 2010 through the first three months of 2013.

Peter Andrew and Andrea Von Amelunxen, on the other hand, got "stellar" service from top-rated Amica. Their less-terrifying brush with 3 feet of snow and ice dams on the roof of their Connecticut home caused around \$30,000 in damage from melt water that trickled down walls, across ceilings, and over hardwood floors. Amica handled the claim over the phone, had an estimate the next day, fixed what was needed without disagreements, and paid up within a week. "We were blown away," Andrew says.

Many consumers shop for home insurance once, then forget about it. Home-loss claims are uncommon to begin with, and losses tend to be relatively small. That means consumers don't develop much experience shopping for the product and rarely get a chance to "test" firsthand how it performs.

Push comes to shove, however, on the

biggest losses. The 6 percent of homeowners we surveyed who had claims of \$30,000 or more also had the most hassles. A whopping 41 percent of those claimants had at least one problem, including disagreement over damages, disputes about coverage, delays, and slow payout. By contrast, only 19 percent of filers with claims below \$30,000 hit such snags.

To protect against huge losses is exactly why you buy home insurance. So we went back to the survey respondents who suffered the most to find out what advice their experience could offer.

## Pick a top insurer

When the intake line for one of Bob Ridout's hot water tanks burst, water poured into his basement for 24 hours. Baseboard, drywall, carpeting, and tile were damaged to the tune of \$30,000. USAA's remediation crew swooped in 90 minutes after



## 5 ways to save on home insurance

► **Shop periodically for a better deal.** About 9 percent of our survey respondents switched home insurers in the previous three years, mostly because they got a better price elsewhere. Check whether your state insurance department publishes online rate comparisons; consider online shopping sites such as Insure.com, Insweb.com, and NetQuote.com; or find an agent who sells insurance from multiple carriers at the website of the Independent Insurance Agents & Brokers of America, at [iiaba.net](http://iiaba.net).

► **Don't underinsure.** Insufficient coverage takes money from your pocket, and almost one in 10 of our subscribers who filed claims found themselves in that boat. Every few years, ask your insurer for a customized estimate of your home's replacement cost. To protect against the surge in the price of materials and labor that can follow a natural disaster, buy an extended-coverage rider, which adds up to 30 percent on top of your replacement value limit.

Take the ordinance or law-endorsement

rider, which pays any extra cost of rebuilding your house to comply with the current local building codes. Get add-on coverage for sewer backup and a special endorsement or floater to cover the full value of expensive jewelry, silverware, or other valuables.

► **Buy home and auto coverage from the same company.** One in seven of our readers who filed claims didn't tap this money saver, which can cut costs by up to 30 percent. If you're one of them, check with your auto and home carriers to see what savings each can offer by consolidating your insurance needs with the best one.

► **Raise your deductible.** Almost half of our survey respondents had deductibles of \$500 or less on their standard homeowner's policy. But because insurance should be called on to cover bigger losses, not just a single broken window, a deductible of \$1,000 is better: It will reduce the annual premium. Of course, build sufficient savings to cover that deductible if your luck runs out and you need it.

### ► Nip loss risks in the bud.

Even when losses are covered, they come with the cost of deductibles and other out-of-pocket expenses, and they can lead to higher future premiums. Avoid that by preventing losses from the perils particular to your region: Install impact- and fire-resistant roofing to guard against hail, debris, and wildfire embers, as well as storm shutters for doors and windows and hurricane-resistant siding. If you're at risk of earthquakes, make sure your home's frame is properly bolted to its foundation.

Substitute reinforced washing machine hoses for standard rubber ones to avoid the average \$5,300 claim for water damage if the hose blows when no one is home. Never leave a stove unattended—a leading cause of home fires—and keep a fire extinguisher nearby. And tap insurer discounts for smoke detectors, burglar alarms, and dead-bolt locks, which can cut 5 percent from your premium.



Ridout called. They vacuumed up the water and set up fans and dehumidifiers that ran all night. Early the next morning, 10 people arrived to continue the cleanup. "I paid my \$1,000 deductible, and we never had any issues," Ridout says.

Our readers judged Amica, USAA, and Auto-Owners more favorably than most other insurers on satisfaction, as our Ratings on page 43 show. Amica especially stands out for earning the top spot in our Ratings for as long as we've evaluated that service. It's a distinction earned through seven surveys dating back to 1988, including this one, involving more than 140,000 homeowners.

Companies can be fickle. Dr. James Lipsett and his husband Paul LaRiviere were happy with the service they got from State Farm on their \$35,000 water-damage claim caused when their second-floor toilet overflowed and drenched their Morro Bay, Calif., home. But less than a year later, the Good Neighbor people sent the couple a notice of non-renewal because of the claim. "Both of us felt betrayed by State Farm," Lipsett says. State Farm declined to comment on the matter.

### Prepare for a fight

As hurricane season 2014 revs up, with potential for large-scale losses, now's the time to learn how to push back against your in-

### After the fall

WHO David and Mai Queen

WHERE Arlington, Va.

WHAT A large oak tree fell on their home without warning, ripping through the side and roof, and landing in their bed

HOW MUCH \$40,000 in damage



surer. Justin Rubin, a retired insurance claims executive whose Long Beach, N.Y., home sustained significant damage from Superstorm Sandy in October 2012, didn't let his insurer (he prefers not to name it) deny coverage by blaming flooding, which was not covered. He argued that some of the damage in the basement was caused when the plumbing system backed up before the storm surge, and the insurer paid.

Prepare long before a disaster. "Find a reliable agent or broker, and ask questions right now, before you suffer a loss," Rubin says. Ask about the house value and the applicable "minimum" coverage required to get full protection in a total loss, review the "perils" listed in the policy, and fill "exclusion" gaps with separate insurance for flood, hurricane, or earthquake, based on the threats you face in your region.

### Befriend a good contractor—today

Christopher Richards learned a lesson the hard way, thanks to Liberty Mutual's handling of his \$50,000 loss from a June 2010 lightning strike to his Brentwood, Tenn., home. The roof and chimney had to be replaced, along with the furnace and electronics that got fried by the electrical surge.

Richards thought he could rely on the insurer's approved contractor. But he says the contractor did shoddy work, didn't get proper permits, and took three months to finish work that was supposed to take three weeks—then failed inspection because code-violating copper lines were used for natural gas. Richards eventually got the repairs done correctly, but he had to closely monitor and prod the contractor throughout the process.



### Storm surge

**WHO** Justin Rubin

**WHERE** Long Beach, N.Y.

**WHAT** His basement and garage took in 5½ feet of Superstorm Sandy seawater

**HOW MUCH** \$80,000 in damage



A better way: While the weather is fair, find work around your house for a trustworthy contractor, because a good one is harder to come by after a major storm. "If you get to know and use a contractor once in a while, you'll have someone you can call in an emergency," says Dwayne W. of Huntsville, Ala. His home dodged three

waves of tornadoes in April 2011 but couldn't get out of the way of a 60-foot tree that caused \$30,000 in damage.

### Beware of falling trees

The beauty of trees on your property belies the hidden hazard that one could topple onto your house, maybe without warn-

## Hurricane test: Insurers doing better

Devastating though it was, Superstorm Sandy was no Katrina, the most destructive hurricane in modern U.S. history. And home insurers did a better job handling claims of victims of Sandy than of Katrina.

Twenty-seven percent of readers who filed claims related to Sandy, which walloped the Northeast in 2012, had problems with their insurer's claim handling or payment. Seventy-nine percent were satisfied with how their home insurer performed.

That's vastly better than homeowners' experience with Katrina in 2005, when 50 percent of claimants suffered problems

and only 51 percent were highly satisfied.

But Katrina, a category 3 hurricane, packed winds of up to 130 mph. Sandy had weakened below hurricane strength when it made landfall in New Jersey. And despite Sandy's catastrophic storm surge along the densely populated and pricey New York and New Jersey coasts, the storm's \$50 billion in damages were less than half of Katrina's \$108 billion.

Meanwhile, insurers have gotten more tight-fisted. Our readers got reimbursed for 80 percent of their losses from Katrina but for only 71 percent of losses from Sandy.

### BY THE NUMBERS

51%

Proportion of Hurricane Katrina claim filers who said they were highly satisfied with how their home insurer performed.

79%

Proportion of Superstorm Sandy claim filers who said the same thing.



ing. There was no storm, wind, or other signal when a neighbor's huge oak came crashing through David and Mai Queen's Arlington, Va., home in the middle of the night in September 2012. A large section of the tree trunk landed in their bed. Luckily, the Queens were visiting friends in Belgium at the time.

The standard homeowner's policy covers damage caused by trees that fall on insured buildings on your property plus the cost of removing the tree itself, generally subject to a \$500 or \$1,000 limit. USAA covered the Queens' \$40,000 in damages without trouble and began the claims process and repair immediately, without requiring the couple to cut their vacation short. But they'd have been on their own if the tree simply had landed on the ground.

Linda Paustian of La Porte, Ind., found out about that exclusion after a violent thunderstorm dropped hard maple and red oak trees on her 1895 arts and crafts bungalow and all over her property in June 2010. "Before the storm, we had about 11 large trees on our property. After the storm, we had 30 to 40 trees in the yard," she says. State Farm paid \$6,000 for the cost of removing trees that struck the house but nothing for the additional almost \$6,000 needed for tree and debris removal and stump grinding.

Know the limits of your policy. If your neighbor's tree hits your house, your policy covers it, not theirs. If a tree falls on your car, your auto insurance pays—if you have comprehensive coverage. Lastly, have a plan for tree removal: either sufficient savings to pay a pro or do-it-yourself skill in safely taking a chain saw to big timber.

Surprise troublemaker: Your mortgage company

When Tim Haynes of Nashport, Ohio, lost the roofs of his home and barn due to wind, State Farm promptly paid the \$52,000 claim, and the roof on his home was repaired. But an unlikely interloper held up \$42,000 of the settlement for the barn: Haynes' mortgage company.

Many homeowners are surprised when their settlement check also has their mortgage company's name on it, a fact of life that aims to keep irresponsible claimants from blowing the money in Vegas instead of repairing the lender's collateral. So the bank will demand that forms be filled out before funds are released, often in stages as work is completed. There may be inspections of the work, and—of

Some homeowners are unaware that their bank can hold up their settlement.

course—extra bank fees. "If you have a mortgage, be prepared for lots of extra steps to get your payment," one claimant advises. After you file your claim, contact your mortgage company to find out how to get the settlement check endorsed and deposited to your or the lender's escrow account.

Tap buried treasure The promise of home insurance is to restore your house to pre-loss condition.

But sometimes you can do even better. A number of readers were able to get materials upgrades, including wind-resistant garage doors, safety window glass, and new carpeting by paying the incremental extra cost on top of what the insurer was going to pay. One Colorado homeowner whose neighborhood was hit by hail damage got a \$1,000 "referral fee" (equal to his deductible) and received upgrade replacement shingles from his roofer for referring other homeowners to him. Another homeowner, whose hallway wood floor buckled after a small, slow powder-room leak, was delighted to learn that his insurance would cover replacement not only of the damaged flooring but also of the flooring contiguous to it—and so got new wood floors for the entire downstairs of his house.

