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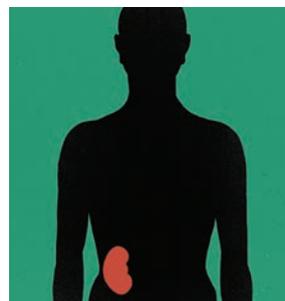
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Dangerous misinformation abounds, but you can continue to trust CR. Our mission is to help you stay healthy, safe, and informed.

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- ⦿ VERY GOOD
- ⦿ EXCELLENT

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# Bridging the Trust Divide



IT'S ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE to comprehend all that has happened this past year, and adjust to our new normal. There have been so many seismic disruptions—and the ground is still shifting under our feet as we continue to grapple with the worst public health crisis in a century.

Our nation is facing incalculable grief and loss, economic distress, and an overdue reckoning

with issues of race and justice—and these challenges are only made more difficult by the deep divisions in our country. We are experiencing the stresses a democracy faces when its citizens can't trust the information they hear and read. This past year we have seen the direct and dire harms related to COVID-19 misinformation, versions of the same stories that plague so many families forced to wonder whether they can trust the health of their tap water or the safety of the products they buy.

The threat is severe, but what has been encouraging is to see the entire CR community unite in common purpose to seek out and instill greater truth in the marketplace. As an organization, CR has always been driven by fact-based solutions and by the belief that a healthy, free, and prosperous society is built on trust. Our work is guided by scientific rigor, independent investigations, research, and advocacy—and it has been informed by what consumers are experiencing in the marketplace.

I want to thank all of you for your support, which allows our nonprofit to bring you trusted information. As we enter this holiday season, we are proud to continue to stand with you, deliver for you, and advocate on your behalf, no matter what disruptions the world has in store—because safety, fairness, and trust have never been more important.

Be well. Stay safe.

**Marta L. Tellado,**  
President and CEO  
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## Student Loan Protection

### WHAT'S AT STAKE

Student debt in the U.S. now adds up to almost \$1.7 trillion. That makes student loans the second-largest class of household debt in the country, trailing only home mortgages and ahead of credit card and auto loan debt. On average, 45 million borrowers owe more than \$37,000 each.

That kind of debt was hard enough to manage before the COVID-19 pandemic. Now, with millions of jobs destroyed and the U.S. economy struggling to right itself, it represents a full-blown crisis for many students and their families.

Making matters worse, the system for repaying student loans has become complex, confusing, and even abusive—and is woefully lacking in consumer protections.

Student loan servicers—companies such as FedLoan Servicing, Great Lakes, Navient, Nelnet, and Sallie Mae—are the main point of contact for many people trying to pay off their loans and are supposed to be there to help. Instead, they sometimes add to borrower burdens: State and federal investigations have shown that some of these for-profit companies routinely lose paperwork, misapply payments, provide borrowers with inaccurate information, and even steer borrowers into more costly repayment options.

### HOW CR HAS YOUR BACK

Consumer advocates at CR have been working at the state and national levels to make the system work better for everyone. In September, that effort took a major step forward with the signing of California's Student Borrower Bill of Rights, the strongest such protections in the nation.

The law, co-sponsored by

CR, takes aim at abuses that make student loan debt more costly and trigger defaults. Among other things, it requires loan servicers to act in the best interests of borrowers—a commonsense principle that, unfortunately, is often flagrantly ignored.

The law also mandates that loan servicers apply payments in a way that minimizes extra fees, improve their record-keeping, and train staff to provide accurate information about repayment options.

And it establishes a student loan ombudsman, a designated advocate for borrowers who will investigate consumer complaints, issue reports to the state legislature, and refer violations to enforcement authorities.

About a dozen other states have passed legislation to expand student loan oversight since 2015, when Connecticut became the first.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you're struggling to make your student loan payments, tell us your story at [CR.org/edloan1220](https://CR.org/edloan1220).



### TAKING A STAND

■ Broadnet Teleservices wants the Federal Communications Commission to rule that the current requirement that robocalls be made only with a consumer's prior consent doesn't apply to calls by state and local governments. Fearing **a new avalanche of robocalls**, CR is opposing the request.

■ CR is also fighting a Department of Energy proposal that would poke holes in a rule limiting the water flow of showerheads to 2.5 gallons per minute. By redefining each nozzle of a multinozzle fixture as a showerhead, the move **could waste water and energy—and swell consumer utility bills**.

## A New Watchdog

### WHAT'S AT STAKE

Ten years ago, CR successfully pushed for a federal watchdog that would make sure banks, lenders, and other financial companies treat consumers fairly—and that could put a stop to fraud and other abuses in the financial marketplace.

But in recent years, that agency—the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau—has scaled back enforcement of consumer protection laws and reduced penalties on firms caught abusing customers. And this is happening even as the COVID-19 crisis leaves Americans especially vulnerable to financial scams and predatory lending.

### HOW CR HAS YOUR BACK

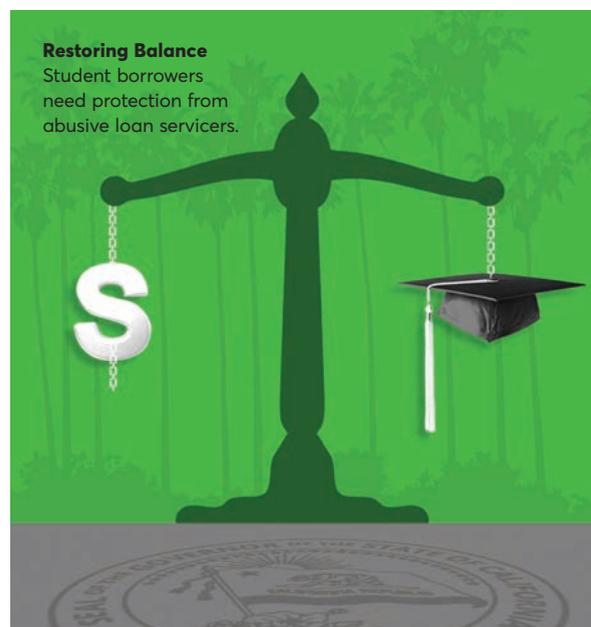
As with student loans, CR has been pushing for state laws that would fill regulatory gaps at the federal level—and, again, efforts in California are paying off.

In September, as part of its budget process, the state created a CFPB-like Department of Financial Protection and Innovation. With broad jurisdiction over the financial services industry, including authority to oversee debt collectors and credit reporting agencies, the agency will monitor the marketplace for patterns of abuse and seek relief for consumers ripped off by financial firms.

"This proposal should serve as a model for other states seeking to strengthen oversight of the financial industry and ensure that consumers are treated fairly when they pay their bills, can manage their debts, and have a real shot at building family wealth and security," says CR senior policy counsel Suzanne Martindale.

### WHAT YOU CAN DO

Learn more about protecting your money at [CR.org/money](https://CR.org/money).





Our October cover story, “**Stop Eating Pesticides,**” offered expert advice to help minimize your exposure to toxic chemicals on the fruits and vegetables you buy. To join the conversation and learn how to pick the safest produce, go to [CR.org/pesticides1220](https://www.consumerreports.org/pesticides1220).

I HAVE BEEN trying to eat more healthy and make more organic choices for years. But I was shocked to see in your produce pesticide ratings that 76 percent of the [U.S. grown] organic spinach samples contained 33 different pesticides. I had switched to spinach from lettuce because I figured it was better for me. ... I guess not! Thank you so much for the graph in the magazine. I'm putting it on my refrigerator for when I make my grocery list!  
—Diane Hollister, Nashville, TN

“HOW MUCH does organic really cost?” CR asked in its October issue. Equally important, if not more so, is “How much does conventionally grown food really cost?” Who pays the environmental, social, and health costs associated with conventional farming’s use of pesticides, herbicides, and synthetic fertilizers? We do. Not at the point of purchase, but through our taxes and health care bills. If all these costs were reflected in the price, we’d see that organic food prices may well be a bargain.  
—Joseph Bonasia, Cape Coral, FL

off my produce. I currently soak my produce in 1 teaspoon of baking soda in 2 cups of water for at least 2 minutes. But there was no mention of this method. Have I been wasting my time?  
—Wendy Pinkham, Grayslake, IL

**EDITOR’S NOTE** Our experts have found limited evidence that soaking produce in a baking soda solution can help get rid of pesticides, particularly on apples. So if you have the time to soak your produce, this extra step may help—but know it hasn’t been widely proved effective, so this method isn’t a guarantee.

I READ with great interest your article on pesticides in produce. I was hoping for some good news on how to better strip pesticides

I FOUND your guide to the produce aisle remarkably useful. I can easily determine the safest way to choose produce, whether

it’s U.S. or imported, organic or nonorganic. With most foods, it’s easy to find an Excellent or Very Good rating. With one exception: fresh cherries. Must I give up my favorite fruit?  
—Michael Trout, Selkirk, NY

**EDITOR’S NOTE** Data on pesticide residues on organic fresh or frozen cherries weren’t included in the five years of the Department of Agriculture’s Pesticide Data Program tests we analyzed. But based on what we found in our analysis of USDA data, which showed safer pesticide levels in organic produce as a whole, it’s a pretty good bet that organic cherries would be low in residues. Plus we determined that the risk from nonorganic cherries (included in our October article’s chart) is primarily due to three pesticides—called cyhalothrin, tebuconazole, and iprodione—all banned in organic farming.

THANK YOU for the interesting guide to pesticides in produce. I’m interested in how organic certification is determined and what kind of inspections there are to check that U.S. farmers adhere to the rules once they’re certified. In other words, can we trust the organic label?  
—Zuzana Dillon, Reston, VA

**EDITOR’S NOTE** You can trust the USDA organic label, says Michael Hansen, PhD, CR’s senior scientist. Organic comes with a long list of criteria and stringent verification rules that by law farmers and food processors have to meet. Farms that grow organic crops or raise animals organically, along with facilities that process organic foods, are inspected at least annually by certifying agencies that are approved by the Department of Agriculture. A USDA spokesperson told CR that when fraud or other serious problems are suspected, it investigates. And when the



WRITE

Go to [CR.org/lettertoeditor](https://www.consumerreports.org/lettertoeditor) to share your comments for publication.

evidence warrants, the offending company can no longer use the USDA organic seal.



## SAFER BACK SEATS

I ENJOYED “Making Back Seats Safer” (October 2020), but what about rear-end collisions? Some small cars and three-row SUVs have the rear head restraints just inches from the rear window. Are there any standards for rear-end crash safety?

—Tom Magdaleno, Camarillo, CA

**EDITOR’S NOTE** *There are few standards for rear-end crash safety, and the expert we spoke with said that there’s so little data about third-row collisions that it’s difficult to even draw conclusions about how passengers in the third row of an SUV would fare. But we know that rear-end collisions tend to be less severe due to lower crash forces: When two cars collide*

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head-on, the relative speed of the impact tends to be higher than when both cars are traveling in the same direction, as is the case in a rear collision.

I APPLAUD your efforts at increasing auto safety with new technologies. But we share the road with numerous large trucks. What are the efforts being made to require all large trucks to also have effective safety technologies?  
—George R. Cochran,  
Saint Paul, MN

**EDITOR’S NOTE** *A recent study from the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety (IIHS) estimates that equipping big trucks like tractor trailers with automatic emergency braking (AEB) and forward collision warning could prevent more than 40 percent of crashes in which a truck strikes another vehicle from behind. Legislation passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in July would mandate AEB on all new commercial vehicles weighing more than 10,000 pounds, in addition to school buses and passenger cars. (Such a mandate is already in place in Europe.) It’s now up to the Senate to act.*

WHEN I BOUGHT my new car (2017 Toyota Prius V), I was offended that the safety features I wanted—automatic emergency braking (AEB) and adaptive cruise control—weren’t available on my model. Unfortunately, those features were available only in the top model. And then, they were part of a \$5,000 package. Now I look forward to another decade of “unsafe” driving because I couldn’t pay an extra \$10,000 for a \$25,000 car.  
—Bill Barnes, Charlotte, NC

**EDITOR’S NOTE** *In 2017 advanced safety and driver assist features were just becoming available, making them harder*



## PROTECT YOURSELF FROM SCAMS

Your October 2020 article “Supplement Schemes & COVID-19 Come-Ons” was interesting. I have probably been exposed via email and spam telephone calls to many scams. On average, I receive five spam calls a day. On one occasion, I received 12 irritating scam calls in one day.  
—Michael Wolfe,  
Bradenton, FL

**EDITOR’S NOTE** *To help protect yourself, list your phone numbers with the Do Not Call Registry, which removes you from call lists used by legitimate telemarketing companies. But it doesn’t stop illegal robocallers—who ignore the list—from contacting you. If you do answer a robocall, don’t engage (you’ll just be encouraging robocallers to keep calling). Instead, hang up and file a complaint at ftccomplaintassistant.gov or consumercomplaints.fcc.gov. For more advice, go to [CR.org/scams1220](https://www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov).*

to find. Today, many companies are offering such equipment as standard on their base version, or at least lower trim levels. But there are still models that keep such features as options or limit them to pricey, higher trims. CR is pushing automakers to include proven, life-saving features on all models so that consumers can be confident they are buying the best, and latest, protection. In a study CR published over the summer, we found that upward of 20,000 lives could be saved annually if existing technologies were fully implemented in new vehicles. We also award points in our road tests for including such features as standard equipment, to encourage automakers to do the right thing.



## WATER CONSERVATION

I WAS DELIGHTED to notice the bar graph, “People who tend to run the water while brushing their teeth, by age,” in “A Better Brush?” (October 2020). While patronizing fitness centers, I have been appalled by the wanton waste of water by members at the sink and in the shower. It seems that people either do not know, do not care, or do not believe that climate change is causing drought over large parts of the U.S. Or maybe they believe it is their right to waste a precious resource just because they can. Then we all can deal with the existential result later.  
—Martin Smukler,  
McKinleyville, CA

**EDITOR’S NOTE** *We’re committed to keeping sustainability in mind whenever possible. For example, on page 11 of this issue, you’ll see our ratings of low-flush toilets.*

# What We're Testing in Our Labs ...

In our 63 labs, we continually review and rate products. Here, timely picks for this month.

## Computer Monitors

**WE TESTED:** 6 models

**WE TEST FOR:** Display quality, including image clarity, color accuracy, and contrast for both text and photos; versatility, including adjustable height; and more.

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**

Median: 67  
Range: 47-69

**Best Overall Quality**

Dell U2419HC, 24"  
\$310

**69**  
OVERALL  
SCORE



**Large, Versatile Screen**

Dell U2719DC, 27"  
\$460

**67**  
OVERALL  
SCORE



**Bargain, but Not Adjustable**

Acer ED242QR, 24"  
\$150

**55**  
OVERALL  
SCORE



## Food Processors

**WE TESTED:** 42 models

**WE TEST FOR:** How well a model chops onions and almonds, slices celery and mushrooms, shreds carrots and cheese, and more.

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**

Median: 58  
Range: 35-81

**Top-Notch Chop**

Breville Sous Chef  
BFP800XL/A, 16 cups  
\$400

**81**  
OVERALL  
SCORE



**Excellent Value**

Oster Versa Pro Series blender/  
food processor BLSTVB-104-000  
4 cups  
\$150

**78**  
OVERALL  
SCORE



**30-Year Motor Warranty**

Magimix 4200 XL, 12 cups  
\$400

**71**  
OVERALL  
SCORE



## Ask Our Experts

**Most of the year I cook for two. Should I use a full-sized food processor?**



FULL-SIZED FOOD PROCESSORS aren't just overkill for small portions; their bowls are too big to chop the food well, says CR tester Tara Casaregola. Some larger models, such as the Breville and Magimix above, include multiple sizes of bowls and blades. Or you can opt for a smaller 4- or 5-cup model. But you may be able to get by without a food processor altogether. A small food chopper has sharp blades to help speed up meal prep without taking up much counter space. (See the one in our gift guide, on page 13.) A blender's blades—while typically not as sharp as a food processor's blades—can take on some larger tasks, too, such as puréeing ingredients to make soup.

ILLUSTRATION: SERGE BLOCH

For the latest ratings of these and other product categories, readers with a Digital or All Access membership can go to [CR.org](http://CR.org).

## Drills

**WE TESTED:** 12 general-use models  
**WE TEST FOR:** Power from max rpm to stall, measured using a dynamometer; speed of drilling holes and driving screws; run time; and more.

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**  
 Median: 54  
 Range: 26-71

**Excellent Power & Handling**  
 Makita FD07R1  
 \$160

**71**  
 OVERALL SCORE



**Great Power for Your Buck**  
 DeWalt DCD701F2  
 \$100

**71**  
 OVERALL SCORE



**Quick to Recharge**  
 Milwaukee 2407-22  
 \$130

**60**  
 OVERALL SCORE



## Low-Flush Toilets

**WE TESTED:** 43 models  
**WE TEST FOR:** How well a model moves simulated waste, how well flushing cleans the bowl, and noise. We also note the gallons of water used per flush (gpf).

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**  
 Median: 71  
 Range: 38-84

**Excellent All-Around**  
 American Standard Champion 4 Max 2586.128ST.020  
 1.28 gpf  
 \$240

**78**  
 OVERALL SCORE



**Great at Bowl Cleaning**  
 Kohler Wellworth K-3575  
 1.28 gpf  
 \$250

**74**  
 OVERALL SCORE



**Uses Less Water, but Noisy**  
 Gerber Ultra Flush UL-20-318, 1 gpf  
 \$520

**71**  
 OVERALL SCORE



## Sound Bars for \$250 or Less

**WE TESTED:** 20 models  
**WE TEST FOR:** Sound quality, how easy it is to set up and use a model's system, ease of using non-TV features, and more.

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**  
 Median: 52  
 Range: 30-60

**Full-Featured & Best Sound**  
 Polk Audio Command Bar  
 \$250

**57**  
 OVERALL SCORE



**Basic Bargain Buy**  
 Creative Stage 2.1  
 \$90

**57**  
 OVERALL SCORE



**Easy-to-Use Basic Bar**  
 Bose Solo 5 TV Sound System  
 \$180

**56**  
 OVERALL SCORE



## Car Seats

**WE TESTED:** 55 models  
**WE TEST FOR:** Protection in simulated crash tests, how easy it is to install in a variety of vehicles, and more.

**ABOUT THE SCORES:**  
**INFANT** Median: 68  
 Range: 42-90  
**TODDLER BOOSTER** Median: 70  
 Range: 38-82

**Excellent Infant Car Seat**  
 Chicco KeyFit Car Seat  
 \$160

**89**  
 OVERALL SCORE



**Best Toddler Booster Overall**  
 Graco Nautilus SnugLock LX  
 \$205

**82**  
 OVERALL SCORE



**A Safe Deal for Toddlers**  
 Cosco Highback Booster  
 \$42

**75**  
 OVERALL SCORE



Note: We rate different products according to different testing protocols; as a result, Overall Scores of one product category are not comparable with those of another.

COMING NEXT MONTH 5G Smartphones & More



## Will a regular flu shot help protect me against COVID-19?

The flu shot won't protect you against COVID-19, for which there is no vaccine yet, but a flu shot will cut your risk of getting the flu—which is particularly crucial this year. That's because there will be a substantial period of time when both flu and COVID-19 are circulating, says Erica Shenoy, MD, associate chief of infection control at Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston. Avoiding the flu will help hospitals keep more beds and ventilators available for people with serious cases of COVID-19.

While last year's flu shot was only, on average, 39 percent effective, getting the vaccine reduces your likelihood of becoming severely ill from the virus. There is also no evidence that getting a flu shot increases your risk of getting sick with COVID-19, the Centers for

Disease Control and Prevention says. In fact, some early, unpublished research suggests that those who get a flu shot are less likely to experience serious complications from COVID-19.

If you haven't had your shot yet, don't delay: Colder weather means more time indoors, in closer proximity to others, giving the flu virus more opportunity to spread. Many doctors' offices, walk-in clinics, and drugstores have procedures for giving flu shots quickly and safely during the pandemic, such as select hours for vaccines and drive-up flu shots. Call ahead to know what to expect, and wear a mask. If you're 65 or older, ask your doctor about Fluzone High-Dose, designed to boost your immune system's response to the shot. And if you have (or may have) COVID-19, get your doctor's okay before you go in for a flu shot.

### What's the best way to de-ice my driveway?

Most ice melts are blends of the same ingredients: sodium chloride, calcium chloride, or magnesium chloride—all types

of salt, says James Dickerson, PhD, CR's chief scientific officer. In weather below 15° F, opt for a product containing calcium chloride, which can melt ice in temperatures as low as minus 25° F. When it's 15° F or above outside, regular rock salt—typically a cheaper option—should work fine. (Ice melts that contain calcium magnesium acetate coating are pricey compared with traditional rock salt.)

No matter which type of melt you use, the salt will seep into porous pavement, potentially causing your concrete driveway to rust, crack, and deteriorate. To reduce the amount of salt on your pavement and provide traction, mix ice melt with an abrasive, such as sand. Pretreat the pavement with a thin layer before a storm, then another light layer during the storm. As the snow falls, the melt will make it easier to shovel snow and ice. And be mindful of your pets' paws. Salt irritates

dogs' feet, and can cause burns and inflammation. Instead of buying an ice melt labeled "pet friendly"—a claim that we couldn't confirm—wipe or rinse paws with water after walks.

### How can I safely tie a tree to my car roof?

If you're planning to pop a pine tree on top of your car's roof this year, it's important to plan ahead. Transporting a tree incorrectly could pose a hazard to you, your car, and other drivers on the road, says Jen Stockburger, director of operations at CR's Auto Test Center. (It can also put a dent in your wallet: In every state, drivers can be fined if an item falls from their vehicle, with fines as high as \$5,000.) According to a 2019 survey by AAA, 16 percent of Americans who planned to buy a real tree said they'd previously had one fall from their car in transit.

Unless you're buying a tree small enough to fit inside your vehicle, you'll need a roof rack. Tying a tree onto your roof without one is a safety hazard—plus branches can scratch your car, and looping twine through the doors can tear the door seals. Put a tarp under the tree, and don't use the rope from tree sellers—it isn't strong enough. Use dedicated tie-downs, such as nylon ratchet straps, and anchor the tree just above the bottom branches. It's best to face a tree's trunk forward for better aerodynamics. Also, be sure the driver's vision isn't obscured.



LEARN

We have more than 140 in-house experts who research, test, and compare. Submit your questions at [CR.org/askourexperts](https://www.consumerreports.org/askourexperts) ... and watch for the answers.

# CR Insights

  
GIFTS FOR \$50  
OR LESS



✓ **Cravings By  
Chrissy Teigen Enamel  
Coated Cookware** \$39

**78**

OVERALL  
SCORE

A smart gift for steak lovers, this oven-safe 11-inch cast-iron skillet earns an Excellent rating at searing meat in our tests and a Very Good at baking cornbread.

Get ready to check off everyone on your holiday shopping list—without busting your budget. Our editors scoured all 63 of CR's labs to bring you the best-rated, least pricey products we've tested. They're all \$50 or less and range from a WiFi tablet and a comfy pair of pillows to a complete 15-piece cookware set.

**\$ Crane Owl Humidifier \$45**

87

OVERALL SCORE



The fun owl humidifier is just one of Crane's series of animal-inspired machines. It earns Excellent ratings in nearly all of our lab tests and covers an area up to 250 square feet.

**✓ Cuisinart Power Advantage HM-50 Mixer \$40**

82

OVERALL SCORE



Cuisinart's 5-speed mixer powers through cookie dough and quickly whips cream in our lab tests (though it's a little loud while in use). Its wire beaters are easier to clean than center-post mixers.

**\$ LEM Boulevard Bike Helmet \$40**

81

OVERALL SCORE



An important accessory for cyclists, this reflective helmet is top-rated among urban-style helmets we've tested. It has excellent impact absorption and stands out for its very good ventilation.

**\$ Amazon Fire Stick 4k \$50**

81

OVERALL SCORE



A good choice for Amazon Prime subscribers, this stick pops into a TV's HDMI port. It has a nice array of content and features, including Alexa-enabled voice control and Dolby Vision HDR.



**Beckham Luxury Linens Hotel Collection Pillow Set \$39**

67

OVERALL SCORE

Give the gift of sweet dreams with these polyester gel-filled fiber pillows—they earn Excellent ratings in our tests for back- and side-sleeper support, and are a bargain to boot at \$39 for the set.

**AmazonBasics Non-Stick Kitchen Cookware Set \$50**

76

OVERALL SCORE



This 15-piece set is among the lowest-priced cookware groupings in CR's tests, offering a durable nonstick coating, and even cooking and simmering. Note that the pans are not dishwasher- or oven-safe.

**\$ Bissell Pet Hair Eraser 33A1 \$40**

71

OVERALL SCORE



A practical present for pet owners or tidy friends, this corded handheld vacuum generates strong suction to clean carpet without a power brush attachment. It also rates Excellent on bare floors.

**✓ Cuisinart Mini Prep Plus DLC-2A Food Processor \$40**

63

OVERALL SCORE



This handy 3-cup chopper combines very good value with solid performance. It's particularly adept at chopping almonds and onions, as well as grating hard cheeses, like Parmesan.

**Oster Designed for Life TSSTTVDFL2 6-Slice \$45**

62

OVERALL SCORE



What's even better than a cookie swap? An easy-to-use convection toaster oven with Excellent baking ratings in our cookie and muffin tests. A generous five-year warranty is just the icing on top.

**Professional Series PS77411**  
\$20

80

OVERALL SCORE



Super-easy to use, this sleek 8x10x6-inch toaster is also a bargain. It makes excellent toast—whether you prefer your slices to be light or dark brown—and comes with a two-year warranty.

✓ **Primula Burke Cold Brew Coffee Maker**  
PBPBK-5101 \$25

78

OVERALL SCORE

One of the less pricey models in our ratings of cold brewers, this is a top performer with an Excellent rating for convenience. Most of its parts are dishwasher-safe.



✓ **SOL Republic Shadow Wireless Headphones** \$30

76

OVERALL SCORE



This ear-insert pair—a top-rated portable wireless Bluetooth model—delivers very good sound quality and is a great choice for the more critical listener, whether for enjoying music or movies.

**Wyze Cam V2** \$25

70

OVERALL SCORE



This home security cam is the cheapest we've tested, but with great video quality and speedy notifications, it beats out others that cost far more. (A caveat: Testers say it lacks sufficient privacy settings.)

**Black+Decker Teal Wave 7-Quart Slow Cooker** \$40

69

OVERALL SCORE



With just a twist to the simple dial control, this slow cooker can turn out great beef stew. It also has a useful keep-warm setting and comes with a dishwasher-safe ceramic stoneware insert.

**Proctor Silex 26070 Belgian Waffle Maker** \$25

69

OVERALL SCORE



The Proctor Silex waffle maker performs very well for a budget model, earning an Excellent rating for even browning. It's easy to use but doesn't have options to adjust the color of the waffles.

✓ **Amazon Fire 7 (16GB) 2019** \$50

66

OVERALL SCORE



Along with more than 8 hours of battery life, this WiFi tablet has a 6.9-inch rectangular screen that's great for reading, everyday tasks, and videos. Want more storage? Add a microSD memory card.

**Vornado SRTH Personal Space Heater** \$40

62

OVERALL SCORE



Keep someone cozy this winter with a personal space heater. This quiet Vornado model is the top performer under \$50, with an Excellent fire-safety rating as well as a five-year warranty.

**ZLOT Vertical Gaming Mouse** \$30\*



Here's a light-up matte-finish mouse that places forearm, wrist, and hand in an ergonomic position. It has 11 programmable buttons, five DPI sensitivity settings, and a mini joystick for gaming.

**Fujifilm Instax Mini 9 Instant Camera** \$50\*



Our testers say the affordable Mini 9 takes instant Polaroid-like photos (though picture quality is limited). Simply adjust the exposure settings by turning a dial, click, and see your print in seconds.

**Anker PowerWave 10W** \$50\*

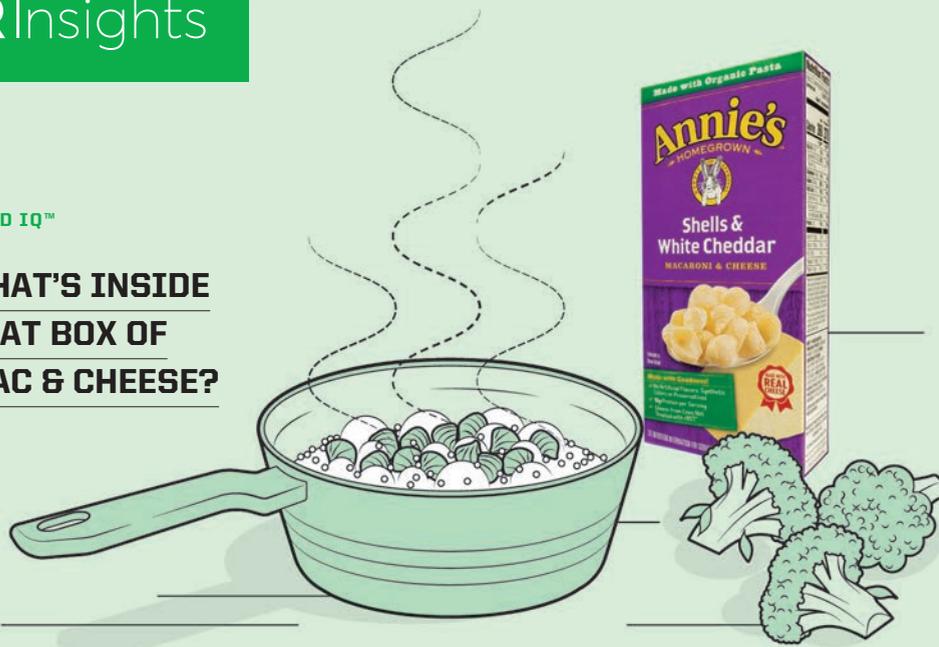


Give the gift of a fully charged phone: The Anker PowerWave charges two devices at once (convenient for a couple's nightstand). LED lights indicate when your phone is charging.

**Note:** We rate different products according to different testing protocols; as a result, Overall Scores of one product category are not comparable with another.  
\*Products were part of our consumer experience and usability program, which does not award Overall Scores.

FOOD IQ™

WHAT'S INSIDE THAT BOX OF MAC & CHEESE?



PACKAGED MAC AND CHEESE has long been a go-to meal busy parents serve their kids—even for breakfast during the pandemic, according to Kraft. Plenty of adults crave a bowl too, even though this cheesy dish has a well-deserved reputation for being a calorie and fat bomb. Just 1 cup can contain more than 350 calories and 11 grams of saturated fat per serving. But now store shelves feature organic, whole-grain, and bean-based “mac” options. Are they healthier? CR’s nutrition experts say not so much. We compared traditional Kraft with more healthful-sounding versions and found some differences. Here are a few important takeaways.

**DON'T ASSUME ORGANIC MEANS LOW-FAT, LOW-CAL, OR LOW SODIUM.** Foods with an organic label don't contain pesticides—but don't expect there to be other nutritional benefits. For example, Annie's organic box has a calorie and fat content that's similar to the regular Annie's version above—and a bit more sodium per serving, at 560 mg.

**MORE THAN A GRAIN OF SALT.** Our experts saw 410 to 940 mg per serving, but even Annie's Reduced Sodium Mac & Cheese, at 410 mg, has about 20 percent of the recommended daily sodium limit. We also found that products with a squeeze cheese pouch tend to be higher in sodium

than powdered choices. For instance, Kraft Dinners Deluxe Original Cheddar has 940 mg; Kraft Original has 570 mg.