Ratings Insurance companies

In order of reader score.

| Insurance group             | Reader score | Survey results  |                                |              |                |                |  |
|-----------------------------|--------------|-----------------|--------------------------------|--------------|----------------|----------------|--|
|                             |              | Damage estimate | Problem-free claims experience | Premium paid | Agent courtesy | Timely payment |  |
|                             | 0            | 100             |                                |              |                |                |  |
| Amica                       | 94           | ●               | ●                              | ●            | ●              | ●              |  |
| USAA                        | 92           | ●               | ●                              | ●            | ●              | ●              |  |
| Auto-Owners                 | 89           | ●               | ●                              | ●            | ●              | ●              |  |
| Erie                        | 87           | ●               | ●                              | ●            | ●              | ●              |  |
| Nationwide                  | 84           | ●               | ●                              | ○            | ●              | ●              |  |
| MetLife                     | 83           | ●               | ○                              | ○            | ●              | ●              |  |
| Hartford                    | 83           | ●               | ○                              | ○            | ●              | ●              |  |
| State Farm                  | 82           | ●               | ○                              | ○            | ●              | ●              |  |
| Travelers                   | 80           | ○               | ○                              | ●            | ●              | ●              |  |
| Liberty Mutual              | 80           | ○               | ○                              | ○            | ●              | ●              |  |
| California State Auto Group | 79           | ○               | ○                              | ○            | ●              | ●              |  |
| American Family             | 79           | ○               | ○                              | ○            | ●              | ●              |  |
| Farmers                     | 78           | ○               | ○                              | ●            | ●              | ●              |  |
| Allstate                    | 77           | ○               | ○                              | ●            | ●              | ●              |  |

Better ← → Worse



Guide to the Ratings

Based on a survey of 90,301 Consumer Reports and CRO subscribers. Ratings are based on responses from 9,905 respondents who had filed claims from January 2010 to June 2013 with one of the rated insurance groups. Results might not reflect the experiences of the U.S. population as a whole. **Reader score** reflects overall satisfaction with claims handling. A score of 100 would mean all readers were completely satisfied; 80, very satisfied, on average; 60, fairly well satisfied. Differences of fewer than 6 points aren't meaningful. Ratings under **survey results** for damage estimate, premium paid, agent courtesy, and timely payment were each based on mean scores for each company on six-point satisfaction scales, ranging from "completely satisfied" to "completely dissatisfied." The problem-free claims experience rating is a relative measure that indicates how each insurance group fared in comparison with the median of all groups for that factor.



**IN HIS SON'S MEMORY** John James, Ph.D., dedicated his life to studying hospital safety after his son died from a medical error in 2002.

# Survive your stay at the hospital

Medical errors are linked to 440,000 deaths each year

**TWELVE YEARS AGO**, John James' 19-year-old son died after cardiologists at two Texas hospitals made a series of mistakes. James says they failed to properly diagnose and treat the cause of an abnormal heartbeat. At the time he was the chief toxicologist for NASA in Houston, responsible for overseeing the air astronauts breathe in space. Now retired, he has responded to the tragedy by dedicating his life—and his son's memory—to improving hospital safety.

He founded Patient Safety America, an organization that educates people about risks they may face in hospitals. He became active in Consumer Reports' own Safe Patient Project, which works with people across the country who have been harmed by medical care. And last year he wrote a comprehensive analysis on the number of people who die at least in part because of medical errors in hospitals.

His conclusion—published in the Jour-

nal of Patient Safety, a peer-reviewed medical journal—was sobering. He estimated that 440,000 people each year die after suffering a medical error in the hospital. Some patients, for example, might have gotten the wrong drugs or developed infections because doctors or nurses failed to wash their hands. Others may have failed to get needed tests or treatments.

"Four-hundred-forty-thousand is a frightening figure," James says. It's more than 1,000 deaths per day, for example, or more than half of the deaths that occur in U.S. hospitals each year. "And it makes patient harm in hospitals the nation's third lead-

ing cause of death, trailing only heart disease and cancer," James says.

## Too many deaths

James, like other researchers who have studied hospital safety, is quick to emphasize that his analysis is inexact. Establishing firm numbers is hard, in part because much of what happens in hospitals goes unrecorded, and because untangling how much any hospital death stems from an underlying health problem and how much stems from medical error is messy, complicated, and sometimes controversial.

But his figures are in line with other research. Fifteen years ago the Institute of Medicine stated that up to 98,000 hospital patients per year die from medical errors. Almost four years ago the Department of Health and Human Services estimated that 180,000 people each year die in part because of their hospital care—but that was limited to Medicare patients. James'

**Our Ratings of 2,591 hospitals can help you find a safe one.**



analysis—which was based on the results of four key hospital safety studies, all published between 2008 and 2011—pushed further by, for example, estimating the number of deaths caused by errors that go unrecorded or that stem from missed diagnoses.

“The truth is that whether it’s 100,000 or 200,000 or 400,000 deaths a year is almost immaterial,” says James. “What matters is that too many people are dying in hospitals because of medical mistakes, not enough is being done to stop it, and patients need more information.”

Our hospital safety score helps fill that gap. It includes information for a record 2,591 hospitals in all 50 states plus the District of Columbia, combining five measures of patient safety into a 1 to 100 score. (See “Safety Score: Where to Find High- and Low-Scoring Hospitals,” on the next page, for more.) And our score includes new information on hospital mortality rates. As in James’ analysis, the results are sobering.

## What we found

Our analysis uses two measures of hospital mortality, both using information from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services—the most recent, reliable, and comprehensive data publicly available—on patients 65 and older. The first focuses on hospital patients admitted with medical conditions, such as heart problems; the second, on surgery patients.

**Medical patients.** This is based on the chance that a patient who has had a heart attack or been diagnosed with heart failure or pneumonia will die within 30 days of entering the hospital. Only 35 hospitals nationwide earned a top rating in the measure. By comparison, 66 hospitals got our lowest rating.

“The differences between high-scoring hospitals and low-scoring ones can be a matter of life and death,” says John Santa, M.D., medical director of Consumer Reports Health. For example, pneumonia patients at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles, which earned a top rating in this measure, had a 7 percent chance of dying within 30 days. That compares with a 22 percent chance of death for similar patients at Delano Regional Medical Center, 2 hours north in Delano, Calif. Overall, pneumonia patients in top-scoring hospitals are at least 40 percent less likely to die within 30 days of admission than similar patients in low-scoring hospitals.

**Surgical patients.** This looks at surgery patients who had serious but treatable

complications—such as blood clots in the legs or lungs, or cardiac arrest—and died in the hospital. More hospitals did well in this measure, with 173 earning a top rating. By comparison, 228 hospitals got our lowest rating. And again, the differences between high- and low-scoring hospitals are dramatic: For every 1,000 patients who develop serious complications in a top hospital, 87 or fewer die; in a low-rated hospital, more than 132 die. Patients in top-rated hospitals are at least 34 percent less likely to die than similar patients in low-rated hospitals.

## Staying alive

Why do some hospitals do a better job than others at keeping patients alive? “Likely because they do a lot of things—some little, some big—well,” Santa says. “That includes everything from making sure staff communicates clearly with patients about medications, which can help prevent drug errors, to doing all they can to prevent hospital-acquired infections.”

That’s what they’ve done at Sanford Medical Center, at the University of South Dakota in Sioux Falls. It earned the highest safety score of any teaching hospital in the country and also got a top rating in avoiding death in surgical patients. The hospital instituted strict protocols for hand washing, says Mike Wilde, M.D., chief medical officer at Sanford, as well as for inserting and removing urinary catheters

and central-line catheters, which provide drugs, fluids, and nutrition to patients. Those are two of the most common and deadly causes of infections in hospitals.

Accountability is also key. “It’s easy to blame a provider, but a lot of times it can be the systems in place,” Wilde says. So the staff now examines whether errors stem from a poorly functioning device or a failure to follow a safety protocol.

When a patient does die from a preventable error, there should be a thorough examination of why and steps taken to prevent similar errors in the future. “I want to know if someone dies on my watch or after they have left my watch, why they died, and how the death might have been prevented,” says Don Goldmann, M.D., chief medical and scientific officer of the nonprofit Institute for Healthcare Improvement.

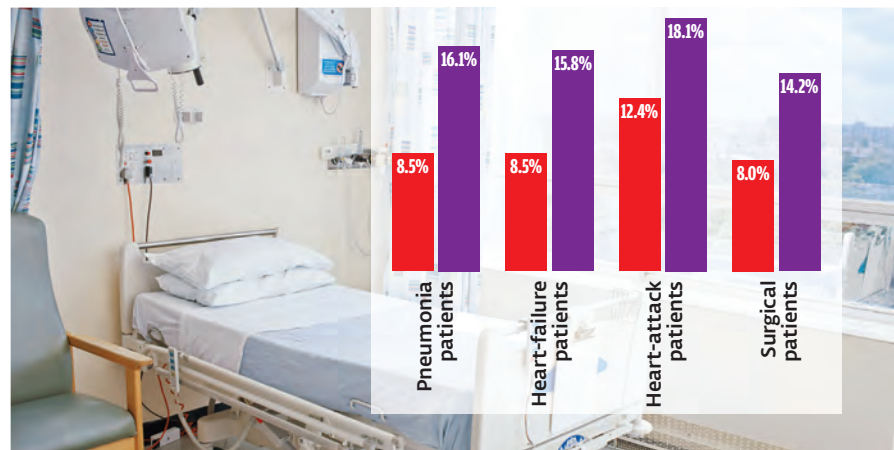
That kind of soul searching can yield better care. In 2006, the University of Pennsylvania Health System established a Mortality Review Committee. One program they came up with focused on detecting sepsis, a bloodstream infection, and starting timely and appropriate antibiotic treatment. Survival rates of hospital patients with severe sepsis rose from 40 percent to 56 percent. And survival rates from septic shock, which occurs when the infection causes blood pressure to plummet, rose from 42 percent to 54 percent.

*Continued on next page*

## BY THE NUMBERS

# The hospital you choose really matters

Death rates are much higher in some than in others.



Compares the average death rates for high-rated and low-rated hospitals, for patients admitted with heart attack, heart failure, or pneumonia, and for surgery patients with serious, treatable complications. Data come from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services for patients 65 and older.

## What you can do

“Informed, active patients and family members are the best defense against hospital errors,” James says. Lisa McGiffert, head of the Consumer Reports Safe Patient Project, agrees. Here are three of the most important steps she says patients should take to stay safe in the hospital:

- Have a friend or family member with

you to be your advocate when you are unable to speak up for yourself.

- Before a planned hospitalization, do your homework. Learn as much as you can about what to expect while at the hospital, and ask about your treatments, especially medications or tests.
- If something goes wrong, keep a journal documenting what is happening.

## For more information, go to:

- [SafePatientProject.org](http://SafePatientProject.org) to see what you can do to reduce the risk of patient harm in the U.S. health care system.
- [ConsumerReports.org/shareyourhospitalstory](http://ConsumerReports.org/shareyourhospitalstory) to tell us about problems you may have experienced in the hospital.
- [ConsumerReports.org/hospitalratings](http://ConsumerReports.org/hospitalratings) to see our complete hospital Ratings.

## Safety score: Where to find high- and low-scoring hospitals

Damariscotta, Maine, population 2,218, and Cleveland, Ohio, may seem like unlikely spots to find two of our top-scoring hospitals. But both are home to hospitals ranking in the top of our updated safety score: Miles Memorial Hospital (now Lincoln Health), with a 78 on our 100-point scale, and Lutheran Hospital, part of the Cleveland Clinic, with a 75.

“We are a very small community, and our patients are our neighbors, friends, and family,” says Cindy Coyne, R.N., director of quality and patient safety at Miles. “We work hard to take care of them.” Though the setting is very different, the sentiment is similar at Lutheran Hospital. “Patient care is what we think about every day,” says Brian Donley, M.D., president of Cleveland Clinic Regional Hospitals. “We empower every person in our system to take the steps necessary to make patient safety a priority.” Other top hospitals are spread across the country, in suburbs, rural areas, and big cities. The message: Success can happen anywhere.