**USE YOUR NOODLE.** Whole-grain and bean-based varieties are a bit better for you than white pastas because they have more fiber. And chickpea-based Banza pasta offers 20 grams of filling protein (others have 9 to 12 grams), making it even healthier than whole grain. But the calories, fat, and sodium are similar to white pasta.

**BALANCE YOUR BOWL.** Make any box healthier by using low-fat milk and less butter. Stick with a 1-cup serving and mix in 2 cups of steamed veggies.

**Annie's Homegrown Shells & White Cheddar Macaroni & Cheese \$1.20** (shown at left)

CALORIES	350
SATURATED FAT	8 g
PROTEIN	11 g
FIBER	2 g
SODIUM	510 mg

**Banza Mac & Cheese Made With Chickpea Pasta \$3.50**



CALORIES	380
SATURATED FAT	10 g
PROTEIN	20 g
FIBER	5 g
SODIUM	690 mg

**Kraft Macaroni & Cheese, Original \$1.00**



CALORIES	360
SATURATED FAT	11 g
PROTEIN	10 g
FIBER	2 g
SODIUM	570 mg

Nutritional info is per 1 cup, prepared with 2% low-fat milk and unsalted butter. Although Kraft Original calls for margarine, we used butter in our calculation for consistency.

PHOTOS: BOTTOM LEFT TO RIGHT: AP/SHUTTERSTOCK; EVERETT COLLECTION/HISTORICAL/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; CONSUMER REPORTS; INTERFORO/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; ISTOCKPHOTO; CHRIS WILLSON/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO; YANA PASKOVA/REUTERS/NEWSCOM; STANLEY

CR Time Traveler HOLIDAYS PAST

**1931** The first ever tree goes up in New York City's Rockefeller Plaza. It's only 20 feet tall.



**1937** In our gift guide, we report that one of the most popular dolls is the Shirley Temple. Her wardrobe expands with each new movie.



**1942** As WWII rages, CR circulates a gift survey to soldiers. Military men report they have no use for “nice” gifts like ties—they prefer sewing kits or shoe polish.

**1952** We suggest museums as a unique place to shop for holiday gifts. For kids, we highlight museum animal figurines, such as these bronze dinos.



**1960** For those splurging on a new car as a holiday gift, CR says there are few better investments than this Volkswagen.

FACE-OFF

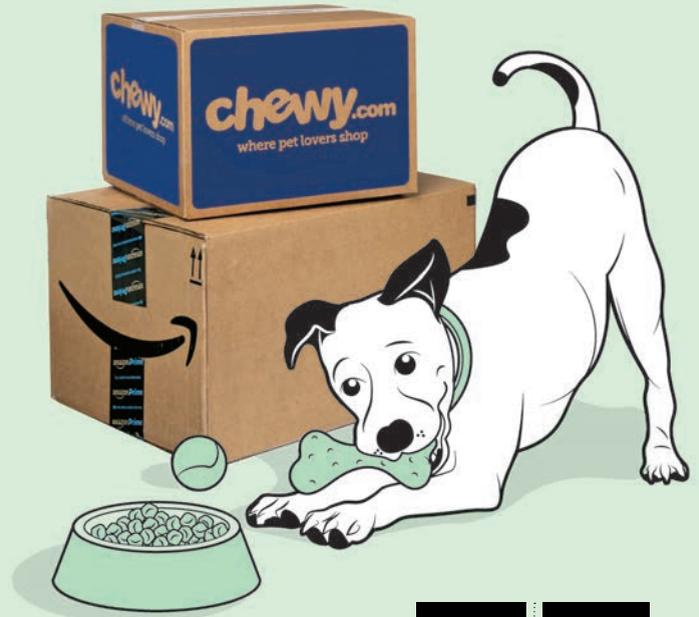
## CHEWY VS. AMAZON: WHICH IS BEST FOR PET PARENTS?

ABOUT 7 IN 10 Americans currently have a pet—and, according to CR’s recent nationally representative survey of 2,085 U.S. adults, 1 in 10 pet owners say their animal companion is a new addition since the COVID-19 pandemic began in early March. Whether new or old, your pet probably adds a chunk of change to your monthly expenses. In fact, according to the American Pet Products Association, pet owners are expected to spend an estimated \$99 billion on their pets in 2020—up from the \$95.7 billion spent in 2019.

To find out which pet stores offer the best online shopping experience, our May 2020 survey asked Americans who had purchased pet products online in the past year to tell us where they shopped most often. (When this survey was fielded, online shopping was a popular option due to the pandemic and there were severe shipping

delays.) More than half of respondents say they shopped most often on Amazon. Roughly a third shop at Chewy—handily beating out several other retailers, including Walmart.com (14 percent), Petco.com (9 percent), PetSmart.com (7 percent), independent pet sites (5 percent), and more. (Respondents could select up to two retailers.)

To better understand why pet shoppers are turning to Amazon and Chewy, we asked them to rate their level of satisfaction with their most recent shopping experience (see chart at right). When it came to overall satisfaction, both retailers received—on average—85 out of 100. But when we drilled down further, the data suggests there were some slight differences in how satisfied shoppers were with different aspects of each site. When respondents assessed the quality of both products and of customer service (such as online chatting or speaking by phone with a representative), Chewy shoppers were more satisfied. The bottom line? Though both retailers offer great shopping experiences, Chewy may offer pet owners slightly better quality products and service for their money.



	Amazon	Chewy
<b>OVERALL SATISFACTION SCORE</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>ASPECTS OF THE OVERALL SHOPPING EXPERIENCE</b>		
PRICE PAID	75	76
SELECTION	80	83
QUALITY	<b>81</b>	<b>85</b>
SPEED OF RECEIVING THE ORDER	77	76
USABILITY OF WEBSITE	85	86
WEB CUSTOMER SUPPORT*	82	84
QUALITY OF SERVICE FROM SALES HELP	<b>80</b>	<b>84</b>

The overall satisfaction score represents overall satisfaction with the online pet product shopping experience. An overall satisfaction score of 100 would mean all respondents are “completely satisfied”; 80, that respondents are “very satisfied,” on average. Aspects of the overall shopping experience scores reflect average scores on a scale from “excellent” (100) to “very poor” (0).

\*Web customer support includes email notifications, shipping trackers, and FAQs.

**1966** Kwanzaa, an annual celebration of African-American family, community, and culture, is introduced by Dr. Maulana Karenga.



**1989** We report “the early favorite to be this year’s most wanted and impossible-to-find toy is Nintendo’s Game Boy.”



**2006** A giant 32-foot, 4,000-pound menorah near Central Park in Manhattan is proclaimed the largest in the world by Guinness World Records. Each year it draws thousands of people.



**Stanley Classic Legendary Vacuum Insulated Bottle, 2 QT \$45**



**1977** This “Six Million Dollar Man” doll has a “bionic eye” and a “bionic arm” that can grip an included girder.



**1996** The new Tickle Me Elmo toy causes a national shopping frenzy. By the end of December, the entire stock of 1 million Elmo toys is sold.



**2020** CR shares smart ways to boost holiday cheer during the pandemic (page 26), including outdoor gathering essentials like this personal thermos, perfect for hot chocolate.

ROOM MAKEOVER

KITCHENS FOR A CROWD

This suite of highly rated products can handle large numbers.



BIG LOADS IN LESS TIME

👉 **Bosch Ascenta SHX3AR75UC** \$630

89

OVERALL SCORE

This Bosch dishwasher has racks that can be manually adjusted to help fit larger pots and pans on either the top or bottom, ample space for flatware, and a tall tub design made to hold 14 place settings compared with the standard 10 to 12 settings. Plus, at 95 minutes, its normal setting is faster than your average cleaning cycle (many models we test in our labs take 150 minutes), and it's currently the top-rated 24-inch model we've tested, receiving an Excellent rating in our washing test.

DOUBLE-DUTY WALL OVEN

✔️ **KitchenAid KODE500ESS** \$2,700

85

OVERALL SCORE

As one of the most spacious wall ovens we've tested, this KitchenAid offers excellent oven capacity (5 cubic feet in each oven, according to the manufacturer) and has six adjustable rack positions to help you fit more—whether it's a bigger bird or multiple side dishes at once. Plus, it receives an Excellent rating in our broiling test for searing burgers. Other noteworthy features include a convection mode and a built-in temperature probe so that you can monitor the internal temperature of meats without opening the oven door.

SUPER-SIZED STORAGE

✔️ **Samsung RT21M6213SG** \$1,100

77

OVERALL SCORE

Our testers measure the actual storage space in the refrigerators we rate—shelves and all. At 20.2 cubic feet, this 33-inch-wide Samsung model has the largest usable capacity of the top-freezer fridges we've measured in our labs so far. It's likely to fit a whole week's worth of groceries—especially if you utilize its flexible freezer compartment, which converts the entire freezer into an additional refrigerated space when needed. It also earns an Excellent rating in our energy-efficiency test.

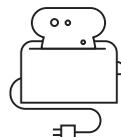
DECEMBER IS THE BEST TIME TO BUY ...

For more info, go to [CR.org/buy1220](http://CR.org/buy1220).

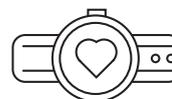
BIKE HELMETS



TOASTERS



FITNESS TRACKERS



SMART SPEAKERS





## RECALLS

TO STAY INFORMED ABOUT RECALLS FOR YOUR VEHICLES, READERS WITH MEMBERSHIP CAN USE OUR FREE CAR RECALL TRACKER AT [CR.ORG/MORE](https://www.consumerreports.org/more).



### FORD VEHICLES

Ford is recalling 38,005 Mustang vehicles due to concerns about the brake pedal bracket assembly. This affects 2020 models with an automatic transmission built between March 4, 2019, and Aug. 13, 2020. The concern is that under hard braking, the brake pedal bracket may fracture and not work properly, increasing the risk of an accident. The problem has been traced to a specific period of time in which a bracket was made of polypropylene instead of nylon.

**What to do:** Owners can contact Ford customer service at 866-436-7332. The automaker will also mail letters to owners, who will be directed to bring their Mustang to a Ford or Lincoln dealership to have the brake pedal bracket assembly replaced at no charge. The NHTSA campaign number is 20V573000. Ford's number for this recall is 20S52.

### DOCTOR DUCK PLUSH TOYS

Communicorp is recalling about 635,500 Aflac Doctor Duck plush toys because the buttons on the toy contain levels of lead that exceed the federal lead content standard. Lead is toxic if ingested by young children and can cause adverse health problems. The ducks were sold to Aflac employees and licensed agents

from January 2005 through July 2020 for \$3 to \$5 and used as a promotional giveaway to customers.

**What to do:** Dispose of the duck. Call Communicorp at 800-642-3522 for more information.

### MEDIQUE OTC DRUGS

Medique is recalling about 143,300 units from over-the-counter product lines Medi-First, Medi-First Plus, Medique, Dover, Otis Clapp, and Ecolab. The products contain regulated substances that must be in child-resistant packaging when being used in the household, as required by the Poison Prevention Packaging Act. The packaging of the products is not child-resistant, posing a risk of poisoning if the contents are swallowed by young children. The drugs were sold online at Amazon from June 2018 through June 2020 for \$2 to \$59.

**What to do:** Store the recalled products in a safe location out of reach of children, and contact Medique for information on how to dispose of the product and receive a full refund. For details, call Medique at 800-680-2474 or go to [mediqueproducts.com](https://www.mediqueproducts.com).

### IMMI UTV HARNESSSES

IMMI is recalling about 162,000 IMMI SubZero 4-point and IMMI Click6 6-point UTV harnesses for off-roading in utility terrain vehicles because the harness may be missing stitching, posing an injury hazard by failing to properly restrain the rider in the event of a crash. The harnesses were sold at Polaris, Kawasaki, and Can-Am dealerships from April 2014 through May 2020 for \$160 to \$240 for Sub-Zero models and \$250 to \$550 for Click6 models.

**What to do:** Stop using the harness until it's inspected by an authorized dealer. To get a free replacement harness, call IMMI at 877-255-4205, Polaris at 800-765-2747, BRP/Can-Am at 888-272-9222, or Kawasaki at 800-802-9381.

### STOREYOURBOARD STORAGE HOISTS

StoreYourBoard is recalling about 36,700 Hi-Lift storage hoist Classic and Pro models with green polypropylene straps because the straps can break while the hoist is in use, causing whatever object is being stored to fall and posing an injury hazard. The hoists were sold on [storeyourboard.com](https://www.storeyourboard.com), Amazon, [walmart.com](https://www.walmart.com), and eBay from January 2018 through June 2020 for about \$35.

**What to do:** Stop using the straps. Contact StoreYourBoard at 877-729-2509 or go to [storeyourboard.com](https://www.storeyourboard.com) for instructions on proper disposal of the green straps and how to receive free black replacement straps.

### SODA SENSE CO2 CANISTERS

Soda Sense is recalling about 19,200 CO2 canisters because a valve in the canister can break, allowing CO2 to forcefully eject

the top valve, posing an injury hazard. The canisters were sold online at [sodasense.com](https://www.sodasense.com) from May 2020 through June 2020 for about \$21.

**What to do:** Stop using the canister. Call Soda Sense at 855-209-4997 or go to [sodasense.com](https://www.sodasense.com) for details and to receive a free replacement canister.

### MONOPRICE ETHERNET CABLES

Monoprice is recalling about 10,800 Category 6 Ethernet Bulk CMR communications cables because they do not meet the flammability requirements of the voluntary safety standard, posing a fire hazard when the cable is exposed to a flame. The cables were sold at [monoprice.com](https://www.monoprice.com) and Amazon from December 2018 through February 2020 for \$20 to \$130 per box, depending on length and color.

**What to do:** Stop using the cable. Call Monoprice at 844-500-7656 or go to [monoprice.com](https://www.monoprice.com) for details and to schedule a free visit to inspect and replace the cable.

### MORPHER BIKE HELMETS

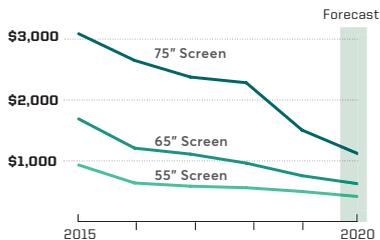
The Consumer Product Safety Commission is recalling about 8,500 Morpher flat-folding bicycle helmets because they do not comply with the federal safety standard for bicycle helmets, posing a risk of head injury. The helmets were sold on Amazon, [cyclingsafetygear.com](https://www.cyclingsafetygear.com), and [morpherhelmet.com](https://www.morpherhelmet.com) from April 2017 through November 2019 for about \$150.

**What to do:** Dispose of the helmet. Morpher is no longer in business, so call the CPSC hotline at 800-638-2772 with questions.

# PRODUCT UPDATE

THE LATEST RATINGS FROM OUR LABS

## Average sale price for LCD TV sets



Source: Omdia TV Sets Market Tracker.

## Big Savings on Big Screens

How to score a great deal on a jumbo TV during the fall shopping season.

by James K. Willcox



LG  
70UN7370PUC  
\$700

65 OVERALL SCORE



INSIDE  
CR'S LABS

CR's TV labs, led by engineer Claudio Ciacci, will test about 130 new sets by the end of 2020.

**L**IKE A LOT of people this year, Chrissy Knapp and her family have been spending more time at home. So it was particularly annoying when their 10-year-old TV went on the fritz. Knapp, a tax compliance officer now working from her home outside New York City, started searching for a replacement. And like many people, she decided to go big this time around, shopping for a set measuring 55 inches or more. (A 55-inch screen used to be considered pretty big, and 65-inch sets were a rarity. But nowadays those sizes are mainstream.)