The flip side is that low-performing hospitals are also easy to find. The average score for hospitals is just 51, and 43 hospitals got a score below 30. “It is unacceptable that so many hospitals are doing so poorly,” says John Santa, M.D., medical director of Consumer Reports Health, “especially since our Ratings show that some hospitals can do a good job at keeping patients safe.”



## Ratings Hospitals

### Top-scoring

| Hospital name and location   | Safety score |
|--|--------------|
| <b>Miles Memorial Hospital</b><br>Damariscotta, Maine                          | <b>78</b>    |
| <b>Oaklawn Hospital</b><br>Marshall, Mich.                                     | <b>77</b>    |
| <b>Aurora Medical Center of Oshkosh</b><br>Oshkosh, Wis.                       | <b>75</b>    |
| <b>Lutheran Hospital</b><br>Cleveland, Ohio                                    | <b>75</b>    |
| <b>Palm Drive Hospital</b><br>Sebastopol, Calif.                               | <b>74</b>    |
| <b>Marshalltown Medical &amp; Surgical Center</b><br>Marshalltown, Iowa        | <b>74</b>    |
| <b>Hillside Hospital</b><br>Pulaski, Tenn.                                     | <b>73</b>    |
| <b>Margaret R. Pardee Memorial Hospital</b><br>Hendersonville, N.C.            | <b>73</b>    |
| <b>Spectrum Health United Hospital</b><br>Greenville, Mich.                    | <b>73</b>    |
| <b>St. John Medical Center</b><br>Westlake, Ohio                               | <b>73</b>    |
| <b>Sonoma Valley Hospital</b><br>Sonoma, Calif.                                | <b>73</b>    |
| <b>UnityPoint Health - Trinity Regional Medical Center</b><br>Fort Dodge, Iowa | <b>73</b>    |
| <b>UnityPoint Health - Finley Hospital</b><br>Dubuque, Iowa                    | <b>73</b>    |
| <b>Lovelace Westside Hospital</b><br>Albuquerque, N.M.                         | <b>73</b>    |
| <b>Boulder Community Hospital</b><br>Boulder, Col.                             | <b>73</b>    |

### Bottom-scoring

| Hospital name and location                                     | Safety score |
|--|--------------|
| <b>Bolivar Medical Center</b><br>Cleveland, Miss.              | <b>11</b>    |
| <b>Tulane Medical Center</b><br>New Orleans, La.               | <b>19</b>    |
| <b>Harris Hospital</b><br>Newport, Ark.                        | <b>20</b>    |
| <b>Lake Cumberland Regional Hospital</b><br>Somerset, Ky.      | <b>20</b>    |
| <b>Delta Regional Medical Center</b><br>Greenville, Miss.      | <b>21</b>    |
| <b>Beckley ARH Hospital</b><br>Beckley, W.V.                   | <b>21</b>    |
| <b>Faxton-St. Luke's Healthcare</b><br>Utica, N.Y.             | <b>23</b>    |
| <b>Poplar Bluff Regional Medical Center</b><br>Poplar, Mo.     | <b>24</b>    |
| <b>Kings County Hospital Center</b><br>Brooklyn, N.Y.          | <b>24</b>    |
| <b>Avoyelles Hospital</b><br>Marksville, La.                   | <b>25</b>    |
| <b>Nyack Hospital</b><br>Nyack, N.Y.                           | <b>25</b>    |
| <b>St. Petersburg General Hospital</b><br>St. Petersburg, Fla. | <b>25</b>    |
| <b>Methodist Hospitals</b><br>Gary, Ind.                       | <b>25</b>    |

Note: Hospitals are ordered by unrounded safety score. Hospital names are from the most recent American Hospital Association annual survey.

## What's behind our hospital Safety Score

We combined five safety categories into a score between 1 and 100. Data are the most recent available from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services. Mortality, readmission, and scanning apply to patients 65 or older; communication, to all adults; and infections, to all patients. **Mortality** represents the chance a patient who has had a heart attack, heart failure, or pneumonia will die within 30 days of admission, or the chance that a surgical patient with serious complications will die in the hospital. **Readmission** represents the chance that a patient is readmitted to a hospital within 30 days of initial discharge. **Scanning** reflects the percentage of chest and/or abdominal CT scans that are ordered twice for the same patient, once with contrast and once without. **Infections** reflects a hospital's success in avoiding infections from central-line and urinary catheters in intensive care units, and infections after certain surgeries. **Communication** indicates how well staff explain medications and discharge planning to patients.



# The Hot List

A monthly guide to the top products our testers recommend

**Spring has sprung.** And to make the most of the season, here are our picks to help you stay in shape, cook with confidence, print out your favorite recipes, and enjoy your digital life.

Your  
cheat sheet  
to the best  
models



Dell XPS 12 Convertible  
Touch Ultrabook

## Laptops

| MODEL   | SCORE     |
|---|-----------|
| <b>15- TO 16-INCH</b>   |           |
| <b>Apple</b> MacBook Pro 15-inch with Retina display ME664LL/A, \$1,800 | <b>78</b> |
| <b>Apple</b> MacBook Pro 15-inch with Retina display ME293LL/A, \$2,000 | <b>78</b> |
| <b>Dell</b> XPS 15 Touch, \$1,500                                       | <b>77</b> |
| <b>Samsung</b> Ativ Book 8 NP880Z5E-X01UB, \$1,200                      | <b>76</b> |
| <b>Lenovo</b> IdeaPad U530-59385621 Ultrabook, \$800                    | <b>71</b> |
| <b>Asus</b> Q550LF-BBI7T07, \$1,000                                     | <b>71</b> |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>11- TO 14-INCH CONVERTIBLES</b>                                    |           |
| <b>Dell</b> XPS 12 Convertible Touch Ultrabook (4th Gen. i5), \$1,200 | <b>81</b> |
| <b>Dell</b> XPS 11 2-in-1 Ultrabook, \$1,000                          | <b>76</b> |
| <b>Sony</b> Vaio Duo 13 Ultrabook SVD13213CXB, \$1,200                | <b>72</b> |

|   |           |
|---|-----------|
| <b>11-INCH</b>                                      |           |
| <b>Acer</b> Aspire S7-191-6447 Ultrabook, \$800     | <b>76</b> |
| <b>Apple</b> MacBook Air 11-inch MD711LL/A, \$1,000 | <b>73</b> |
| <b>Sony</b> Vaio Pro SVP11213CXB Ultrabook, \$900   | <b>73</b> |



Apple  
MacBook Pro  
15-inch with  
Retina display  
ME664LL/A



Acer Aspire S7-191-6447 Ultrabook



Breville  
BFP800XL/A



Cuisinart  
DFP-14BCN

## Food processors

| MODEL  | SCORE     |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Breville</b> BFP800XL/A, \$400            | <b>81</b> |
| <b>Cuisinart</b> DLC-2011CHB, \$180          | <b>70</b> |
| <b>Cuisinart</b> DFP-14BCN, \$180            | <b>67</b> |
| <b>Cuisinart</b> Pro Custom II DLC-8S, \$170 | <b>64</b> |

## Blenders

| MODEL  | SCORE     |
|--|-----------|
| <b>Ninja</b> Master Prep Professional QB1004, \$60                   | <b>91</b> |
| <b>Vitamix</b> 5200, \$450   | <b>91</b> |
| <b>Ninja</b> Professional NJ600, \$100                               | <b>87</b> |
| <b>Breville</b> Hemisphere Control BBL605XL, \$200                   | <b>84</b> |
| <b>Vitamix</b> 750, \$650 (and similars 7500, \$530, and 300, \$530) | <b>81</b> |
| <b>Hamilton Beach</b> Commercial Tempest HBH650, \$450               | <b>77</b> |
| <b>Waring</b> Xtreme MX1000R, \$350                                  | <b>74</b> |



Vitamix 5200



LG LDG3037ST

## Ranges

| MODEL  | SCORE |
|--|-------|
| <b>30-INCH GAS</b>                           |       |
| LG LDG3037ST (double oven), \$1,900          | 75    |
| LG LRG3097ST, \$1,900                        | 74    |
| GE PGS920SEF, \$2,800                        | 73    |
| LG LRG3095ST, \$1,500                        | 72    |
| Frigidaire Gallery FGGF3032MW, \$775         | 71    |
| KitchenAid KDRS505XSS (double oven), \$2,000 | 71    |
| Samsung NX58F5500SS, \$1,000                 | 71    |
| LG LRG3091SW, \$1,000                        | 71    |
| <b>30-INCH ELECTRIC SMOOTH TOP</b>           |       |
| GE Profile PHB925STSS, \$2,700               | 90    |
| Samsung FTQ307NWXG, \$2,000                  | 89    |
| LG LDE3037SB (double oven), \$1,300          | 89    |
| LG LRE3083W, \$1,000                         | 86    |
| GE JB705STSS, \$1,000                        | 86    |
| LG LRE3023S, \$1,000                         | 86    |
| GE Profile PS978STSS (double oven), \$2,800  | 86    |
| GE Café CS980SNSS, \$2,800                   | 86    |
| LG LRE3025S, \$1,250                         | 86    |



GE Profile PHB925STSS

## Elliptical exercisers

| MODEL                         | SCORE |
|-------------------------------|-------|
| Diamondback 1260 Ef, \$2,200  | 79    |
| Octane Fitness Q37ci, \$3,100 | 79    |
| AFG 18.1AXT, \$1,700          | 73    |
| Life Fitness X5 Go, \$3,150   | 73    |
| AFG 3.1AE, \$1,100            | 72    |
| Precor EFX 5.21, \$1,600      | 71    |



Diamondback 1260 Ef



Precor 9.31



ProForm Pro 2000

## Treadmills

| MODEL                                | SCORE |
|--------------------------------------|-------|
| <b>NONFOLDING</b>                    |       |
| Precor 9.31, \$4,000                 | 85    |
| Landice L7 Cardio Trainer, \$3,800   | 84    |
| NordicTrack Elite 9700 Pro, \$2,400  | 84    |
| Sole S77, \$1,900                    | 83    |
| Smooth 9.35, \$1,800                 | 81    |
| True PS300, \$3,000                  | 81    |
| AFG 7.1 AT, \$1,700                  | 81    |
| <b>FOLDING</b>                       |       |
| ProForm Pro 2000, \$1,250            | 82    |
| Spirit XT485, \$2,000                | 81    |
| FreeMotion 790 Interactive, \$2,000  | 80    |
| LifeSpan TR4000i, \$1,700            | 79    |
| NordicTrack Commercial 1750, \$1,500 | 78    |
| AFG 3.1 AT, \$1,200                  | 78    |

## All-in-one printers

| MODEL                                 | SCORE |
|---------------------------------------|-------|
| <b>BLACK-AND-WHITE LASER</b>          |       |
| Canon ImageClass MF6160dw, \$400      | 77    |
| Canon ImageClass MF4890dw, \$300      | 76    |
| Canon ImageClass MF4770n, \$200       | 76    |
| Samsung SCX-3405FW, \$200             | 76    |
| Canon ImageClass MF5950dw, \$400      | 76    |
| HP LaserJet Pro 400 MFP M425dn, \$500 | 76    |
| <b>COLOR INKJET</b>                   |       |
| HP Photosmart 7520, \$150             | 78    |
| HP Photosmart 6520, \$120             | 72    |
| Canon Pixma MG3220, \$60              | 72    |



Canon ImageClass MF4890dw



HP Photosmart 7520



## Reports

Smart watches 49

Microwave ovens 50

Coffemaker 50

Smart phone 51

Freezer 51

# Lab tests

## Time for smart watches

Just when it seemed that smart phones had made watches irrelevant, here comes the smart watch: wearable tech that connects wirelessly to your mobile device and receives notifications of incoming calls, texts, instant messages, social-network updates, and more. Smart watches can also run various apps, such as fitness-monitoring apps and simple games.

A barrage of new smart watches from small startup companies hit the market last year, and now the big guns have joined in: Sony, Samsung, and Qualcomm all offer smart watches, and rumor has it that Apple and Google will be following suit.

Here's our take on four models based on how easily they connect with mobile devices, the user interface, and viewability in bright sunlight. Advanced watches have touch screens and can perform more functions than basic models, which require you to press buttons to navigate through menus.

### ADVANCED MODELS

#### ▶ Samsung Galaxy Gear, \$300

**Claimed battery life** Around a day

**Weight** 2.6 ounces

**Works with** Samsung Note 3, Galaxy S III and S 4, and Mega Android phones

This is the only smart watch of the tested group that you can make a call with and the only one with a built-in camera. It was the easiest to set up and pair—helped, no doubt, by the fact that it is NFC-capable—but it pairs only with a few Samsung phones. It has an intuitive color touch-screen interface and a Power/Home button. But the OLED color display's readability in bright sunlight was middling, and the phone is pricey. Samsung recently announced two new smart watches, the Gear 2 and the Gear 2 Neo, as well as the Fit, a fitness monitor. Both feature heart-rate monitors and look sleeker and more stylish than the original Gear (pictured). Samsung says the new watches will have a two- to three-day battery life. We'll test as soon as possible.

#### ▶ Sony SmartWatch 2, \$200

**Claimed battery life** 3 to 4 days

**Weight** 1.6 ounces

**Works with** Android 4.0 and later

The SmartWatch 2 is a streamlined version of Sony's first smart watch, which launched in 2013. It also adds a number of new features.



Samsung Galaxy Gear



Sony SmartWatch 2



Qualcomm Toq



Pebble Watch

The OLED color display has very good readability in bright sunlight, and the touch-screen interface is intuitive. Pairing is made easy by NFC capability. This is a good-looking and versatile smart watch, but its mobile-device app requires that additional apps (or extensions) be downloaded and installed for basic features such as text messaging or e-mail.

#### ▶ Qualcomm Toq, \$250

**Claimed battery life** Several days

**Weight** 2.4 ounces

**Works with** Android 4.0.3

The Toq is a bit large and clunky compared with the others in this group. It weighs more than the Sony and the Pebble and, along with the Samsung, is one of the heavier watches. But the color display, which uses Qualcomm's low-power Mirasol technology, has very good readability in bright sunlight. You can accept and reject phone calls from the watch and also initiate them. Many features—music control, weather, stock info—are preloaded, but the Toq will also work with whatever apps you already have installed on your mobile device. The interface was quite easy to navigate. Overall, there's a lot to like about the Toq.

### BASIC MODEL

#### ▶ Pebble Watch, \$150

**Claimed battery life** 5 to 7 days

**Weight** 1.4 ounces

**Works with** Android 2.3.3 and up; iPhone 4, 4S, and 5, and 3rd and 4th gen. iPod Touch, iOS 5 or newer required

The Pebble Watch is more rudimentary than the advanced watches—it has fewer functions and no touch screen, so you have to move through its menus via button presses. But it's pretty useful, channeling e-mails, texts, and other notifications from your mobile device. The Pebble also runs a wide variety of apps from third-party developers, including fitness apps. And this smart watch now has its own app store, with more than 1,000 apps at the time we wrote this. We liked the Pebble's display, platform, and engaged online community. The new Pebble Steel, \$250, is a stylish alternative to the original model (above), which is plastic.

**Bottom line.** For now, anyway, these devices are more for the early adopters among us than for most mainstream consumers. But that could change as more big electronics companies jump into the category.

# A family of microwave ovens

**EVER WONDER** what makes one microwave oven more expensive than another? These three GE over-the-range microwaves have a stainless-steel finish, touchpad controls, roughly the same amount of usable space, around 1,000 watts of power, and a child

lock for the controls, a safety feature worth every cent. They were the top microwave ovens because they were easy to use, excellent at defrosting, and impressive at evenly heating food and venting. In addition to price, here's how they differ.



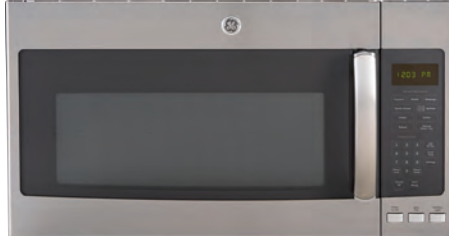
## GE JVM3160RFSS

**Price** \$250

### CR Best Buy

**Great for** the basics, such as programmed settings for reheat, popcorn, beverages, potatoes, and auto-defrost.

**But** it doesn't have a sensor that detects when food is properly heated or cooked, a handy feature that helps when preparing unfamiliar dishes. If you usually set cooking and defrosting times yourself, you may not need to spend extra for a sensor.

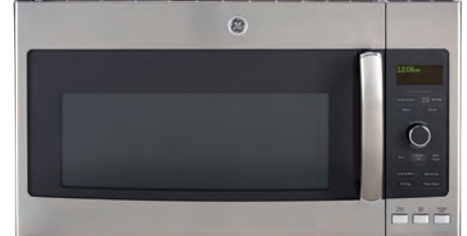


## GE JVM7195SFSS

**Price** \$400

**Great for** cooking two foods at once using a wire rack. There are more programmed settings, including snacks, steam cook, and an USDA MyPlate menu option to encourage healthy choices and portions. It was the fastest of the three over-the-range microwaves at heating. The exhaust fan adds a fourth, higher speed.

**But** it wasn't as quiet as the others.



## GE Profile PVM9215SFSS

**Price** \$550

**Great for** top-performance, slightly outperforming its brandmates. It also has a wire rack and the programmed settings found on the \$400 model, but adds a knob, and has the same number of vent speeds as the JVM7195SFSS.

**But** turning the knob to reach the setting adds an extra step to the programming. Plus it's pricey.

## Dual coffeemaker to avoid

"So much in so little space," says Hamilton Beach about its 2-Way FlexBrew 49983. One side is a single-serve coffeemaker and the other is a drip-style brewer with a carafe. But the unit's carafe-warming plate is on and hot—about 400 degrees without the carafe—even when you are only using the single-serve function. So you could inadvertently burn yourself on the drip-side warming plate while reaching for your mug of single-serve coffee if the carafe isn't on the warming plate. We think it's reasonable for a consumer to expect the warming plate to be cold when it's not being used. So we have judged this product a "Don't Buy: Safety Risk."

Hamilton Beach appears to be aware of the burn risk. A label in front of the warming plate displays the word "HOT" and turns red when the machine is in use. Another warning—that the warming plate is hot when brewing on either the carafe or single-serve side—

is printed inside the fresh-water reservoir lid. The manual for the product also includes warnings. But Consumer Reports does not believe that the label and manual warning sufficiently protect against the burn risk. We have contacted the Consumer Product Safety Commission to alert them of our findings, and the agency told us it is following up.

We also contacted Hamilton Beach. It responded that of the more than 91,800 2-Way FlexBrew 49983 coffeemakers sold, the company has received no reports of burn injuries attributable to the model's warming plate. The manufacturer also emphasized its confidence in the safety of its product and said it had placed warning labels out of an abundance of caution. But should anyone want a refund or an exchange for a product of equivalent value, Hamilton Beach says it will honor such requests.

We've tested other dual-use coffeemakers, and no other currently rated model heats up its warming plate when you're not using the carafe side, including another unit made by Hamilton Beach.

If you already own the Hamilton Beach 2-Way FlexBrew 49983, we suggest you to take the manufacturer up on its offer of a refund or exchange.



**✗ Don't Buy: Safety risk**  
Hamilton Beach 2-Way  
FlexBrew 49983



### COFFEEMAKER BURN RISK

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





# Samsung Galaxy S 5 smart phone shines

Samsung's new **Galaxy S 5** smart phone, which was announced as we were going to press, has the same winning personality as its well-regarded predecessor, the S 4, plus a few new features and tweaks to existing ones. Here are our first impressions of the S 5 based on a hands-on preview; we'll have an in-depth review when we can get the phone in our lab and fully test it. It was due in April through the major carriers and retailers at an expected price of about \$200.

A fingerprint scanner built into the S 5's home button is capable of recognizing three fingers. Samsung said it enables you to unlock its screen and authorize PayPal purchases with a quick swipe. The phone has an Emergency Mode that will automatically blast SOS messages to emergency responders and personal contacts. Along with the pedometer that's part of the phone's Android KitKat OS, the S 5 has a heart-rate sensor and integrated health apps. It's also rugged: The body is designed to resist dust and withstand a 30-minute dunk in about 3 feet of water.

Samsung said several tweaks enhance camera capabilities on the S 5, including a jump in resolution from the S 4's 13 megapixels to 16 and the ability to shoot Ultra HD (4K) video, like the Samsung Note 3. It can autofocus on a subject and snap a picture in less time than other phones, the company said, and the easy-to-use HDR (high dynamic range) mode can bring out

details that would otherwise be lost in the shadows of sunny settings.

The S 5's battery, which has more capacity than the one on the S 4, promises a longer run time per charge. Its Ultra Power Saving Mode can squeeze out even more time by reverting to a black-and-white screen and limiting the phone to sending and receiving voice calls and texts.



## Did you know?

The Galaxy S 5 has a 2,800 mAh battery—huh? mAh stands for milli-ampere hour, which is one-thousandth of an amp hour. That describes the amount of juice in a battery. But operating time depends on how efficiently the phone uses it, so don't assume a bigger battery always has longer life. Current capacities: about 1,500 to 3,500 mAh.



# Frigidaire's new freezer can also store fresh items

Wouldn't it be great if the stand-alone freezer in your basement could occasionally double as an extra fridge—say, to hold catering trays and drinks before a big party? That's the promise of the **Frigidaire FKCH17F7HW**, the industry's first convertible freezer/refrigerator. And the \$770 multi-tasker, with its respectable 12.7 cubic feet of usable capacity, proved adept in both modes in our tests.

Like most standalone freezers, the Frigidaire has a plain white-box design, though that shouldn't matter since it's meant to sit in a utilitarian part of the home. Its real beauty is in its Frost-Free Operation, and a cooling system design that lets you convert the unit to

a refrigerator with the push of a button. In its fridge mode, the Frigidaire delivered excellent temperature control and energy efficiency.

We then toggled the unit back to freezer mode and waited about 75 minutes for its internal temperature to reach 0° F. As a freezer, the Frigidaire also delivered excellent temperature control, plus it's self-defrosting, so you won't have to periodically do that task by hand. Its noise and ease-of-use scores were just average, though as with its ho-hum looks, those factors shouldn't be a deal breaker if what you want is a solid stand-alone freezer with the unique ability to provide on-demand auxiliary fridge space.



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\*Between 04/01/13 and 04/30/13, the average estimated savings off MSRP presented to program users by participating based on user new vehicle configurations was \$2,791.





# Cars

Road tests, auto products, hot topics

## Reports

**Exterior trim cleaners** 53

**Latest from the track** 54

**Mazda3** 56

**Jeep Cherokee** 58

## Spruce up your trim

**B**LACK HAS BECOME the new chrome for many new vehicles, as automakers have taken to swathing bumpers, side panels, and other exterior areas in dark, plastic trim. But exposure to the elements takes its toll, and dark trim often starts to fade to a lighter gray and turn chalky over time. Worse, as the material dries out it can become brittle and prone to breakage.