The toughest part, it turns out, was deciding how long to wait for a great deal. “I’ve literally been moving TVs in and out of my online shopping carts since the summer, wondering if it was the best time to buy,” Knapp says.

In the past you could depend on TV prices dropping sharply for Black Friday. But the COVID-19 pandemic is shaking up the holiday shopping season this year. Manufacturing delays, the rising cost of television components, and other factors are making it difficult for analysts—let alone consumers—to predict just how enticing holiday deals will be or exactly when they’ll kick in.

There’s some good news for shoppers like Knapp, however: When holiday sales do roll around, analysts say, the biggest price cuts are likely to come on the biggest televisions.

Here are some tips for getting the best deal on a TV you’ll really enjoy.

### **Don’t Be Afraid to Go Big**

In the past few years, prices have been falling for all large sets, but the steepest declines have been on the very biggest. (See the graphic on the facing page.) Add in this year’s holiday discounts, and 2020 looks like a good year to indulge in a jumbo television.

“We don’t expect enormous price changes on TVs over the holiday, but the biggest price cuts will be on more

expensive larger-screen TVs 65 inches and over,” says Stephen Baker, vice president for industry analysis at the NPD Group. In contrast, he says, “we expect very little price movement with TVs 50 inches and under.”

Some of the biggest, most expensive sets will not only see a price drop but also will be bundled with a gift card, making the deals even more appealing.

The average price of a 55- or 65-inch set during the holidays will be 18 to 20 percent lower than last year, according to Paul Gagnon, senior research director at the market research firm Omdia. And the true giants, sized 75 to 86 inches, could be 35 percent cheaper than in 2019.

Some 65-inch sets are already selling for below \$500, surprisingly low for a set that size. “And we expect to see more during the holiday season this year,” Gagnon says.

### **Check Online First**

Great deals on big, bright TVs are proven champs at pulling shoppers into stores each November. But in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic may lead retailers to offer fewer in-store promotions that could attract crowds and risk spreading the illness. “Since the shift to online shopping has been so successful,” Gagnon says, “I expect many retailers to double down on that strategy and offer promotions throughout the whole month, essentially turning Cyber Monday into a Cyber November.”

More online shopping could mean more great deals on large TVs. Retailers are constantly changing prices on their websites to compete with one another, so you may find new deals popping up through the whole holiday shopping period. (See “Shopping Tools,” on page 22.) Whenever you buy, there’s a good chance you’ll be able to get free delivery or shipping to a nearby store for curbside pickup.

This year several major TV retailers—including Best Buy, Target,

and Walmart—have already announced they’ll be closed on Thanksgiving. If you do go shopping in stores, expect most to have COVID-19 safety protocols in place, possibly with mandatory mask requirements and limits on how many people they’ll let in at one time.

Stores may look for creative ways to limit crowds. Target has announced it will spread out its sales instead of packing them into the Black Friday weekend. Other retailers are hinting they’ll do the same, says Michael Bonebright, an analyst at DealNews.com. “This is great news for shoppers,” he says, “as it looks like we’ll have fewer time-sensitive doorbusters and more opportunities to score great deals.”

### **Shop Early**

Analysts we spoke to agree that shopping early is a good strategy in 2020. That’s because deals are kicking off sooner, and hot products could sell out or, if you order online, fail to arrive in time for the holidays.

“Shoppers who do all their purchasing before Black Friday are more likely to find items in stock, and they have the best chance of getting their purchases shipped in a timely fashion,” Bonebright says. “Plus, many retailers will extend their Black Friday deals throughout November, so you might not actually miss Black Friday deals if you shop early.”

### **Pay Attention to HDR Scores**

Now that you know when to shop and where, how can you pick the right TV for you and your family? Picture quality is the most important attribute, encompassing everything from accurate, realistic colors to the sharpness of the images. In our ratings, that’s reflected in the HD and UHD picture quality scores.

But there’s another factor to consider, one that may not have existed the last time you bought a TV: high dynamic range, or HDR, which now has its own column in our ratings charts. A growing

number of movies and TV series take advantage of HDR technology. And when a TV does a good job showing this content, the result can be higher contrast, and brighter and more colorful images—in short, something closer to what we experience in real life.

We've found that HDR performance varies widely. Many sets, especially lower-priced models, can't deliver a satisfying HDR experience, mainly because they lack sufficient brightness.

### Shop the Middle of the Ratings

Many of the top-rated sets in our ratings are also the highest-priced. But those aren't the only great TVs we've tested. If you're on a tighter budget, consider models farther down in the ratings chart that still deliver solid picture quality.

Some of these sets lag in the ratings because of attributes that may not be as important to you, such as sound quality or viewing angle. For example, a TV with not-so-hot sound could be a good bet if you'll be using a sound bar instead of the model's built-in speaker. And one with a narrower viewing angle could work if everyone in your household can sit right in front of the TV rather than off to the sides.

Also, don't be afraid to consider TVs from an emerging brand, such as Hisense or TCL. Their top-tier models may be priced well below those from well-established brands such as Samsung and Sony, and do as well or better in our ratings. (Check the predicted reliability ratings along with the lab results.) Take a look at the TCL 65R625, for instance, a 2019 model that costs just \$800 for the 65-inch version, and the Hisense 65H9G, a 65-inch 2020 set priced at \$950. They don't make CR's recommended cutoff, but both offer satisfying picture quality plus effective HDR, something few sets in this price range can match.



### SHOPPING TOOLS

**SHOPPING ON THE INTERNET** can be fast and furious. Prices fluctuate; inventory comes and goes. So if you're intent on getting the best possible price at any given moment, use these websites, apps, and tools to stay on top of the deals.

**PRICE-COMPARISON SITES.** You can compare prices across the web using shopping engines such as Google Shopping, PriceGrabber, RetailMeNot, and Shopzilla. And CR.org lists current prices from multiple retailers for products in our ratings.

**IN-STORE APPS.** Smartphone apps such as BuyVia, Shopkick, ShopSavvy, and Shopular let you scan bar codes or QR codes while in a store to compare prices, get discounts, and find coupons.

**BROWSER EXTENSIONS.** Tools such as CamelCamelCamel and Honey enable your web browser to let you see price histories and get price alerts or coupons for products when you shop online.

**RETAILER APPS.** Companies such as Amazon, Best Buy, Target, and Walmart have their own apps. Some let you use a smartphone camera to scan products and price-shop online.

**SOCIAL MEDIA.** Follow your favorite stores on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to get in on exclusive discounts and promotions.

**SECURITY.** Just remember to delete apps you no longer use when you're done shopping. This can help protect your privacy and security.

### Skip 8K Sets

Only in the past couple of years have you been able to assume that a new, decent-sized TV would have 4K resolution. Meanwhile, the programming you get from most cable companies is still just HD, which doesn't fully exploit that 4K capability. Yet that's not keeping manufacturers from now promoting 8K TVs.

These sets have more than 33 million pixels, or four times the 8 million or so tiny dots that make up a 4K TV's picture. That means they're capable of producing sharper, more detailed images. But we don't think an 8K set makes sense for most people right now. At normal viewing distances, you'll notice all that detail only in the biggest screen sizes—say, 75 inches and above. The sets are also very pricey: Samsung's least expensive 75-inch 8K set, for example, costs nearly \$4,000. And there will be very little native 8K content for the foreseeable future.

### Don't Settle for Low Quality

Sets that are super-low in price can be very alluring, especially in the heat of the Black Friday season. But they might not be worth it. You'll probably be watching your new TV for a number of years. If you're not happy with its features or picture quality, you could regret not spending an extra 50 or 100 bucks to get something better. Also, those bargain TVs, often called loss-leaders, are usually at their rock-bottom prices, meaning you won't be able to negotiate a better deal. A retailer may have more wiggle room on a step-up or flagship model.

And that brings us to a final tip about getting a big TV at a low price: Don't hesitate to haggle, whether it's in person or through an online chat box. CR's member surveys have found that you can often get a better price, free shipping, or another perk if you ask.

**Ratings** > **Updated Ratings** This year we've added new scores for data privacy and data security, and updated our testing for UHD picture quality and HDR effectiveness.

Brand + Model	Overall Score	Price	Survey Results		Test Results							
			Predicted reliability	Owner satisfaction	HD picture quality	UHD picture quality	HDR	Viewing angle	Sound quality	Data privacy	Data security	
<b>60-INCH AND LARGER TVs</b>												
✓ Sony XBR-65A9G	86	\$3,300	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ LG OLED65CXUAU	86	\$2,250	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ LG OLED65C9PUA	85	\$2,300	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ Samsung QN75Q80T	80	\$2,600	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ Sony XBR-75X950H	80	\$2,800	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑
✓ Samsung QN75Q8DT	79	\$2,600	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ Samsung QN65Q80T	79	\$1,700	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↑
Ⓢ Sony XBR-65X900F	78	\$1,200	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑
Ⓢ LG 65SM9000PUA	76	\$950	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ Samsung QN65LS03T	76	\$1,900	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑
✓ Samsung QN65Q70T	76	\$1,200	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ Sony XBR-75X900H	74	\$2,000	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑
✓ Sony XBR-65X90CH	74	\$1,370	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑
✓ LG 75NANO91ANA	73	\$1,950	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ Sony XBR-65X950H	73	\$1,700	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑
Ⓢ Samsung UN65RU8000	73	\$900	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑
Ⓢ Samsung QN65Q60R	72	\$800	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑
✓ Sony XBR-75X800G	72	\$1,400	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑
✓ TCL 75Q825	71	\$2,200	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	↓
Ⓢ Samsung UN65RU7300	71	\$700	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑
✓ Samsung QN75Q7DT	71	\$2,000	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑
Ⓢ Samsung UN65NU6900	71	\$500	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑
✓ TCL 65Q825	70	\$1,500	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	↓
Ⓢ LG 70UM6970PUA	70	\$580	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑
Samsung QN65Q6DT	67	\$950	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑
Samsung UN75TU7000	67	\$850	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↑

**Ratings** > **Dig Deep** Top-rated sets tend to be pricey. But if you drill down into the ratings, you can find less expensive models that have lower Overall Scores but still deliver impressive picture quality.

Brand + Model	Overall Score	Price	Survey Results		Test Results						
			Predicted reliability	Owner satisfaction	HD picture quality	UHD picture quality	HDR	Viewing angle	Sound quality	Data privacy	Data security
<b>60-INCH AND LARGER TVs</b> <i>Continued</i>											
TCL 65R625	67	\$800	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Hisense 65H9G	67	\$950	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
LG 65NANO90UNA	67	\$1,200	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
LG 70UM7370PUA	66	\$800	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Vizio P659-G1	66	\$1,200	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Sony XBR-65X800H	65	\$1,000	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
LG 65NANO81ANA	65	\$900	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
LG 70UN7370PUC	65	\$700	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Samsung UN65TU700D	64	\$500	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Sony XBR-75X800H	64	\$1,400	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Samsung UN65TU7000	62	\$500	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Samsung UN75TU8000	61	\$1,200	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Samsung UN65TU8000	61	\$700	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
TCL 65S525	61	\$600	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Hisense 75H8G	61	\$1,250	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
LG 65UM6900PUA	61	\$650	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
LG 75UN7370PUE	61	\$1,000	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
LG 60UM6900PUA	59	\$430	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
TCL 75S425	59	\$750	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Samsung UN65TU8200	59	\$700	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
LG 65UN7300PUF	58	\$550	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Hisense 65R8F	57	\$650	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Hisense 65R6E1	56	\$430	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Vizio V655-H19	54	\$460	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Philips 65PFL5604	52	\$450	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️
Element E4AA65R-G	46	\$450	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️	⬆️

Brand + Model	Overall Score	Price	Survey Results		Test Results							
			Predicted reliability	Owner satisfaction	HD picture quality	UHD picture quality	HDR	Viewing angle	Sound quality	Data privacy	Data security	
<b>55- TO 59-INCH TVs</b>												
✓ Sony XBR-55A9G	87	\$2,300	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ LG OLED55GXPUA	85	\$2,100	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ LG OLED55CXPUA	85	\$1,600	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ Samsung QN55Q90T	83	\$1,600	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ Samsung QN55Q80T	83	\$1,200	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
✓ Samsung QN55LS03T	76	\$1,400	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑
✓ Samsung QN55LS01T	72	\$1,500	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑
✓ LG 55SM8600PUA	71	\$800	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑
💰 Samsung UN55RU7300	71	\$500	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑
✓ Samsung UN55RU7100	70	\$595	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑
Samsung UN55NU6900	68	\$380	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑
TCL 55R635	66	\$650	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑
Samsung UN55TU7000	66	\$400	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑
Sony XBR-55X800H	66	\$800	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑
Sony KD55X75CH	65	\$570	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑
TCL 55R625	64	\$580	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
LG 55UN7300PUF	62	\$480	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑
Insignia NS-55DF710NA21	59	\$330	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑
Toshiba 55LF71U20	58	\$350	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑
LG 55UN7300AUD	58	\$460	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑
Hisense 55R8F	58	\$450	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑
Philips 55PFL5604	57	\$320	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑
Onn 100018971	53	\$300	—	—	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑
Hitachi 55R80	50	\$320	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑
Westinghouse WR55UX4019	43	\$400	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓

**HOW WE TEST:** Overall Score combines test and survey results. Predicted reliability reflects the likelihood that a TV will have problems in the first five years of ownership. Owner satisfaction

reflects the proportion of members extremely likely to recommend their TV. HD picture quality encompasses detail, color accuracy, and contrast using test patterns and videos. UHD picture

quality is evaluated similarly, using 4K content. HDR shows how well the TV reproduces the enhanced quality of HDR content. Viewing angle reflects picture quality at various viewing

angles. Sound quality is for the set's built-in speakers. Data privacy and security indicate how the TV and its service providers collect, share, use, and protect your data.

# KEEP

EACH HOUSEHOLD SHOULD HAVE ITS OWN TABLE, FOOD, AND DISHWARE.



FOR A SIMPLE BUT FESTIVE ACTIVITY, TRY ROASTING MARSHMALLOWS.



SHIP GIFTS EARLY THIS YEAR TO ENSURE THAT THEY ARRIVE IN TIME.



RECHARGEABLE LANTERNS AND FLASHLIGHTS CAN HELP LIGHT UP THE NIGHT.



# TOGETHER

YOU CAN CHAT, LAUGH, AND EVEN SING WITH LOVED ONES VIRTUALLY.



CHILLY OUTSIDE?  
A PATIO HEATER  
CAN HELP KEEP  
GUESTS COZY.

# CALM



WHETHER YOU'RE PLANNING TO  
GATHER WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS IN  
PERSON OR VIRTUALLY, WE HAVE  
ADVICE ON HOW TO BE FESTIVE AND SAFE.

# TOGETHER



HAVE EXTRA  
HAND SANITIZER,  
TISSUES, AND  
MASKS ON HAND.

SURPRISE FAR-  
FLUNG FAMILY  
WITH HOMEMADE  
HOLIDAY TREATS.



**F**or the past 15 years, Maya Feller has thrown a Christmas Eve party for family and friends, transforming her Brooklyn, N.Y., home into a winter wonderland and serving an elaborate sit-down dinner for up to 18 people. This year she's brainstorming ways to safely hold a much smaller gathering, one that may include just her 71-year-old mother and stepmother traveling from Massachusetts and, possibly, step-siblings flying in from California. "We've given up on celebrating with friends—if we can see our close loved ones, we'll consider it a victory," she says.

Around the country, countless families are grappling with similar situations as they try to preserve their holiday traditions without exposing themselves to the coronavirus. In a Consumer Reports nationally representative survey of 2,020 U.S. adults in September, only 36 percent said they planned to attend or host in-person seasonal events with people outside their household. "There's no doubt that this year's holiday season is going to be a challenge," says infectious disease specialist Daniel Griffin, MD, a clinical instructor at Columbia University in New York City.

But with a little ingenuity and adherence to social distancing guidelines, there are plenty of great ways to keep the season celebratory, he says. Whether you're considering face-to-face gatherings or virtual ones, our expert advice can help.



**YOUR IMMEDIATE** "bubble" or "pod," the people in your household who have been taking the same protective measures during the pandemic, can celebrate together without concern. For others, before you send out invites, or reply to one, check COVID-19 rates in your area and in the communities the other attendees might be traveling from. You're looking for fewer than 10 cases a day for every 100,000 people and a positive testing rate of less

than 2 percent, according to George Abraham, MD, chair of the infectious disease board at the American Board of Internal Medicine.

You'll also want to know whether any potential invitees are at higher risk for severe effects from COVID-19—notably, adults 65 and older with underlying conditions such as heart or lung disease, or type 2 diabetes—which means they should rule out in-person gatherings with those outside their household for now.

Even if the numbers are with you, manage the size of the guest list tightly. A good general rule of thumb is a maximum of 10 people (including your household), says Maureen Miller, PhD, an epidemiology professor at Columbia University's Mailman School of Public Health in New York City. Then consider the following safe celebration tips.

### **Give Guests Clear Info**

"If possible, request that guests self-quarantine for two weeks prior to their visit, and then travel to your home in a way that reduces the possibility of exposure," says Donald Schaffner, PhD, a specialist in quantitative microbial risk assessment at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J. You may also want to ask everyone to be tested for COVID-19 beforehand. Let invitees know you'd like them to wear masks, except while they're eating or drinking, and to maintain social distancing—leaving 6 feet between themselves and those not in their household. And tell guests whether you'll gather outside, which experts say is much safer than an indoor event, so they can dress warmly. (For colder areas, have extra gloves and hats, and encourage guests to dress in layers, which they can remove and put back on as weather demands.)

### **Prep Your Home**

Disinfect high-touch surfaces, such as doorknobs and bathroom faucets, and place liquid hand soap, paper towels, and disposable disinfectant wipes in bathrooms. Stock up on face masks, tissues, and hand sanitizer to leave where guests can easily find them, such as at the entry area to your yard, in hallways leading to bathrooms, and on tables outside.

### **Pick Your Spot and Time**

Weather permitting, just about any outdoor space—a backyard, patio, covered front porch, or deck, or even a park or campground—can stand in for the traditional dining room. In

chilly climates, consider scheduling festivities for the afternoon, when temperatures may be highest.

### Add a Heat Source

A portable wood-burning fire pit, which can cost from \$10 to thousands, provides light, charm, and plenty of heat—it can reach 1,000° F or hotter. But the smoke it produces can overwhelm anyone sitting downwind, and it requires open space away from combustible materials, such as your house, your deck, and overhanging trees. (A mesh cover can help prevent embers from floating away.) A modular propane-burning version, \$90 to well into the thousands, is easier to start and creates less or no smoke, but some don't generate a roaring flame. Celebrating in a park where fires are permitted? Consider a small metal fire pit bowl, about \$40 to \$570. One with a mesh screen will keep sparks contained.

Patio heaters, about \$80 to \$1,900, which may run on the same propane tank that fuels your grill, are another option. According to advertising claims, a 42,000-Btu floor-standing version can warm about a 16½-foot radius; an 11,000-Btu tabletop model covers a radius of about 5 feet.

Feller's patio heater lets her host one family at a time in her front yard in cooler weather. "We can't serve a five-course dinner, but it keeps us warm enough for an hour to enjoy some drinks and appetizers," she says. Draping throws and blankets over chairs can also help guests feel cozy.

### Go for Smart Seating

Guests are more likely to stay outside, and preserve social distancing, if they're seated and comfortable, which can be as easy as adding a seat cushion to a metal or plastic folding chair. CR doesn't test these chairs, but the GCI Outdoor FirePit Rocker, \$65, sounds appealing: It folds, has a spring that encourages gentle rocking, and has a sleeve to hold your drink. Assign everyone their

own chair, and arrange them so that each bubble of chairs is 6 feet from other bubbles, facing the heat source. Have a separate table for each bubble or individual tray tables for each guest.

### Light Up the Night

String lights add a festive touch, but flashlights or lanterns are a must to help guests navigate the area. You can suggest that invitees bring their own, but prepare to have a few on hand. Newer rechargeable lanterns, from \$5 to about \$255, should adequately light up your gathering. Leave lights on inside your home, so guests can get to and from the bathroom easily.

### Have a Simple, Safe Menu

Guests probably aren't expecting a traditional holiday dinner, so feel free to serve anything from individually wrapped sandwiches to takeout food—with separate containers for each household bubble. You can also have a platter for each group, or ask guests to bring their own nibbles. (Skip sharing with other households.) Opt for disposable flatware, and serve drinks in individual cans or bottles, or a pitcher for each group. Try to stick to nonalcoholic sips because drinking can make partygoers sloppy about social distancing.

### Think Beyond Dinner

Amp up the celebratory feeling with a hot cocoa and roasted marshmallow party around the fire pit or park campfire, says Danielle Alexander, owner of Posh 5 Productions, a Los Angeles event planning company. "It's fun for everyone, including the older adults, because it evokes nostalgia," she says.

Insulated canteens may ensure that the hot chocolate stays piping hot. CR doesn't test these products, but the makers of the Stanley Classic Legendary Vacuum Insulated Bottle, \$45, say it will keep 2 quarts of hot chocolate warm for 45 hours. Give each bubble its

own container of hot chocolate and make sure everyone has long sticks for roasting marshmallows, so they can maintain their social distance. But skip the around-the-campfire carols or any in-person singing with those outside your bubble. Small particles released when people sing could increase transmission of the coronavirus.

### Do Indoors With Extreme Caution

One indoor-outdoor option is gathering in an easy-to-ventilate area, such as a garage, leaving the roll-down door open. Another is renting or buying a tent for guests to sit under (with the flaps open to allow air to circulate).

Some experts, such as Christine Kistler, MD, an associate professor in the division of geriatric medicine at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine in Chapel Hill, discourage indoor holiday gatherings right now. If you choose an inside get-together, keep it under an hour, open windows, and maintain mask-wearing and social distancing, Columbia University's Daniel Griffin says. Try to seat each household in a different room or have them eat at staggered times. Ceiling fans may help with ventilation, but skip floor fans. "They could inadvertently blow infected air onto someone," Griffin says.

Consider placing humidifiers in the rooms where people are gathering, Kistler says: "The virus that causes COVID-19 loves dry air, since the lack of humidity means infectious droplets can remain airborne for longer."

If you need more space than your home allows for proper social distancing, it may be reasonable to consider a small gathering in a private room at a restaurant or community center, but proceed with caution and make sure state and local regulations permit it. "Each household can eat at their own separate table, including higher-risk grandparents, and everyone should wear their mask when they are up and about," Griffin says.



**IF YOU CHOOSE** to celebrate from a distance, you have plenty of ways to hold on to traditions or create new ones. A bit of creativity and simple tech tools will help make it meaningful.

### **Share Favorite Goodies**

This year, instead of visiting relatives in Puerto Rico, Laurita Tellado, a writer in Orlando, Fla., will be sending them polvorones, the dense, buttery cookies the family traditionally eats during the holiday season. If you're sending baked goods, choose those that are moist, firm, and hard, such as quick breads, cookies, muffins, pound cakes, and scones, says Nancy Farrell Allen, RDN, a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics.

Shipping temperature-sensitive items? Place them in an insulated cooler with packs of dry ice, and pop the cooler into a sturdy corrugated cardboard box, says Angel Planells, RDN, another Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics spokesperson. Label the box "keep refrigerated," pick a fast shipping option, and let your relatives know it's en route.

### **Choose a Virtual Meeting Service**

If you'd like to gather the gang for an online sing-along, meal, or toast, the Zoom teleconferencing service, where up to 100 invited guests can see and talk to each other onscreen, is a great option. Attendees don't need to be tech-savvy or have an account,

though you need one person with a Zoom account to host, email invites, and run your group chat. (If you have a particularly tech-challenged relative, consider having a family member quarantine for two weeks, then join them in person to help.) Zoom's tile-screen interface—think "The Brady Bunch" intro on steroids—is fun and works on almost any computer or phone. Plus, you can choose a seasonal virtual background, such as an idyllic image of snowy woods, to hide that cluttered bookcase.

Zoom sessions have a 40-minute limit, unless the host has a \$15-per-month paid account, so if you want free video sessions of unlimited duration, consider app-based options. Apple FaceTime, which uses software built into iPhones, iPads, and Mac computers, can handle up to 32 revelers. Google Duo welcomes up to 32 iOS and Android users, and Facebook Messenger Rooms allows up to 50 participants.

### **Glitchproof Your Tech**

A stable WiFi connection is critical so that your Zoom call with the cousins doesn't stutter and freeze midconversation. Several days before your holiday gathering, measure the WiFi signal strength in the room you'll join the virtual party from. You can do this easily at speedtest.net using your phone or laptop; you'll need only about 1.5 megabits per second for a Zoom call, according to the company's website.

If your WiFi tends to be unsteady in the virtual party room, try moving your router closer so that signals aren't blocked by walls or doors.

Another option is a mesh router. These devices excel at spreading WiFi far and wide in your home while keeping the signal stable. Several \$200 mesh routers have done well in our ratings, including the TP-Link Deco and Eero Home WiFi (second generation).

### **Put Your Party on a Big Screen**

Why crowd around a laptop when you can see your virtual guests on a TV screen? Here's how: Open the Zoom app on your smartphone, tablet, or computer. Then simply connect the device to your TV's HDMI input with a cable. (Devices with a USB or Lightning port, as iPhones have, require an adapter.)

If you want to avoid dealing with cables and adapters, you may be able to "mirror," or display what's on your iPhone, iPad, or Mac computer screen on your TV with Apple's AirPlay. You'll need a TV with built-in AirPlay support, which many newer models have, or an Apple TV streaming player. Windows 10 computers can mirror wirelessly using a technology called Miracast.

Similarly, many Android smartphones and tablets will let you mirror, or "cast," your screen, so you can watch a Zoom meeting you've joined on your TV. If your TV doesn't support mirroring/casting, you can buy a Google Chromecast dongle, about \$30, and plug it into an HDMI port on your television. That will let you mirror your screen from an Android phone. (If you have a Roku streaming device, you can mirror from an Android or Windows device.)

### **Make It Brighter and Clearer**

Optimizing lighting can be as simple as holding your end of the party near a window or in a brightly lit room. A dedicated, external webcam,

which can cost anywhere from \$20 to \$200, can provide better image quality, especially if lighting isn't ideal, and allow you to fit more people in the shot. CR doesn't test webcams, but Logitech and Razer products, such as the Logitech StreamCam, have a good reputation. As for sound, the built-in microphone in your laptop may be fine for general use, but a separate USB omnidirectional microphone with noise cancellation, \$12 to \$250, may capture conversation from a group around a table significantly better.

### Get Virtually Playful

Challenge each other in online Scrabble or other games at a site such as Pogo. You can also view movies with far-flung family and friends via Amazon Prime, Hulu, and Netflix.

With Netflix Party, invited virtual participants can use a chat box to comment on "The Grinch" or other holiday classics in real time.

### Cook Together Across the Miles

Yearning for Aunt Judy's famous baked ziti? Using a service such as Zoom, she can do a live demonstration, so you and other relatives can make the dish at the same time, says Danielle Alexander at Posh 5 Productions. If you're the host chef, "send the ingredients list to your guests a week before the event, or even include it in the invitation, so they can follow along," she says. Or have everyone sign up for the same virtual cooking class. Dozens of options are available online.

Finally, keep in mind that breaking with tradition right now might give you

a break and a lift. For example, instead of waiting for the holidays to cook a traditional Puerto Rican Christmas Dinner, Tellado and her parents made the special meal in August—complete with roast pork, rice with pigeon peas, and coquito, which is something like eggnog—just for the fun of it.

So celebrate when and how it works best for you, with safeguards. "We're all just trying to get through the next few months, and these big celebrations, as well as we can," Tellado says. "As long as you connect with loved ones in some way, whether it's in person or online, that's all that's important."

—Reporting by Nicholas De Leon, Samantha Gordon, Hallie Levine, Haniya Rae, Allen St. John, Sal Vaglica, and James K. Willcox

## GETTING GIFTS THERE IN TIME



IF YOU'RE SHIPPING gifts and goodies this season, the earlier you do so, the better. The pandemic-related shipping slowdowns of last spring have eased, for the most part, but an expected swell in online holiday shopping may lead to a resurgence. Deloitte's annual holiday retail survey predicts that online sales will grow by 25 to 35 percent between November and January, compared with about 15 percent for the same time last year.

To get an idea of when

your packages will arrive, review retailers' various shipping options and expected delivery windows before checking out, and choose one that suits your timetable. Sending gifts yourself? The FedEx and UPS websites provide estimates of shipping costs and delivery dates.

You can also sign up for services such as FedEx Delivery Manager, UPS My Choice, and the U.S. Postal Service's Informed Delivery, which track your shipments

and may even allow you to redirect a delivery if you send a package to the wrong address. (The USPS service isn't available in all areas.)

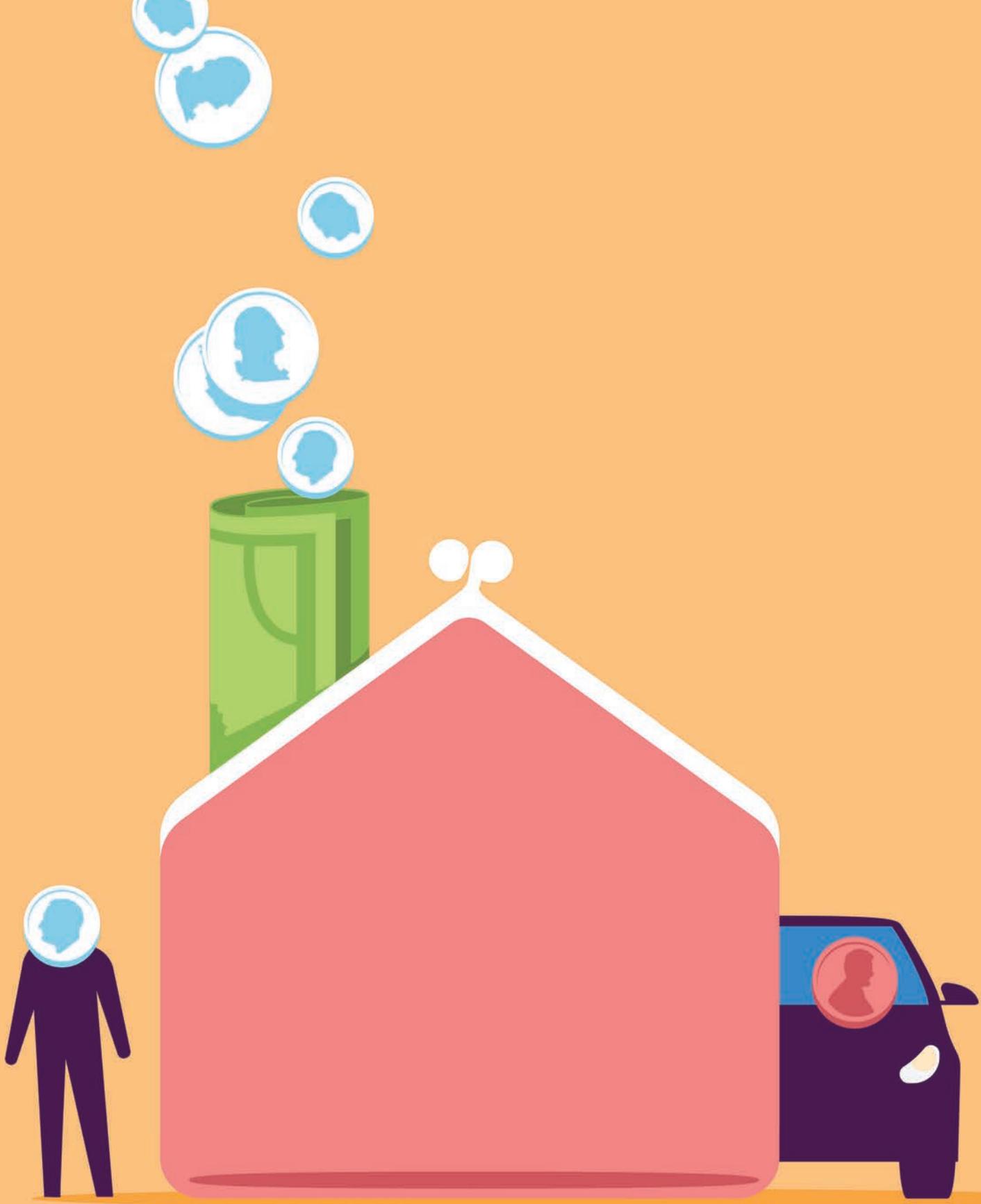
Running late? Be aware that carriers such as FedEx are guaranteeing last-minute deliveries (even, in some cases, as late as Christmas Day), but this may carry restrictions and extra fees. Given the uncertainty of service this year, it may be wise not to rely on these options.