The trend has spawned an array of cleaners and protectants that are designed to restore a dark sheen and preserve a supple flexibility that could help reduce the risk of damage. We recently sampled five products and found big differences in the claims, performance, and price.

Most of these products are applied much like car wax, using an included applicator or a cloth. A second pass is then made with a clean cloth to even the finish and remove any residue. Manufacturers say additional applications may be necessary for the best results. Depending on the product, the packaging claims longevity of a few weeks to two years. Though some products are designed to work on any colored surface, we focused on their primary application, dark trim.

To test them, we removed well-weathered trim pieces from the lower exterior of a 2001 Toyota Sienna minivan owned by Consumer Reports. Each panel was thoroughly washed and dried. We used a wax and grease remover to ensure nothing remained that might interfere with the products' performance. Then we divided each panel into five sections and applied

one product to each section, according to manufacturer instructions.

The panels were put on racks on the roof of our test facility and allowed to weather for 10 weeks. After each week, technicians took the panels back into the lab, where they were washed and dried again before being inspected and photographed.

**Bottom line.** Two products—ReNu Finish and Wipe New—really stood out, far

outlasting all others. They brought back a rich, dark finish to our panels and maintained that look for 70 days and 10 washes. But both come in small bottles that provide far less product than the others.

The other products made a big improvement at first, but after 10 weeks the effect had almost completely faded. Still, if you don't mind regular applications, they offer good results and come in larger bottles.

### What we tested



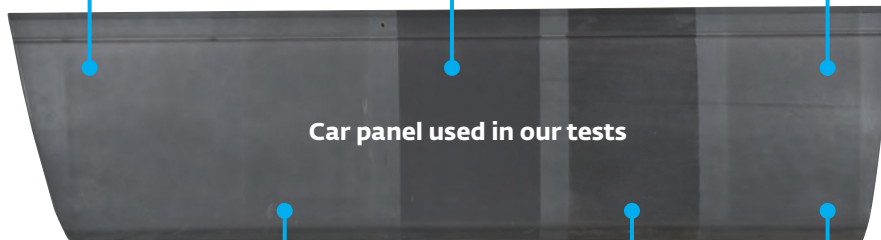
#### Turtle Wax Premium Grade Trim Restorer

At \$35 for a 10-ounce bottle, this had the highest price. But its restorative effect faded by the end of our 10-week test.



#### Wipe New

This brought back a rich, dark finish and maintained that look throughout our test without added applications. But a small 1.5-ounce bottle cost us \$18.



Car panel used in our tests

#### Meguiar's Ultimate Black Plastic Restorer

This made a big improvement at first, but the panels showed some fading after two weeks and completely faded after 45 days. We paid \$11 for 12 ounces.



#### ReNu Finish

Like Wipe New, this product provided a like-new look that lasted much longer than the other three cleaners. But we got only 1.75 ounces for our \$15.



#### Mothers Back-to-Black

Like Meguiar's, this looked great at first but began fading after two weeks and needed reapplying after 45 days. We paid \$7 for 8 ounces.

# Latest from the track

A sneak peek at some noteworthy vehicles we're now testing

## ► Chevrolet Corvette

The latest version of this American icon delivers performance that can be refined or wild, depending on your mood. Our C7 Stingray offers ferocious acceleration, precise handling, and superb braking. Gone are the cheap interior and noisy cabin of past 'Vettes.

From a standing start, the Stingray shoots forward like a fighter jet catapulted off an aircraft carrier, with never-ending torque and a throaty bark. With its direct-injected 460-hp, 6.2-liter V8, Chevy claims that it sprints from 0-to-60 mph in a mere 3.8 seconds; we'll check that on our track. The seven-speed manual gearbox works well, but navigating through the gears takes some practice.

The Corvette has quick reflexes, flat cornering, and none of the nose-heavy sensation of previous models. Like any sports car of this ilk, it shows off its virtues best on a track. Dial the driving-mode selector to "Track," and the steering tightens, the exhaust bellows, and the stability control loosens its grip, giving a skilled driver a little more latitude to explore the car's handling limits.

Switching to "Touring" mode turns the Corvette into a fairly civilized cruiser with a palatable ride and an exhaust sound that

doesn't frighten the neighbors.

Thankfully, the Corvette now has comfortable, supportive seats, and interior quality has received a major upgrade. But getting in and out still requires a fair bit of agility, and outward visibility is not terrific. Chevy's MyLink touch screen competently coordinates audio, phone, and navigation functions. And it's handy that the instrument panel shows the posted speed limit.

It's also easy to remove and stow the optional carbon-fiber roof panel for open-air driving.



### Test-car specs

**Price** \$73,260

**Trim** Stingray 3LT with Z51 suspension

**Engine** 460-hp, 6.2-liter V8

**Transmission** Seven-speed manual



## ► Mercedes-Benz S550

The S-Class has long been a standard for driving comfort and a showcase for new technology. And this redesigned 2014 model pushes the envelope further. It treats you to an extremely hushed cabin, a magic-carpet-like ride, and effortless power delivery. And in corners this large sedan can dance with

the alacrity of a sports sedan. The interior is opulent and pampering, but good luck getting used to the complicated controls.

With its suite of advanced safety features, the S550 can almost drive itself. Its active cruise control maintains a set distance behind a car in front, and the steering-assist system



### Test-car specs

**Price** \$114,475

**Trim** 4Matic

**Engine** 449-hp, 4.6-liter turbocharged V8

**Transmission** Seven-speed automatic

keeps the car centered in the driving lane—with the steering wheel eerily moving by itself. All that it asks is for the driver to keep one hand on the steering wheel. The S550 also has inflatable rear seat belts, like mini air bags to prevent rib-cage injuries, and it automatically brakes if needed to help avoid a collision.





## ► Toyota Highlander

**The Highlander** has always been pleasant, functional, and one of our highest-rated SUVs. The redesigned 2014 model provides improved handling and a larger third-row seat, and the once-stodgy styling has been jazzed up. We bought an all-wheel-drive XLE version, which comes well-equipped and has a navigation system.

The Highlander's steering is quick and well-weighted, lending this midsize SUV some athletic moves. The ride is comfortable while remaining steady and tied down. And

the cabin is pretty quiet, letting in only a touch of wind noise at highway speeds.

The 270-hp, 3.5-liter V6, paired to a six-speed automatic transmission, provides smooth and ready power. So far, we're seeing about 19 mpg in mixed driving, which is about par for the class. A hybrid version arrives this spring, but only in Limited and Platinum trim lines; its price will start at \$49,790.

Toyota has also spiffed things up inside the cabin. Wide and well-padded, the front seats accommodate most body types. We opted for



### Test-car specs

**Price** \$38,941

**Trim** XLE AWD

**Engine** 270-hp, 3.5-liter V6

**Transmission** Six-speed automatic

the \$275 second-row captain's chairs over the standard bench seat, which give lots of elbow room. But that option drops seating capacity from eight people to seven. Even though the new third-row seat is wider, it remains best for kids.

Controls are simple, with large buttons. Toyota couldn't resist sprinkling in some touch-sensitive buttons around the radio, but they work OK. It's easy to navigate the large, 8-inch touch screen, but it's a far reach to some controls. Toyota's Entune system provides a high level of smart-phone connectivity.

So far, the new Highlander has been a favorite among staff members with kids.



## ► Chevrolet SS

**You can think** of this seemingly nondescript sedan as a stealth Corvette. Or a wolf in sheep's clothing. With its Corvette-sourced 6.2-liter LS3 V8, the SS is a high-horsepower, rear-wheel-drive scorchers that's built by GM's Holden division in Australia. And for a starting price of \$43,475 you get an incognito muscle machine that can run with BMW and Mercedes-Benz tuner cars, and do it for significantly less money.

Firing up the SS's engine sparks a rumble that gets everyone's attention. All 415 hp

are channeled through a six-speed automatic transmission that works well with the V8; paddle shifters are on the steering wheel for those inclined to shift manually.

The quick, taut steering and well-controlled suspension keep the car stable and buttoned-down, lending it a sporty, athletic character. The ride is firm, but it's compliant enough to make the SS tolerable on a day-to-day basis. Note, though, that the SS comes with summer-only tires, so you'll want to swap those for all-season or winter tires if you expect



### Test-car specs

**Price** \$47,170

**Trim** —

**Engine** 415-hp, 6.2-liter V8

**Transmission** Six-speed automatic

to drive in snowy conditions.

Inside, you'll find a very good driving position as well as deeply sculpted seats with a prominently stitched red "SS" logo. Controls are mostly easy to master, but the reach to the touch screen is a bit far.

The SS benefits from a spacious rear seat and a good-sized trunk. Standard safety features include a backup camera as well as blind-spot-detection, forward-collision-warning, rear-cross-traffic-alert, and lane-departure-warning systems.

Overall, the SS can be especially appealing for those who want an exciting driving experience yet balk at having to contend with a low-slung, two-door sports car.

## COMPACT CARS

## Mazda3

ROAD-TEST  
SCORE  
**78**

Fun to drive, fuel-efficient, and affordable—that's an inviting combo that can be hard to find in one car. But it perfectly sums up the redesigned-for-2014 Mazda3. It has long been a small-car favorite among our testers, and the agile handling and precise steering of this revamped model make it one of the most enjoyable compacts to drive. It's right up there with the Ford Focus and Volkswagen Golf for the highest fun factor in the class.

We tested two versions: a sedan equipped with a six-speed automatic transmission and a hatchback with a six-speed manual. Both were powered by a 155-hp, 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine, which provided ample power and excellent fuel economy of 33 mpg overall for the sedan and 32 for the hatch. That's better gas mileage than you'll get in any other compact car, or even a subcompact, without spending more for a hybrid or diesel. And with the 2.0-liter's spirited performance, we see little

reason to go for the optional 184-hp, 2.5-liter four, which is livelier but gets 2 mpg less, according to EPA estimates.

Both engines carry Mazda's Skyactiv designation, which means they use direct fuel injection and a high compression ratio to help improve fuel efficiency. And our results back that up. On the highway, we got an amazing 45 mpg with the automatic transmission and an impressive 41 with the manual; that's similar to a diesel car. Moreover, the automatic delivers quick, smooth shifts, and the manual is crisp and precise. In fact, driving the manual car reminded us of the Mazda3's ultra-fun corporate cousin, the MX-5 Miata roadster.

Safety is another area in which the Mazda3 excels. In addition to getting an excellent overall rating in our accident-avoidance tests, it has earned top-notch crash-test scores from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety, including in the new frontal small-overlap test, which has plagued several of its competitors.

In addition, the 3 offers a number of advanced electronic safety systems that aren't typical in this class, including blind-spot monitoring, forward-collision warning, lane-departure warning, and city-braking assist (which helps prevent rear-end collisions).

One downside is ride comfort, which takes a backseat to the car's sporty handling. It's quite taut and provides a decent level of isolation, but the ride can be a bit jumpy. In addition, the cabin lets in a fair amount of noise, with road rumble and wind noise at highway speeds competing with normal conversation.

**High-tech and user-friendly**

Inside, the front seats are supportive and well-shaped. Most drivers will find adequate space, although shorter drivers may want to sit up higher for a better view out. The manual telescoping steering wheel provides a generous range of adjustment.

With large front and side windows, visibility



Mazda3 hatchback



Mazda3 sedan

**FUN AND FUELISH**

We measured an excellent 33 mpg overall in our sedan.