# PRACTICALLY PAINLESS WAYS TO SPEND LESS RIGHT NOW

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■ Save hundreds—even thousands—on your **car insurance, cable bills, energy costs, groceries, gifts,** and more.

ILLUSTRATIONS BY BEN WISEMAN



# 'YOU GUYS HAVE THE WORST HOLD MUSIC.'

I've uttered that phrase countless times since last spring. Banks. Airlines. Insurance companies. Car dealerships. I've heard enough Muzak to fill a lifetime of elevator rides.

Everyone at Consumer Reports began working from home when the coronavirus pandemic swept our area. First, I went on a cooking spree, whipping up confit tomatoes and a Peruvian stir-fry called lomo saltado. Then I began to tackle the pile of bills and mail on my dining room buffet. You know, the credit card come-ons, the offers of a lower mortgage rate.

Financial matters have always overwhelmed me, so I put them off—a bad strategy. But I decided I could now do my regular work while on hold with customer service using my landline, taking work calls on my cell.

It was as boring as it sounds. But so far I've saved or recovered thousands of dollars, mostly from refinancing my mortgage. I lowered my interest rate by almost a point with no fees or closing costs. It took only about a dozen phone calls.

I also spent almost an hour suffering Delta's hold music to demand a refund for a flight canceled due to pandemic-related travel restrictions. I armed myself with CR's advice on how to get your money back (for details, go to [CR.org/planerefunds1220](https://www.consumerreports.org/planerefunds1220)). Turns out I didn't need it. A customer service agent said sure right away when she finally answered.

I called AmEx to ask why it slapped on a fee for a two-days-late payment. What, no grace period? And why such high interest? It refunded the fee and cut my interest in half. And I transferred the debt I'd been carrying on another credit card, for two destination weddings I had attended, to a no-interest card from another bank. I plan to pay that off before interest kicks in.

Next up? Getting new home insurance quotes and taking an online defensive driving course to lower my car insurance. Happily, the top of my buffet has returned into view. You can cut through your clutter and save a small fortune too by taking the following advice from CR's experts.

—Mary H.J. Farrell

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## 1.

### Use Your Tech Tools

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#### Get More Music for Less Money

People used to buy CDs; now they sign up for music-streaming services. These services aren't terribly expensive—Spotify costs \$10 a month, or \$15 for a family plan. But if you have specialized tastes, such as classical music, you can end up subscribing to multiple services and paying a lot more.

One way to get around that is to use the free versions of music-streaming services—most have one. Usually you have to put up with ads, and you might have to listen to playlists or stations with the kind of music you like, instead of choosing individual tracks.

There are lots of ways to combine paid and free services, but here's one great approach: Start with Amazon Music Prime. You may already pay for Prime but fail to take advantage of all the music it provides. Music Prime offers 2 million songs on demand and ad-free—that's plenty for many listeners, though far fewer tracks than with other streaming services. But let's say you don't want to pay anything additional for music. Start with Amazon and add the free

versions of these two services. Idagio. This is geared toward classical music. It's built for the genre from the ground up, designed for track titles that get complicated because of factors such as conductors, soloists, and individual movements in a larger piece. You can listen to Idagio's recommendations and playlists curated for different themes and moods without paying a dime, or stream the entire library free in a web browser. Idagio recommends music based on your taste as you use it and has features to help you explore composers and performers you may not have listened to much before. YouTube Music. The app lets you upload up to 100,000 of your own audio files and stream them from other devices. So if you have your own big music collection and want to access it from anywhere, the free version of YouTube Music can help.

## Cut the Cord for \$25 a Month

Just a few years ago, almost anyone could cut the cable cord or satellite TV and save money by signing up with what we at CR called cable-replacement streaming services. These services, such as Sling TV, offer local channels plus dozens of cable channels, such as CNN and HGTV, for around \$30 a month. But just like cable, prices for these services have been steadily rising; many now cost \$50 a month or more.

Now, thanks to the entry of some giant media conglomerates, there are several new streaming options that will let you spend about half that and still get access to a surprisingly robust assortment of broadcast channels, cable networks, TV shows, movies, and original series. (Many people also want Netflix or Amazon

Prime; if so, add those fees into your total TV-watching budget.) Here's what to do.

Start with CBS All Access, which provides tons of sports, including NFL games on CBS' schedule and Super Bowl LV, plus content from other Viacom properties, such as BET, Comedy Central, and movies from the Paramount library. Oh, there's also "Star Trek." A lot of "Star Trek." Monthly price: \$6.

Next, add Disney+, now home to Lucasfilm ("Star Wars"), Marvel Studios ("Black Panther"), and Pixar ("Toy Story"), as well as 20th Century Studios ("The Simpsons") and the lion's share of National Geographic. You can get Disney+ for \$7 a month, but we think it's worth paying for a bundle that includes Hulu (lots of broadcast channels) and ESPN+ (sports). Monthly price: \$13.

Last, sign up for the ad-supported, paid tier of Peacock, from NBC Universal. You'll get NBC shows, Universal movies, sports (including the

Olympics), and original programming—plus shows from Bravo, Syfy, Telemundo, USA Network, and Universal Pictures. Monthly price: \$5.

We listed only a fraction of all the entertainment this three-part package provides. If you do the math, you'll see the actual total price is just \$24, leaving you with an extra buck for popcorn.

## Make Saving Automatic

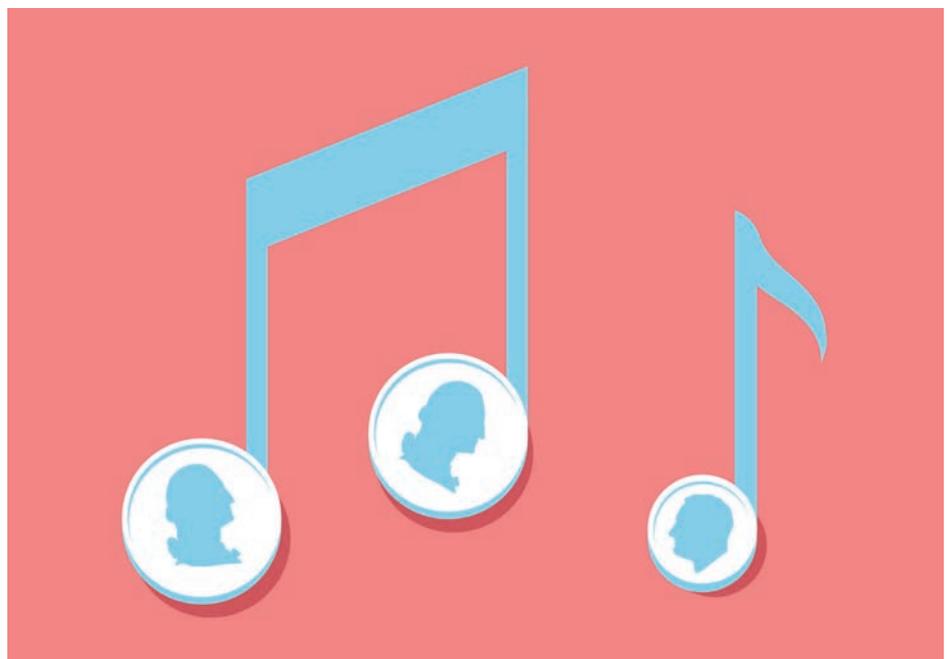
Thirty-seven percent of Americans have stepped up their saving during the pandemic, according to a recent Consumer Reports survey. That's in part because there have been fewer opportunities to spend on activities such as concerts, travel, or eating out.

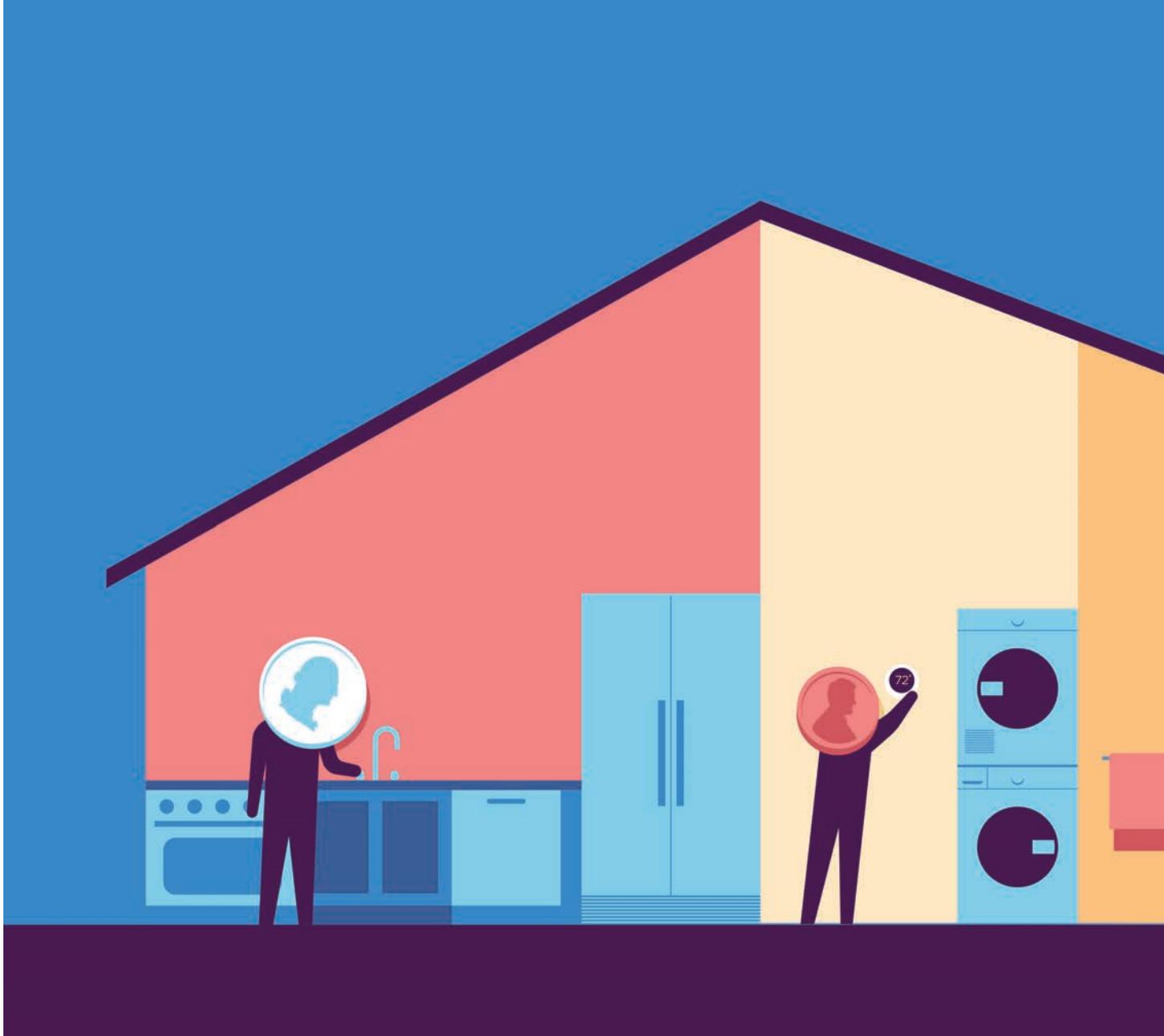
This underscores a crucial principle of how people behave financially—to make savings happen, you often need to be pushed into it, or find a way to push yourself.

"That's why 401(k) plans are so effective at getting people to save—the employer signs you up and the money is deducted from your pay, so you don't even miss it," says Meir Statman, professor of finance at Santa Clara University in California.

If you don't have an employer retirement plan, you can go into your bank's account settings online or via its app to create your own automatic savings program, by shifting a regular amount from your checking account to a savings or brokerage account. Even if you must start small, you can gradually increase the amount over time.

Some banks, including Bank of America and Chime, the latter a company that partners with banks and provides online banking services, offer programs that let you round up expenditures to the nearest dollar and stash the difference in a savings account. A number of financial apps offer similar round-up features.





# 2.

## Save on Energy, Water, and Repairs

### Home Maintenance To-Do's

Shut off hoses. And also insulate indoor pipes that run along exterior walls, to help avoid a burst pipe. Pipe insulation costs pennies per foot, but a burst pipe and the cleanup that comes with it can cost \$5,000 or more. Check your roof. Look for leaks and loose shingles before they become a big problem. It costs about \$8,000, on average, to replace a roof, according to Home Advisor, an amount that can climb far higher if you need to replace sheathing or framing as a result

of a long-neglected leak. Clean your gutters. Clearing leaves from your gutters is crucial every spring and fall, but you'll pay a pro about \$150 to do the job. You can carefully clear your own gutters on a ladder, or if you feel unsafe, look for a telescoping gutter-cleaning tool that attaches onto a garden hose or leaf blower.

### Water Conservation

Fix leaks in toilets, faucets, and showerheads. Old and worn washers and gaskets are frequently the cause of faucet leaks.

Take shorter showers and avoid taking baths, which use more water. Skip prerinsing dishes. Your dishwasher is designed to get rid of the debris; just make sure you scrape off the extra food. Run full washer loads. And pair like with like: towels in one load and sheets in another. Turn off the faucet when you're brushing your teeth or shaving. But keep it on while washing your hands so that you're not touching a potentially germey handle. Don't flush floss or tissues in the toilet. Throw them in the trash instead. Plus, you'll save



# 3.

## Save When You Shop

### Save More Than \$1,000 on Groceries

The average U.S. family trashes \$1,500 worth of food each year. Here's how you can cut back on that waste.

Be date savvy. Confusion over best-by/use-by/sell-by dates causes 20 percent of food waste, according to the Food and Drug Administration. "It's easy to think they mean 'throw out on this date,' but they have nothing to do with safety," says Amy Keating, a CR nutritionist. "They're just a manufacturer's estimate of the window for best flavor or quality." Even some perishables, like milk and eggs, may be perfectly fine for days or weeks past the date.

Make a meal plan and a shopping list. Whatever you're cooking, make a list of ingredients you need, plus any staples, to save time and avoid impulse purchases.

Don't be swayed by deals. You won't save by buying the 2-quart container of berries if you can't use all before they spoil. And you often don't have to buy multiples to get "2 for" or "10 for" prices.

Buy from supermarket bins. This is an especially good move if you need just a little of an ingredient for a recipe. Extend the life of fruits and

money on plumbing bills. Don't hose down your car. Use a bucket and sponge instead. Sweep your driveway rather than using a hose on it. And, really, it's okay to have a little debris on the driveway. It's not like it's your living room.