# Ratings 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<br>P   F   G   VG   E |                       |             |
| ✓    | 1    | Subaru Impreza Premium                           | \$21,345        |               | 82                          | ⊖                     | 27          |
|      | 2    | Kia Forte LX (1.8L)                              | 19,570          |               | 81                          | new                   | 28          |
| ✓    | 3    | Hyundai Elantra SE (1.8L)                        | 19,410          |               | 80                          | ○                     | 29          |
| ✓    | 4    | Subaru Impreza Sport Premium (hatchback)         | 22,345          |               | 79                          | ⊖                     | 26          |
| ✓    | 5    | Mazda3 i Grand Touring (2.0L, manual, hatchback) | 24,040          | •             | 78                          | ⊖                     | 32          |
| ✓    | 6    | Mazda3 i Touring (2.0L)                          | 21,740          | •             | 78                          | ⊖                     | 33          |
|      | 7    | Ford Focus SE Sedan SFE                          | 21,650          |               | 77                          | ●                     | 31          |
|      | 8    | Ford Focus SE Hatch                              | 22,185          |               | 74                          | ●                     | 28          |
|      | 9    | Volkswagen Jetta SE (1.8T)                       | 22,610          |               | 73                          | new                   | 30          |
| ✓    | 10   | Toyota Corolla LE Plus                           | 20,652          |               | 72                          | ⊖                     | 32          |
|      | 11   | Ford Focus SE Sedan                              | 20,280          |               | 71                          | ●                     | 28          |
| ✓    | 12   | Honda Civic EX*                                  | 21,605          |               | 71                          | ⊖                     | 29          |
|      | 13   | Chevrolet Cruze 1LT (1.4T)                       | 20,530          |               | 70                          | ⊖                     | 26          |
|      | 14   | Dodge Dart SE (2.0L)                             | 20,680          |               | 64                          | ●                     | 27          |
|      | 15   | Nissan Sentra SV                                 | 20,570          |               | 64                          | ○                     | 29          |

\* Powertrain has changed since last test.

**Why some models are not recommended.** The Kia Forte and Volkswagen Jetta (1.8T) are too new for us to have reliability data. The Ford Focus and Chevrolet Cruze have had below-average reliability. The Dodge Dart and Nissan Sentra scored too low in our testing.

is relatively good, although thick rear roof pillars and a small rear window in the hatchback limit rearward visibility. A backup camera comes only with the uplevel Mazda Connect infotainment system, which is standard on Grand Touring and optional on Touring models.

Rear-seat room is adequate but is not among the best in the class. Leg room is a bit

tight, and taller adults will run short on head room, especially in the hatchback. The seat is too narrow for three adults to fit comfortably.

The Mazda Connect system has a large in-dash screen and handy connectivity features, although the multifunction control knob takes getting used to. It's easy to pair a phone via Bluetooth, and it quickly reconnects each time you get into the car. You can stream music from Aha, Pandora, and Stitcher by selecting one on the screen or by speaking the name for the voice-command system, and it will initiate the app on your mobile device. The radio in the Touring version requires a long reach.

The previous Mazda3 has had consistently above-average reliability, and we expect the same from this new model.

**Best version to buy.** Skip the basic SV and Sport versions and go for the Touring trim or higher to get standard blind-spot monitoring. Also stick with the 2.0-liter engine, which provides adequate pep and better gas mileage. And with such a good manual shifter, it's almost worth learning to drive a stick, if necessary. Although it's more complex, we'd go for the Mazda Connect system for its added connectivity capabilities. Many of our staff members said that our 3i Grand Touring hatchback, with the manual, was a perfect blend of sportiness and practicality, and exactly the version they'd buy.



## Tested vehicle

|                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| <b>HIGHS</b>         | Handling, fuel economy, transmissions, high-end options, IIHS crash-test results  |
| <b>LOWS</b>          | Ride, noise, rear seat, rear visibility in hatchback, relatively pricey   |
| <b>TRIM LINES</b>    | Hatchback: i Grand Touring; Sedan: i Touring  |
| <b>DRIVETRAIN</b>    | 155-hp, 2.0-liter four-cylinder engine; front-wheel drive. Hatchback: Six-speed manual transmission; Sedan: Six-speed automatic |
| <b>MAJOR OPTIONS</b> | None  |
| <b>TESTED PRICE</b>  | Hatchback: \$24,040<br>Sedan: \$21,740  |

## The Mazda3 line

|                         |   |
|-------------------------|---|
| <b>OTHER TRIM LINES</b> | i Sport, i SV, s Grand Touring, s Touring |
| <b>OTHER ENGINE</b>     | 184-hp, 2.5-liter four-cylinder           |
| <b>BASE PRICES</b>      | \$16,945-\$26,495                         |

## More test findings

|                        |   |
|------------------------|---|
| <b>BRAKING</b>         | Short stopping distances.   |
| <b>HEADLIGHTS</b>      | Good visibility and intensity from low and high beams.  |
| <b>ACCESS</b>          | It takes a bit of ducking to get into or out of the car.  |
| <b>VISIBILITY</b>      | Decent to the front and sides, but the hatchback's rear window is small. A backup camera is optional and blind-spot monitoring is standard on i Touring and i Grand Touring versions. |
| <b>CABIN STORAGE</b>   | Moderate space in front.  |
| <b>HEAD RESTRAINTS</b> | Center-rear restraint must be raised to provide protection.   |
| <b>CHILD SEATS</b>     | Front- and rear-facing restraints are easy to secure in the rear.   |



Scan for video.



**TECH SUPPORT** The uplevel Mazda Connect infotainment system has welcome connectivity features, but it takes some getting used to.

## SMALL SUVs

## Jeep Cherokee

ROAD-TEST  
SCORE

70

Limited,  
V6ROAD-TEST  
SCORE

56

Latitude,  
4-cyl.

The Cherokee name was etched into SUV lore in the '80s, when sport-utility vehicles were rapidly gaining popularity. That original

model was a good off-roader, but it was also rough and cramped. For 2002 the Cherokee was replaced by the Liberty. Now Jeep has resurrected the name for a new compact SUV that's based on the same platform as the Dodge Dart sedan.

After Chrysler's success in our road tests with other recent redesigns, such as the Chrysler 300, Ram 1500 pickup, and Jeep Grand Cherokee and Dodge Durango SUVs, we expected more from the new Cherokee than it delivers. Though it has notable strengths, it comes off as a work in progress, failing to get a lot of the day-to-day basics right. Overall, the Cherokee didn't score well enough in our tests to be recommended.

We tested two Cherokees: The first is a Latitude version with a 184-hp, 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine, and the other is a more upscale Limited with a 271-hp, 3.2-liter V6. Both have Chrysler's new nine-speed automatic transmission and all-wheel drive.

Though more gear ratios in a transmission usually improve fuel economy and response—most competitors have six-speed automatics—the results from our four-cylinder model were dismal. It took a long 10.9 seconds to go from 0 to 60 mph, which is about 2 to 3 seconds slower than competitors. And its gas mileage was a mediocre 22 mpg overall, 2 to 4 mpg less than most competitors. Overall, this underpowered four-cylinder feels overworked by the heavy Cherokee. Moreover, the unrefined transmission shifts roughly and is reluctant to downshift.

Opting for the \$1,495 V6 rewards you with much better performance and refinement, while delivering 21 mpg overall. But you still need a fairly heavy foot on the throttle to get much out of it. Although our vehicles had Jeep's basic Active Drive I all-wheel-drive system, we were surprised by the pronounced front-wheel spin when driving in snow, especially with the V6, before power was transferred to the rear.

### Ups and downs

The Cherokee's ride is compliant, isolating most pavement flaws, but it is choppy, with short, quick hops, especially in the Limited version with 18-inch tires. Handling is not

particularly responsive, though it's secure enough. Even when the Cherokee was pushed to its handling limits at our track, it proved to be stable and predictable.

The steering has nice weight but doesn't transmit much feedback. The optional LaneSense lane-departure warning system makes small tugs on the steering wheel if you begin to drift out of your lane, but that system further dilutes any real steering feedback.

One highlight is how quiet the Cherokee is inside, especially with the more refined and relaxed V6. But the four-cylinder engine sounds rough and busy.

Optional park assist helps the Cherokee maneuver itself into either parallel- or perpendicular-parking spots. When the system finds a space that's large enough, you pull ahead of the spot, shift into reverse, and take your hands off the wheel. But we've found that it takes a long time to analyze parking spaces.

Inside, the cloth seats are too squishy and lack support, and they have no lumbar adjustment. Our Limited's leather seats, with power adjustment, are much better. The rear seat is roomy.

The Limited offers such luxury features as a heated steering wheel and a power



Jeep Cherokee Limited





### Tested vehicle

|                      |  |
|----------------------|--|
| <b>HIGHS</b>         | Quietness, access, rear seat, solid feel, high-end options   |
| <b>LOWS</b>          | Transmission, choppy ride, lack of agility, visibility, unsupportive cloth seats, confusing price structure  |
| <b>TRIM LINES</b>    | Latitude, Limited  |
| <b>DRIVETRAIN</b>    | Latitude: 184 hp, 2.4-liter four-cylinder engine; Limited: 271 hp, 3.2-liter V6. Both: nine-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive  |
| <b>MAJOR OPTIONS</b> | Latitude: none; Limited: Technology group (blind-spot, forward-collision, and lane-departure warnings), Luxury group (power liftgate, ventilated seats, and Uconnect 8.4 system with navigation) |
| <b>TESTED PRICE</b>  | Latitude: \$27,490; Limited: \$37,525  |

### The Cherokee line

|                         |                   |
|-------------------------|-------------------|
| <b>OTHER TRIMS</b>      | Sport, Trailhawk  |
| <b>OTHER DRIVETRAIN</b> | Front-wheel drive |
| <b>BASE PRICES</b>      | \$22,995-\$29,495 |

### More test findings

|                        |  |
|------------------------|--|
| <b>BRAKING</b>         | The Limited has short braking distances; the Latitude takes a bit longer to stop.      |
| <b>HEADLIGHTS</b>      | Neither standard halogen nor optional xenon HID lamps provide good forward visibility. |
| <b>ACCESS</b>          | Doors are large and tall, but access requires a big step over thick sills.             |
| <b>VISIBILITY</b>      | Thick roof pillars impede the view out. A backup camera should be standard but isn't.  |
| <b>CABIN STORAGE</b>   | There's lots of storage.   |
| <b>HEAD RESTRAINTS</b> | The second row's center restraint must be raised to provide protection.                |
| <b>CHILD SEATS</b>     | Hinge covers on the center-rear seat can interfere with installing some child seats.   |



Scan for video.



**USER-UNFRIENDLY**  
Basic Cherokees have a small, fussy touch screen that requires a long reach.

liftgate. Jeep's Uconnect 8.4 touch-screen infotainment system combines top-level connectivity with a friendly interface. Versions without the system use a smaller touch screen that's a long reach away and has only four visible radio presets. Adjusting the temperature on cars without automatic climate control is infuriatingly cumbersome, requiring a lot of button-tapping.

Serious off-roaders might be interested in the Trailhawk version, which comes with off-road-oriented tires and suspension, extra ground clearance, underbody skid plates, and electronic features such as hill-descent control and low-range gearing. We tried a Trailhawk on our rock hill and were impressed with its capability. But its tires

and added height make on-road handling more ponderous and less agile.

When the Cherokee is equipped with the V6 engine and \$495 Trailer Tow Group, it boasts a hefty 4,500-pound towing capacity.

The Cherokee is pricey. Even basic versions, costing \$27,000, lack features that many lower-priced rivals offer as standard.

**Best version to get.** If you get a Cherokee, go for a Limited (for the more comfortable leather seats) with the V6 and the big Uconnect 8.4 touch-screen system. That puts you right around \$32,000 with AWD. It's too bad that adding blind-spot monitoring requires a \$2,155 package on top of that. Whichever Cherokee you get, be sure to get the optional backup camera.

## Ratings Small SUVs

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<br>P   F   G   V   E |                       |             |
| ✓    | 1    | Subaru Forester 2.5i Premium     | \$26,814        |               | 88                         | ●                     | 26          |
|      | 2    | Ford Escape Titanium (2.0T)      | 36,600          |               | 79                         | ●                     | 22          |
| ✓    | 3    | Honda CR-V EX                    | 26,455          |               | 77                         | ●                     | 23          |
| ✓    | 4    | Volkswagen Tiguan SEL            | 37,020          |               | 76                         | ○                     | 21          |
| ✓    | 5    | Mazda CX-5 Touring (2.5L)        | 28,090          |               | 76                         | ●                     | 25          |
|      | 6    | Toyota RAV4 XLE                  | 26,802          |               | 75                         | ●                     | 24          |
|      | 7    | Ford Escape SE (1.6T)            | 28,040          |               | 75                         | ●                     | 22          |
|      | 8    | Kia Sportage SX (2.0T)           | 31,440          |               | 72                         | ○                     | 21          |
|      | 9    | Jeep Cherokee Limited (V6)       | 37,525          | ●             | 70                         | new                   | 21          |
|      | 10   | Kia Sportage LX                  | 24,400          |               | 70                         | ○                     | 22          |
|      | 11   | Hyundai Tucson GLS               | 24,920          |               | 70                         | ○                     | 22          |
|      | 12   | Mitsubishi Outlander SE (4-cyl.) | 27,180          |               | 57                         | ●                     | 23          |
|      | 13   | Jeep Cherokee Latitude (4-cyl.)  | 27,490          | ●             | 56                         | new                   | 22          |
|      | 14   | Jeep Patriot Latitude*           | 24,440          |               | 52                         | ●                     | 21          |
|      | 15   | Jeep Compass Latitude*           | 24,985          |               | 49                         | ●                     | 22          |

\*Powertrain has changed since last test.

**Why some models are not recommended.** The Ford Escape has had much-worse-than-average reliability. The Toyota RAV4 scored poorly in the IIHS small-overlap crash test. Models with a score below 75 didn't perform well enough in our testing.

# Compare

 Recommended

 Recommended


| VERSION  | Mazda3                                 | Mazda3                                 | Jeep Cherokee                                  | Jeep Cherokee                                  |
|--|--|--|--|--|
| <b>TRIM LINE</b>                                 | <b>i Grand Touring</b>                 | <b>i Touring</b>                       | <b>Limited</b>                                 | <b>Latitude</b>                                |
| <b>PRICE: BASE/TESTED</b> <sup>①</sup>           | \$23,245/\$24,040                      | \$20,645/\$21,740                      | \$29,995/\$37,525                              | \$26,495/\$27,490                              |
| <b>DRIVETRAIN</b>                                |  |  |  |  |
| Engine   | 2.0-liter 4-cyl. (155 hp)              | 2.0-liter 4-cyl. (155 hp)              | 3.2-liter V6 (271 hp)                          | 2.4-liter 4-cyl. (184 hp)                      |
| Transmission                                     | 6-speed manual                         | 6-speed automatic                      | 9-speed automatic                              | 9-speed automatic                              |
| Drive wheels                                     | Front                                  | Front                                  | AWD  | AWD  |
| <b>TIRES TESTED</b>                              |  |  |  |  |
| Model & size                                     | Yokohama Avid S34, size P205/60R16 91H | Yokohama Avid S34, size P205/60R16 91H | Continental ProContact TX, size 225/60R18 100H | Firestone Destination LE2, size 225/65R17 102T |
| <b>RATINGS</b>                                   |  |  |  |  |
| <b>PERFORMANCE</b>                               |  |  |  |  |
| Acceleration                                     |  |  |  |  |
| 0 to 60 mph, sec.                                | 8.2                                    | 8.3                                    | 7.7  | 10.9   |
| 45 to 65 mph, sec.                               | 6.1                                    | 5.0                                    | 5.5  | 7.0  |
| Quarter-mile, sec.                               | 16.6                                   | 16.6                                   | 16.1   | 18.2   |
| Transmission                                     |  |  |  |  |
| Routine handling                                 |  |  |  |  |
| Emergency handling                               |  |  |  |  |
| Avoidance maneuver, speed, mph                   | 54.0                                   | 54.5                                   | 51.5   | 51.5   |
| Braking  |  |  |  |  |
| From 60 mph, dry/wet, ft.                        | 133/143                                | 133/140                                | 133/144  | 138/153  |
| Headlights                                       |  |  |  |  |
| <b>COMFORT AND CONVENIENCE</b>                   |  |  |  |  |
| Ride   |  |  |  |  |
| Noise  |  |  |  |  |
| Driving position                                 |  |  |  |  |
| Front-seat comfort                               |  |  |  |  |
| Rear-seat comfort                                |  |  |  |  |
| Access   |  |  |  |  |
| Controls and displays                            |  |  |  |  |
| Interior fit and finish                          |  |  |  |  |
| Trunk/cargo area                                 |  |  |  |  |
| <b>PREDICTED RELIABILITY</b>                     |  |  | New  | New  |
| <b>FUEL</b>                                      |  |  |  |  |
| Overall mpg                                      | 32                                     | 33                                     | 21   | 22   |
| City/highway mpg                                 | 24/41                                  | 23/45                                  | 14/29  | 15/31  |
| Type   | regular                                | regular                                | regular  | regular  |
| Capacity, gal./Cruising range, miles             | 13.2/425                               | 13.2/435                               | 15.8/325                                       | 15.8/345                                       |
| Annual cost, 12K miles @ \$3.50/gal.             | \$1,305                                | \$1,275                                | \$2,045  | \$1,935  |
| <b>SAFETY</b>                                    |  |  |  |  |
| <b>CRASH TESTS</b>                               |  |  |  |  |
| IIHS moderate/small-overlap frontal              | Good/Good                              | Good/Good                              | Good/NA  | Good/NA  |
| IIHS side  | Good                                   | Good                                   | Good   | Good   |
| IIHS rear  | Good                                   | Good                                   | Good   | Good   |
| IIHS roof strength                               | Good                                   | Good                                   | Good   | Good   |
| NHTSA front, driver/passenger                    | NA/NA                                  | NA/NA                                  |  |  |
| NHTSA side, driver/rear                          | NA/NA                                  | NA/NA                                  |  |  |
| NHTSA rollover 2WD/4WD                           | NA/NA                                  | NA/NA                                  |  |  |
| <b>AIR BAGS</b>                                  |  |  |  |  |
| Side, front/rear                                 | std./no                                | std./no                                | std./std.                                      | std./std.                                      |
| Head protection                                  | standard                               | standard                               | std. w/rollover                                | std. w/rollover                                |
| <b>SPECIFICATIONS</b>                            |  |  |  |  |
| <b>DIMENSIONS AND WEIGHT</b>                     |  |  |  |  |
| Length/width/height, in.                         | 176/71/57                              | 180/71/57                              | 182/73/66                                      | 182/73/66                                      |
| Wheelbase, in.                                   | 106                                    | 106                                    | 106  | 106  |
| Turning circle, ft.                              | 38                                     | 38                                     | 40   | 40   |
| Ground clearance, in.                            | 5.0                                    | 5.0                                    | 6.5  | 6.0  |
| Curb weight, lb. (% front/rear)                  | 2,885 (59/41)                          | 2,875 (60/40)                          | 4,120 (57/43)                                  | 3,960 (57/43)                                  |
| Maximum load, lb.                                | 850                                    | 850                                    | 1,000  | 1,000  |
| Luggage, suitcases+duffles/cargo volume, cu. ft. | 2+2                                    | 2+3                                    | 31.0   | 31.0   |
| Towing capacity, lb.                             | NR                                     | NR                                     | 4,500  | 2,000  |
| <b>INTERIOR ROOM</b>                             |  |  |  |  |
| Front shoulder room, in.                         | 57.0                                   | 57.0                                   | 57.0   | 57.0   |
| Front leg room, in.                              | 41.5                                   | 41.5                                   | 42.5   | 43.5   |
| Front head room, in. <sup>②</sup>                | 3.0                                    | 4.0                                    | 5.5  | 5.5  |
| Rear shoulder room, in.                          | 52.0                                   | 52.0                                   | 54.0   | 54.0   |
| Rear leg room, in.                               | 26.0                                   | 28.0                                   | 29.0   | 30.0   |
| Rear head room, in. <sup>②</sup>                 | 4.0                                    | 4.0                                    | 4.0  | 4.5  |

<sup>①</sup> Based on sticker price at time of purchase. <sup>②</sup> Above a person 5'9" tall.





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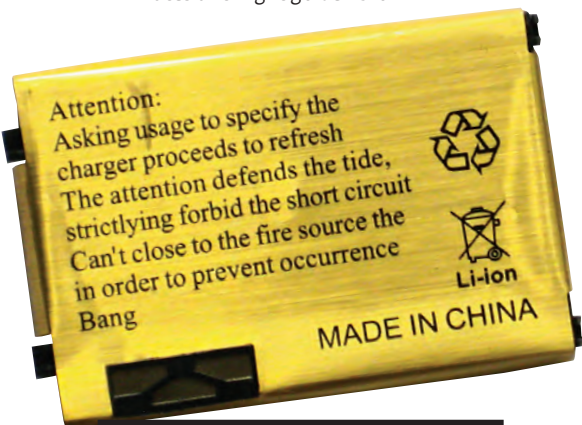
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| Loans, payday, complaints                 | Feb 14, 6                        | Towels, paper                            | Sep 13, 11; Jan 14, 44                         |
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## Beyond the pale

A Connecticut reader puzzled over the instructions for these "triple chocolate cookie dough" cookies. They said: "Bake 12-14 minutes until light golden brown."



## Bang indeed

The buyer who inserted this battery in his new "pay as you go" phone needn't have worried about the warnings. "Sure enough," he writes, "the phone did not work."



## Ya think?

If the paid pitchman doesn't approve the product, who will?



## So you say

"We all chuckled until someone turned the mug," a New Jersey reader writes. "The supplier refunded the full purchase price."



## A tall order

This sign, from a Houston coffee shop, should gladden the heart of anyone who rebels against ordering a Starbucks "tall"—which is, after all, a small (unless you count the even smaller, rarely seen "short.")

Sorry, we don't speak "Starbucks."

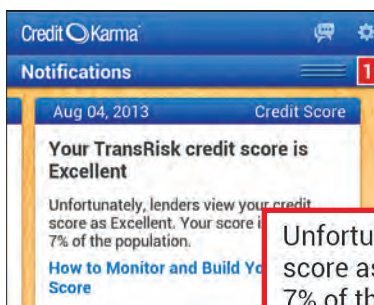
Regular = 12oz.

Large = 16 oz.



## I only have eyes for you

The road? What road?



## Good news/bad news

A Tennessee reader apologized and promised to try to work on his score.

Unfortunately, lenders view your credit score as Excellent. Your score is lower than 7% of the population.