### Energy Savers

Install a smart thermostat, a connected device that can automate heating and cooling. You can save as much as 10 percent a year on heating and cooling by simply turning your thermostat back 7° to

10° F for 8 hours a day from its normal setting, according to the Department of Energy. Skip the range and use your small appliances instead. For example, cooking a meatloaf in a full-sized electric oven for an hour costs 24 cents, but cooking it in a toaster oven for the same amount of time costs 11 cents. Don't keep the fridge door open. Plus, let leftovers cool (for no more than 2 hours) before putting them into the refrigerator so that it doesn't have to work extra hard to cool hot food.

Run your dishwasher at night, when many utilities offer cheaper rates. If you're not a night owl, you can program it to start when you're sleeping. Use a high-spin speed in your washer to save time and money on drying. And make sure you clean the dryer lint filter before every load to improve air circulation. Plug air leaks around the house so that you don't lose cooled or warmed air. And take advantage of the sun by opening your curtains on cold days, but close them on warm days when it's sunny.

veggies. Some produce does better in high-humidity conditions, some in low, and some shouldn't be refrigerated at all. On many refrigerators, humidity in the crisper drawers is adjustable. The following division will help maximize freshness.

**Low-humidity drawer:** apples, berries, grapes, mushrooms, peppers, and—once ripe—avocados, melon, peaches, and pears.

**High-humidity drawer:** broccoli, carrots, cauliflower, cucumbers, and leafy greens.

**Don't refrigerate:** onions, potatoes, tomatoes, and winter squash.

**Rescue on-the-edge foods.** Wilted greens and rubbery carrots can be revived by soaking in cold water. Cut away bruises on fruit, then slice and freeze. It's safe to eat newly sprouted potatoes that are still firm if you remove the sprouts, as well as moldy hard cheese if you cut off the mold and 1 inch around it. Freeze leftovers that you

won't eat in three to four days. Soups, sauces, even cooked poultry can be frozen. "Use airtight, moisture-proof wrapping material, such as heavy-duty foil, freezer paper, or freezer-weight bags," says Elizabeth Andress, a professor and food-safety specialist at the University of Georgia and director of the National Center for Home Food Preservation.

### Pay Less for Rx Meds

High drug costs pose such a problem that 15 percent of Americans have skipped filling prescriptions to save money, according to a recent CR survey of people who had a medical bill in the last 12 months.\* Before you take that step, try these ideas. Use your insurer's "preferred pharmacy." Some pharmacies have arrangements with insurers to offer low prices on meds. Using out-of-network pharmacies could cost much more, says pharmacist Brian Caswell, owner of Wolker Drug

in Baxter Springs, Kan., and president of the National Community Pharmacists Association, which represents independent pharmacies. Ask the pharmacy for its lowest possible price. A CR secret shopper investigation found that doing so can net more savings. Some pharmacies will also work with you if you face financial hardship due to the COVID-19 crisis, Caswell says.

**Find generic drug discounts without using insurance.** Websites such as GoodRx and RxSaver are good places to search for discount coupons you can use without insurance. A membership service, ScriptCo, could be helpful if you regularly take a medication and live in certain states. Sign up for an annual (\$120) or quarterly (\$45) membership and it will deliver drugs at wholesale prices, potentially saving you hundreds of dollars a year. To see whether it's available where you live, go to scriptco.com.

# 4.

## Money Moves

### Trim Your Car Insurance Premium

Many factors affect your car insurance rate, from how much coverage you choose to your credit score and driver profile. Even so, there are ways to cut costs, including these four.

**Don't pay for miles you aren't driving.** If you're driving less than you used to, ask your insurer whether you qualify for a low-mileage discount. Or opt for a pay-per-mile plan. This requires sharing information about your driving habits. Safe drivers who don't travel much can save up to 50 percent on premiums.

**Seek savings on coverages.** Raising your comprehensive and collision deductible from \$500 to \$1,000 can lower your premium by 13 percent. On older cars, consider canceling collision, comprehensive, or both altogether if they cost more than you would recoup if the car were damaged or stolen. Ask about additional discounts. You might be eligible for untapped discounts, including ones for anti-theft features on your car, affinity group

## TIME YOUR BIG-TICKET SHOPPING

When your fridge breaks, it's time for a new one. But if your kitchen renovation is still a few months off, you can often score decent savings by waiting for the best sales to come around. CR tracks prices of many of the products we test—including big-ticket items like large appliances and TVs—to determine when during the year the discounts are deepest.



### Computers

August, November, December



### Dishwashers

May, July, November



### Mattresses

February, May, October, November



### Refrigerators

July, August, November



### Televisions

January, November, December



### Cooktops

August, September, November



### Lawn Mowers & Tractors

April, September



### Ranges

May, July, November



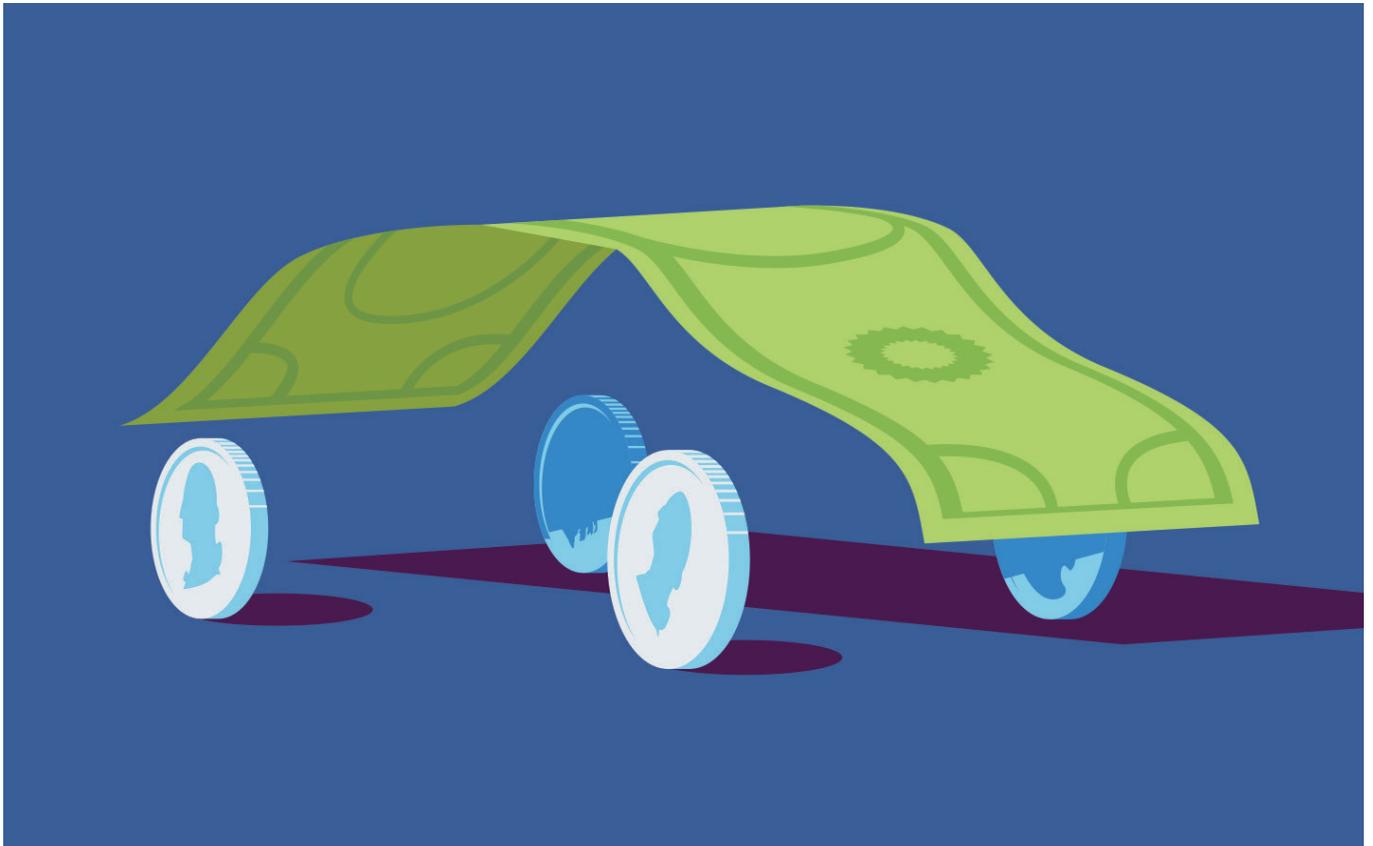
### Wall Ovens

January, September, November



### Washing Machines & Clothes Dryers

July, November



membership (such as an alumni association or union), the completion of a defensive-driving training course, or for bundling your home and car insurance. Some carriers give discounts for prepaying premiums, signing up for automatic billing, or using paperless billing. Switch carriers. Loyalty may not pay. In our 2018 Auto Insurance Survey, we found that among the 22 percent of CR members who told us they'd switched insurers in the past five years, 62 percent said they'd found a better price. It's legal in some states for insurers to collect data about your shopping habits to gauge how sensitive you are to price and raise your rates accordingly—regardless of

what car you drive or how safe a driver you are. If you're shopping around, start with CR's guide to recommended carriers, many of which don't advertise on TV. (Go to [CR.org/carinsurance1220](http://CR.org/carinsurance1220).)

### Keep Tabs on Your Credit Score

Your credit score can help you save, especially if you are applying for a mortgage or other loan. The higher your score, the lower the interest rate, which could save you thousands of dollars.

The FICO credit score is the brand used by most consumer lenders, so focus on it. FICO scores usually range from a low of 300 to a high of 850.

To get the best mortgage rate, you will probably need a

score of at least 740, which is considered very good; a score of 800 or more is exceptional.

"Someone with a fair credit score might pay three-quarters to a full percentage point more for a mortgage than someone with a very good credit score," says Keith Gumbinger, a vice president at HSH Associates, which tracks the mortgage market.

According to FICO's loan savings calculator, a borrower with a 640 credit score might pay \$1,807 a month on a \$400,000 30-year fixed mortgage and a borrower with a 740 score might pay \$1,628 a month. That adds up to \$64,000 more over the life of the loan for the borrower with the lower credit score.

Improving your credit score typically takes time because

you need to show a history of on-time payments, as well as avoid using too much of your available credit. Those factors alone account for two-thirds of the FICO score.

Still, there are three main steps you can take to improve your score.

Avoid canceling any credit accounts or opening new ones, which can hurt your score, says Jay Abolofia, a certified financial planner in Weston, Mass.

Pay down outstanding balances, and make all payments on time. Review your credit report periodically and fix errors you find. You can get free reports from the three major credit bureaus—Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion—through [AnnualCreditReport.com](http://AnnualCreditReport.com).





# HOW TO BUY AN APPLIANCE RIGHT NOW

With inventory low, getting what you want fast—and at the right price—isn't so easy. Here's help. **BY TOBIE STANGER**

**IN THIS NEW** pandemic world, product shortages seem to come in waves. First it was toilet paper and cleaning supplies, then decking lumber, laptops, and yes, appliances. Supply-chain holdups from the spring are still affecting what's available now.

Almost one-third of standard-sized 24-inch dishwashers have been out of stock at major appliance retailers this fall, compared with about one-fifth in early January, according to Gap Intelligence, a market research company. Thirty-seven percent of refrigerators have been unavailable on retailers' websites, about double what's usually out of stock.

"Before COVID-19, when you typed in the model number at some retailers' sites, they'd say 'available now,' or 'three left, order soon,'" says CR's

head shopper, who buys appliances for our tests. "Now, they sometimes won't give a date at all."

Janet Cather experienced the wait firsthand when it took nearly four months for the refrigerator and dishwasher she ordered to be delivered to her in Hartford, Mich. Cindy Wilmore of Columbia, Tenn., found a dishwasher she wanted on sale—but out of stock—and had to wait months until it was back in stock before she could order it. In the interim, she had to go to the store three times to extend the rain check for the sale price, which expired every 30 days. The dishwasher is now on order, but its projected delivery date is more than five months from when Wilmore and her husband first laid eyes on it. "Never in a million years did we think it would take this long to replace appliances," she

says. “We wait and wait and wait.”

And if an appliance is available now, you may have to pay more for it. That’s because with less inventory on hand, retailers are offering fewer discounts than usual. Chris Scurria of Talullah, La., had to deal with runarounds from a big-box store and delivery delays for a month before replacing her washer and dryer at an independent retailer—and spending \$400 more than she wanted to.

### What’s Causing All the Inventory Problems?

The shortages began in March, when consumers sheltering in place started using their appliances more—and ordering replacements and upgrades. But manufacturers, hamstrung by COVID-19-related closings and slowdowns, couldn’t meet the sudden

increase in demand. “There was a period of six to eight weeks when nobody in Asia was making steel,” says Tom Derry, CEO of the Institute for Supply Management, an industry group in Tempe, Ariz. “All of that adds up to months of backlog.”

And what about the higher prices? It’s not that retailers are raising them; their pricing agreements with manufacturers may stipulate that they can’t go much above suggested retail prices, says Jason Barry, an industry analyst for Gap Intelligence who focuses on large appliances. But he notes that during periods of low inventory, “there’s less aggressive discounting.”

Manufacturers we contacted say they’re working to fix supply-chain problems. Whirlpool, for instance, acknowledged that it had “a few brief

interruptions in production” at its plants but that “we are focused on overcoming these challenges.” Bosch said that while it’s improving availability, “we anticipate we will continue to face higher demand for our dishwashers.” Home Depot and Lowe’s didn’t address the problem when asked for comment.

Just how long will this topsy-turvy market last? Probably through the beginning of next year, at the very least. “Manufacturers are suggesting that we’ll see closer to normalized inventory levels during the first quarter of 2021,” Barry says.

That doesn’t mean you’re completely out of luck if your dishwasher breaks down right now. Read on for strategies on getting the appliance you need at the best possible price, pronto.

### How to Get Around Shortages and Delays—and Save

**SHOP AT AN INDEPENDENT.** Local independent retailers can offer selections comparable to those of big-box stores, thanks to their membership in cooperative buying groups. “An established indie may also have personal relationships with manufacturer representatives they can lean on in times like this to help you get what you want,” our head shopper says.

Independents may offer other perks as well. Marla Collins of Midlothian, Va., for example, says her local appliance dealer gave her a loaner fridge while she waited for her new Whirlpool last summer. “The loaner helped tremendously,” she says.

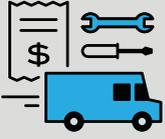
If you find a big-box store has a lower price for an item that’s available at an independent, see if the indie will price-match. This past spring, Frances Brooks Sanchez found an indie store near her Chicago home that matched Costco’s sale price for a refrigerator and range. It also beat Costco’s sale price for a dishwasher and microwave oven by \$90 and \$20, respectively, and delivery charges were waived, Sanchez says.

**USE DIGITAL RESOURCES.** Take advantage



#### Can't Get It?

The pandemic is to blame for supply-chain holdups that started last spring.



## WATCH OUT FOR ADDED FEES

Nothing's more frustrating than finally finding an appliance you want only to be priced out by all of the unexpected added fees. We researched the costs you're likely to see at the five major retail appliance dealers where CR members shop most often (Best Buy, Costco, Home Depot, Lowe's, and Sears) so you won't be surprised—and you'll be ready to haggle.

### IN-HOME DELIVERY

You may be surprised by how much delivery charges vary. Costco charges nothing to deliver most large appliances. At other retailers, the general rule is that the more you spend, the less you pay. Home Depot charges \$59 for purchases less than \$396 but nothing if your purchase costs more. The same goes for Lowe's. Best Buy charges \$70 or more for purchases under \$399, and nothing for those \$399 or more. (Fees vary if you live in outlying areas.) At Sears, you pay \$90 no matter how much you spend, though delivery fees for third-party retailers on Sears.com vary.