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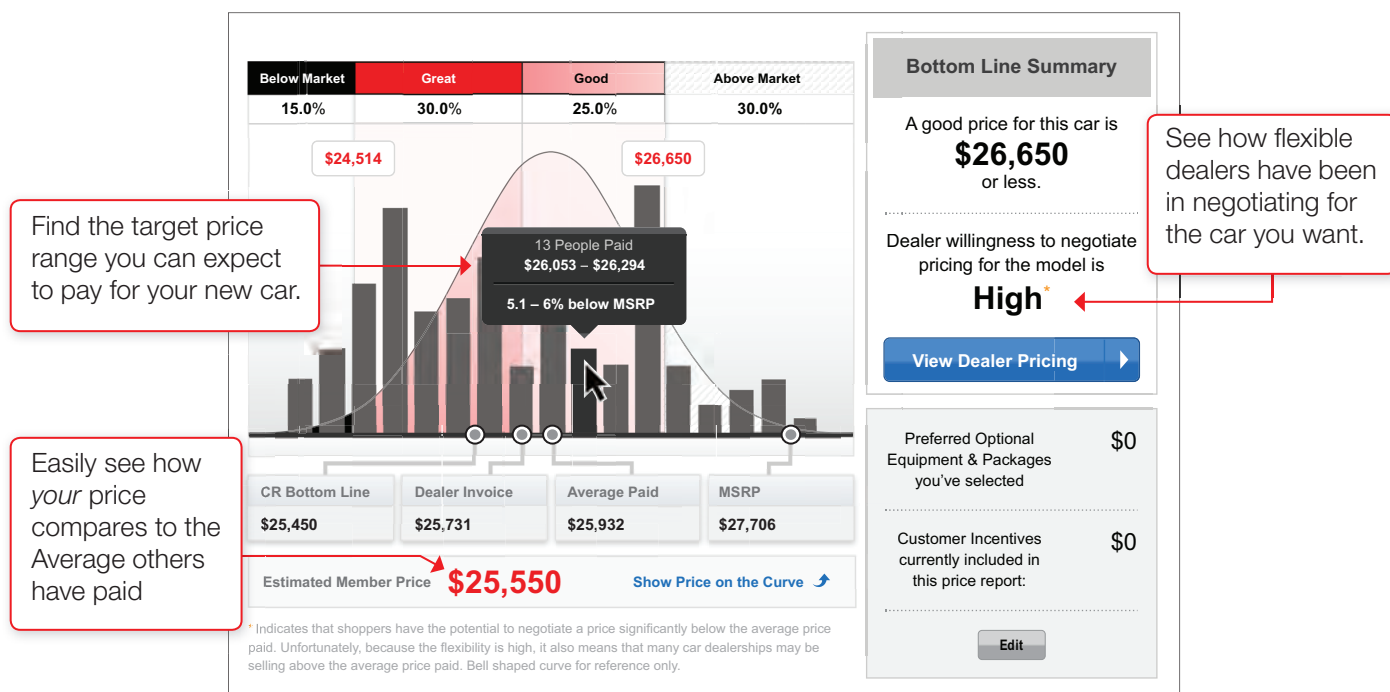
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NCPS0414B



# Canada **Extra**

Information from CONSUMER REPORTS® for Canadian readers

## 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](mailto: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.

### IN THIS SPECIAL SECTION

|                              |            |
|------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Lawn mowers</b>           | <b>32B</b> |
| <b>Tractors &amp; riders</b> | <b>32B</b> |
| <b>String trimmers</b>       | <b>32C</b> |
| <b>Autos</b>                 | <b>32D</b> |
| <b>Contact info</b>          | <b>32D</b> |

- ✓ **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.

# Lawn mowers

Report, page 33; Ratings, pages 35-36

Recommended models only, from 89 tested.

| Rec.<br>Rank | Brand & model | Price |  | Specs           |                 | Overall score               |
|--------------|---------------|-------|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
|              |               |       |  | Deck size (in.) | Engine cc/volts |                             |
|              |               |       |  |                 |                 | 0 100<br>P   F   G   VG   E |

## A GAS SELF-PROPELLED, MULTI-SPEED Best for most lawns, these blend ease and performance.

|   |   |                     |       |    |        |    |
|---|---|---------------------|-------|----|--------|----|
| ✓ | 3 | Toro 20381          | \$620 | 21 | 159 cc | 82 |
| ✓ | 4 | Honda HRR2169VYC    | 660   | 21 | 160    | 82 |
| ✓ | 5 | Honda HRR2169VKC    | 560   | 21 | 160    | 81 |
| ✓ | 6 | Toro Recycler 20333 | 570   | 22 | 190    | 75 |
| ✓ | 8 | Toro Recycler 20332 | 460   | 22 | 190    | 73 |

## B GAS SELF-PROPELLED, SINGLE-SPEED Suitable for most lawns, but they sacrifice flexibility.

|   |   |            |     |    |        |    |
|---|---|------------|-----|----|--------|----|
| ✓ | 2 | Toro 20370 | 370 | 22 | 149 cc | 66 |
| ✓ | 3 | Toro 20371 | 380 | 22 | 149    | 65 |

## C GAS PUSH For smaller, flatter lawns and for trimming larger ones.

|   |   |                     |     |    |        |    |
|---|---|---------------------|-----|----|--------|----|
| ✓ | 5 | Ariens Razor 911173 | 430 | 21 | 159 cc | 65 |
|---|---|---------------------|-----|----|--------|----|

## D ELECTRIC BATTERY Best for lawns small enough to mow within the 15- to 45-minute run time.

|   |   |  |     |    |      |    |
|---|---|--|-----|----|------|----|
| ✓ | 2 | Black & Decker CM1936                  | 500 | 19 | 36 V | 59 |
| ✓ | 3 | Black & Decker SPCM1936 <sup>(4)</sup> | 500 | 19 | 36   | 59 |
| ✓ | 7 | Toro 20360                             | 460 | 20 | 36   | 56 |

<sup>(4)</sup> Self-propelled electric.

# Tractor & riders

Report, page 33; Ratings, page 38

Recommended models only, from 54 tested.

| Rec.<br>Rank | Brand & model | Price   |               | Specs           |                   | Overall score               |
|--------------|---------------|---------|---------------|-----------------|-------------------|-----------------------------|
|              |               | Machine | Bag/mulch kit | Deck size (in.) | Engine power (hp) |                             |
|              |               |         |               |                 |                   | 0 100<br>P   F   G   VG   E |

## A LAWN TRACTORS Best for most large lawns.

|   |   |                 |         |             |    |    |    |
|---|---|-----------------|---------|-------------|----|----|----|
| ✓ | 6 | John Deere D125 | \$2,100 | \$350/\$100 | 42 | 20 | 75 |
| ✓ | 8 | John Deere D110 | 2,100   | 340/30      | 42 | 20 | 74 |

## B LAWN TRACTORS (WIDE DECK) These offer wider cuts.

|   |   |                     |       |        |    |    |    |
|---|---|---------------------|-------|--------|----|----|----|
| ✓ | 1 | John Deere D140     | 2,400 | 350/35 | 48 | 22 | 69 |
| ✓ | 2 | Husqvarna 10240503S | 2,600 | 400/50 | 48 | 24 | 69 |

## C ZERO-TURN-RADIUS RIDER Turns tightly but can be hard to control on hills.

|   |   |                 |       |         |    |    |    |
|---|---|-----------------|-------|---------|----|----|----|
| ✓ | 3 | John Deere Z235 | 3,200 | 400/100 | 42 | 20 | 73 |
|---|---|-----------------|-------|---------|----|----|----|



# String trimmers

Report and Ratings, page 39

Recommended models only, from 79 tested.

| Rec. Rank | Brand & model | Price | Weight (lb.) | Engine cc/amp | Overall score               |
|-----------|---------------|-------|--------------|---------------|-----------------------------|
|           |               |       |              |               | 0 100<br>P   F   G   VG   E |

## A GAS-POWERED MODELS These offer mobility and unlimited run time but require more upkeep.

|     |  |       |      |       |    |
|-----|--|-------|------|-------|----|
| ✓ 2 | Stihl FS 45                              | \$180 | 10.5 | 27 cc | 82 |
| ✓ 5 | Stihl FS 40 C-E                          | 230   | 11   | 27    | 81 |
| ✓ 6 | Echo SRM-225 <sup>1</sup>                | 290   | 12   | 21    | 80 |
| ✓ 7 | Stihl FS 56 RC-E Easy2Start <sup>1</sup> | 300   | 12.5 | 27    | 78 |
| ✓ 8 | Echo GT-225 <sup>2</sup>                 | 190   | 10   | 21    | 77 |

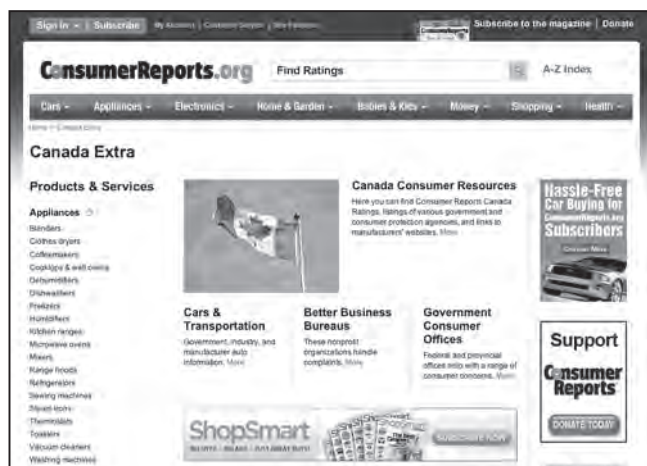
## C CORDED ELECTRIC MODEL Provides unlimited run time within range of a power outlet.

|     |              |     |     |         |    |
|-----|--------------|-----|-----|---------|----|
| ✓ 2 | Stihl FSE 60 | 130 | 8.5 | 5.3 amp | 70 |
|-----|--------------|-----|-----|---------|----|

<sup>1</sup> Straight shaft; others are curved. <sup>2</sup> Fixed-line head; others are automatic or bump-feed.

## 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](http://ConsumerReports.org). Once there, click on the "Canada Extra" link on the opening screen. There you can see which reports have Canadian information available.



# Autos

Report and Ratings, pages 56-60

All of the tested vehicles are available in Canada.

| Make & model           | Price range       | Acceleration (sec.) |            |             |            | Fuel economy (liters per 100 km) |                 |         |
|------------------------|-------------------|---------------------|------------|-------------|------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|---------|
|                        |                   | 0-50 km/h           | 0-100 km/h | 80-100 km/h | 500 meters | City driving                     | Highway driving | Overall |
| COMPACT CARS           |                   |                     |            |             |            |                                  |                 |         |
| Mazda3 hatchback       | \$16,995-\$26,885 | 3.1                 | 8.9        | 4.0         | 19.0       | 10.0                             | 5.7             | 7.3     |
| Mazda3 sedan           | 15,995-27,195     | 3.3                 | 8.8        | 3.5         | 18.9       | 10.4                             | 5.2             | 7.1     |
| SMALL SUVs             |                   |                     |            |             |            |                                  |                 |         |
| Jeep Cherokee (V6)     | 26,590-36,935     | 3.2                 | 8.2        | 4.2         | 18.5       | 17.2                             | 8.0             | 11.5    |
| Jeep Cherokee (4-cyl.) | 23,495-35,440     | 4.1                 | 11.6       | 5.0         | 20.9       | 16.2                             | 7.6             | 10.8    |

## Contact info

How to reach manufacturers in Canada.

### Ariens

920-756-4688  
ariens.com

### Black & Decker

800-544-6986  
blackanddecker.com

### Echo

877-324-6600  
echo.ca

### Honda

888-946-6329  
honda.ca

### Husqvarna

800-805-5523  
husqvarna.com/ca

### John Deere

800-522-7448  
deere.ca

### Stihl

519-681-3000  
stihl.ca

### Toro

800-544-5364  
toro.ca