### EXTRA DELIVERY FEES

Do you live in a rural area or up four flights of stairs? Be prepared to pay more for delivery. Best Buy charges a custom fee for in-home delivery outside metro areas; for items \$399 and over, that fee is reduced by \$70. Costco charges more if delivery staff have to climb three

or more flights of stairs or use extra equipment, or if you want your appliance outside the usual weekday 4-hour window.

Home Depot, on the other hand, charges as little as \$20 if you want to reserve a 4-hour window rather than accepting a delivery date without a delivery window. Lowe's charges more for items delivered by ferry. And Sears' delivery fee in rural areas depends on the ZIP code.

### INSTALLATION

Most retailers don't charge for basic installation of most appliances, including unboxing, placing, and hooking up an item, as well as setting up and demonstrating its basic functions. Sears, though, charges \$160 to install dishwashers. Other retailers may charge for what they consider to be added installation tasks, such as hooking up refrigerators, dishwashers, gas ranges and dryers, and over-the-counter microwave ovens.

Best Buy charges \$135 or more for installing refrigerators with water and ice dispensers if you have no existing water line. (The fee goes down to \$50 if you pay \$200 per year for its Total Tech Support service.)

### MOVING AN OLD APPLIANCE TO A DIFFERENT ROOM

Costco, Lowe's, and Sears won't charge anything to move that old fridge to the basement. But Lowe's won't help you reconnect it. Best Buy and Home Depot will charge \$25.

### HAULING AWAY AND RECYCLING AN OLD APPLIANCE

Best Buy and Home Depot charge \$25, and Lowe's and Sears charge \$30. Costco doesn't charge for this service.

### RETURNS

This one's not a fee, but if you want a refund because your appliance is a dud, you'll need to request it within the time frame stated by the retailer. Costco gives you 90 days from the date of delivery; Best Buy, 15 days. Lowe's window is 30 days, and with Sears you have three days, plus 30 days to make the return. Home Depot requires customers to report damage or defects within 48 hours of delivery; returns must be scheduled at the first available date for the delivery service.

### RESTOCKING FEE

Most retailers don't charge one. But Sears has a 15 percent restocking fee for built-in appliances unless the item is defective, the wrong one was delivered, or delivery is in a state that prohibits a restocking fee.

## DON'T FORGET THESE INSTALLATION EXTRAS

Appliance shopping requires some homework beyond finding the model you want. You'll need measurements to make sure it can fit where you want it to go—and can pass through doorways, stairways, and hallways on its way there. (You can check measurements in CR's ratings online or on retailer websites.) You also may need extra parts for installation that aren't always included in the purchase price. Here's a look at what some of those extras might cost:

### WASHING MACHINE

Water hose (\$5 to \$30)

### CLOTHES DRYER

Galvanized, rigid duct (\$10 to \$30); flexible gas line (\$10 to \$30) or 240-volt electric power cord (\$10 to \$20)

### REFRIGERATOR

Water supply line for an icemaker (\$10 to \$25)

### ELECTRIC RANGE

240-volt power cord (\$20 to \$30). Professional installation, another cost, may be required.

### GAS RANGE

Flexible gas line (\$10 to \$40)

of a retailer's online shopping filters to narrow your search to what's in stock or in stores now. If you want to see a model in person, some retailers, like Lowe's, will tell you the nearest store that has it. AJ Madison, which is based in New York City but ships nationwide, has a "QuickShip" icon next to products that can usually be delivered within two business days from its warehouse.

**USE THE ONLINE CHAT IF IT'S AVAILABLE.** We tried Home Depot's, and a representative spent half an hour helping us find an in-stock LG French-door fridge.

**PRIORITIZE YOUR MUST-HAVES.** When inventory is limited, it helps to be flexible with features. For instance, Nish Suvarnakar, a market analyst for major appliances at CR, recommends choosing basic stainless steel instead of a more specialty finish, because it's a popular finish that's often manufactured in larger batches.

Consult our appliance Buying Guides on CR.org to learn about the features on different types, and use the "Compare" option in our ratings to see the features on specific models and our test results side by side.

**CONSIDER A FLOOR MODEL WITH COSMETIC FLAWS.** You may be able to get a floor model or an appliance with a few dents or scratches right away and at a discount. Best Buy, for one, has a search filter on its website for discounted "open box" appliances. We found a GE Spacemaker washer-dryer combination at 28 percent off. It was in "satisfactory" condition, meaning it may have had minor to moderate signs of use that wouldn't have an impact on performance, and it may have lacked nonessential parts.



## HOW TO STAY SAFE IF YOU SHOP IN-STORE

Checking out a new appliance can be trickier during the coronavirus pandemic. Some retailers are offering new ways for customers to "experience" products. Nebraska Furniture Mart in Omaha, for instance, can demonstrate appliance features via video. But if you do have to enter a store, take the following safety precautions

**GO WHEN TRAFFIC IS LOW.** Do a Google search for the retailer to see if you get a chart showing the times when the store is less busy. If you're an older person or in a vulnerable population, shop during any special hours reserved for you. (You may have to call to ask.)

Keep a distance from store staff and other shoppers.

**MAKE AN APPOINTMENT.** Set a specific time to meet with a salesperson if possible, so that you don't have to wait around in the store. Prepare questions ahead of time.

If you can't make an appointment, don't be shy about telling the salesperson that you want to expedite the shopping process. (So, no, you don't want to hear the pitch for an extended warranty. CR usually doesn't recommend them anyway.)

**PLAN FOR CONTACTLESS PAYMENT.** You can download a mobile app such as Apple Pay or Google Pay to check out simply by waving your smartphone above the card reader. Or pay with a credit card with radio-frequency identification (RFID) technology, which lets you do the same thing without having to swipe the card or sign anything.

**WEAR A MASK, BRING SANITIZER, SKIP GLOVES.** As with any public outing, remember to wear a mask. Bring hand sanitizer that's at least 60 percent alcohol to use after touching appliances and

when you leave the store. Don't wear gloves, because they can give you a false sense of security—you could touch a surface with gloved hands and inadvertently touch your face. Wash your hands with soap when you get home.

**PREPARE FOR THE DELIVERY.** Whether you shop in-store or online, when the company contacts you before your appliance arrives, ask that the people delivering it follow safety protocols, including wearing masks, using hand sanitizer, and maintaining a social distance of at least 6 feet when they're in your house. Keep windows open before and after delivery to circulate air, which helps reduce airborne virus particles. If possible, stay out of the room during installation. Clean the appliance with soap and water afterward—and surrounding countertops—and wash your hands.

**Ratings** > **Where to Shop** We surveyed CR members early in the pandemic on their appliance-buying experiences from January 2019 to April 2020, so the ratings don't necessarily reflect the current market.

**ORDER—AND KEEP BROWSING.** If you see something you want online, buy it. Then keep looking. If you find a better or quicker deal, cancel the first order. Big-box stores generally allow cancellations and a refund before the appliance is delivered. Just make sure you check the policy first. And be sure you can handle multiple purchases on your credit card; a refund may not be instant.

**DON'T FORGET TO HAGGLE.** Just because appliances may be harder to come by shouldn't stop you from bargaining. (In our recent survey, only 28 percent of CR members who bought large appliances from January 2019 to April 2020 haggled for a lower price, but 72 percent of those who did succeeded. The median savings was \$113.)

When we recently called Best Buy about an LG bottom-freezer fridge, we were able to get the \$25 haul-away fee dropped. John Hinnenkamp, who lives outside of Omaha, got even better results. After waiting for weeks for a gray GE washer and dryer set from Nebraska Furniture Mart, he settled for a white one instead. When he asked the retailer to make up for his time and trouble, the store discounted \$120 from his purchase and waived the haul-away fee. He also got a \$100 store credit. "Why was I compensated? That's simple," Hinnenkamp says. "I called them and complained. The squeaky wheel can get the grease."

**USE YOUR OWN VEHICLE.** With access to a truck, you can cut the wait for delivery by picking up your appliance yourself. Or try what Scott Cook of Cumberland, R.I., did: Have it delivered to a nearby location that offers a better delivery date. When Home Depot gave him a three-month lead time to deliver a freezer, he entered his sister's address in Massachusetts, 15 minutes away, into the online order. That ended up shaving a month off the delivery date. At his sister's house, Cook had the delivery crew put the freezer box directly into his truck, and his wife and father helped him unload it at home.

Retailer	Member Survey Results						
	Overall satisfaction score	Price	Selection	Service	In-store atmosphere	Website usability	Home delivery
<b>MAJOR APPLIANCE RETAILERS</b>							
Abt Electronics	94	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Famous Tate	93	↑	↑	↑	↑	—	↑
Albert Lee Appliance	92	↓	↑	↑	↑	—	↑
Costco Wholesale	92	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑
Nebraska Furniture Mart	92	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Warners' Stellan	91	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
Independent retailer/website	91	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
Orville's Home Appliances	90	↑	↑	↑	↑	—	↑
Spencers TV & Appliance	90	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
Amazon.com	89	↓	↑	—	—	↑	↑
Pacific Sales Kitchen & Home	89	↓	↑	↑	↑	—	↑
R.C. Willey Home Furnishings	88	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
ABC Warehouse	88	↓	↑	↑	↓	—	—
Sears Hometown Stores	87	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑
Ferguson	87	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
Best Buy	87	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑
P.C. Richard & Son	87	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑
Grand Appliance & TV	86	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓
Airport Home Appliance	86	↓	↑	↑	↓	—	↓
Lowe's	85	↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓
Home Depot	85	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Bray & Scarff	85	↓	↑	↑	↑	—	↑
Menards	84	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	—
Sears	84	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓
Appliance Factory Outlet	77	↓	↓	↓	—	—	—

**HOW WE SURVEY:** Ratings are based on Consumer Reports' 2020 Spring Survey of 25,029 CR members reporting on 33,947 major appliance purchases made between January 2019 and the spring of 2020. The **Overall satisfaction score** represents shoppers' opinion about their retail experience. If

all respondents were completely satisfied with a given retailer, the reader score would be 100; a score of 80 would indicate that respondents were very satisfied, on average. Differences of fewer than 4 points aren't meaningful. The other attributes listed under **Member Survey Results** reflect average scores on a scale from

very poor to excellent. Ratings are based on the experiences of CR members, who may not be representative of the general U.S. population. Dashes ("—") indicate there was an insufficient sample size to provide a rating or an attribute that wasn't applicable to a retailer.

# HOW YOUR RACE CAN CHA

Certain lab tests provide one result if a patient is Black, another if they're not Black. Debate over these 'race adjustments' is heating up.

BY KAVEH WADDELL

## HOW RACE ADJUSTMENTS WORK

Medical test results may be reported differently for otherwise identical Black and non-Black patients. Does that reflect real health differences, or a hidden bias? Here's how the question plays out for commonplace kidney tests.

### Non-Black Patient

#### A BLOOD TEST IS USED TO EVALUATE KIDNEY HEALTH



The lab reports the patient's GFR\* score.



A low GFR score indicates poor kidney function.

#### WHAT COULD HAPPEN NEXT



To be safe, certain drugs aren't prescribed, or when they are, dosages may be kept low.



The patient gets referred to a kidney specialist earlier.



If a transplant is needed, the patient is eligible earlier.

# CHANGE YOUR MEDICAL CARE

## Black Patient

The patient's GFR\* score is increased by as much as 21%.

A higher GFR score indicates better kidney function.

More medications, and higher dosages, are considered safe for this patient.

The patient gets referred to a specialist later.

If a transplant is needed, the patient becomes eligible later.

\*GLOMERULAR FILTRATION RATE, WHICH INDICATES HOW FAST A PERSON'S KIDNEYS CAN FILTER BLOOD.



**WHEN VANESSA GRUBBS, MD,** first met Eli about a decade ago, he was a muscular man in his 50s. Grubbs, a nephrologist at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital, was treating him for membranous nephropathy, a serious kidney condition. To take his vitals, she'd get out an extra-large blood pressure cuff.

Eli is not the patient's real name. Grubbs refers to him as "Book of Eli" because when they first met, he looked like Denzel Washington's brawny character in the 2010 action movie by that name. But over the next five years, as his illness progressed, Eli slowly lost some of his bulk. Grubbs switched to a regular-sized blood pressure cuff.

Eventually, the condition left Eli's kidneys so damaged that it was time to consider an organ transplant. But kidneys are in short supply: About 23,400 transplants took place last year, and approximately 92,000 people are on a national waitlist.

To get a spot on the list, a patient must have severely compromised kidneys, which doctors watch for using a number called the glomerular filtration rate, or GFR. The figure indicates how fast a person's kidneys can filter blood. Only people with a GFR of 20 or below can get in line for a kidney from a deceased donor, the main source of kidney transplants. (Sixty is considered the threshold of normal kidney function.)

To estimate GFR, a lab will commonly use a blood test to measure a substance called creatinine, then do calculations

that factor in a patient's sex and age. They also consider the patient's race.

If the patient is Black, the laboratory handling the blood test will multiply the initial GFR number by a specific coefficient, or ask the doctor to do so. For the test Eli underwent, that coefficient is 1.212.

So when Grubbs ordered a GFR test for Eli, she got two numbers back. His GFR was estimated at 20 "if not African American" or 24 "if African American." There were no other racial categories.

If Eli had been white, his blood test result would have qualified him for a spot on the transplant waitlist. Because he is Black, he did not make the cut.

Similar race adjustments, or "corrections," crop up in a number of the algorithms used in medicine. Some of these algorithms help doctors decipher test results like Eli's. Others assist a doctor in choosing the best diagnostic test, or deciding whether a patient is a good candidate for a particular treatment. Such calculations often adjust for age, sex, and other factors that can help account for broad physiological differences among patients. But the race adjustments are more controversial.

Grubbs, who studies how race affects medical decisions as an associate professor at the University of California, San Francisco, didn't stop with Eli's initial test results. "I didn't believe that just because he was Black he had higher kidney function," she says.

Weight loss like Eli's can affect some GFR estimates, and he was very close to the transplant cutoff. So Grubbs ordered a more elaborate GFR test, one that she considers to be more precise. The test is onerous, requiring a patient to collect urine samples over a period of 24 hours, in addition to having blood drawn. But it doesn't have a race adjustment factor.

The results came back with a single value: 20. Grubbs referred Eli to transplant center, which later entered his name on the transplant waitlist. Now, after a number of other health

setbacks, Eli is nearing the front of the transplant line, Grubbs says, and he could get a new kidney within a year.

## WHERE RACE COMES IN

Race adjustments are based on studies that report differences in measures of organ function or responses to treatments between Black people and others. Supporters of such adjustments say they can often steer doctors toward more effective medical care for their Black patients.

However, a paper published this year in the *New England Journal of Medicine* raised troubling questions about the race adjustments in 13 clinical algorithms from a variety of specialties.

In obstetrics, for instance, if a pregnant woman has had a cesarean section in the past, her doctor can use the "vaginal birth after C-section," or VBAC, risk calculator to help decide which kind of delivery to recommend. But the VBAC calculation makes vaginal delivery look more dangerous for Black and Hispanic women than for others. That may increase the odds they will end up with C-sections, which generally carry more risk. Black women are more likely to have C-sections than members of any other racial group in the U.S.

Race matters in the emergency room, too. If a patient comes in complaining about abdominal pain, a formula can help medical staff decide whether to run tests for kidney stones. If the patient is Black, the calculation suggests that they are less likely to have kidney stones, reducing the odds that they'll get tested.

With kidney disease, race-adjusted scores can affect patients long before they need a transplant, says Nwamaka Eneanya, MD, a nephrologist and an assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia, who co-authored an essay in 2019 on how race-adjusted GFR formulas may hurt Black patients.

Ideally, medical experts say, clinical

algorithms are just one part of how a doctor makes treatment decisions. However, because a higher GFR estimate can make Black patients' kidneys appear healthier than non-Black patients', they may be prescribed medications at doses that are too high for people with poor kidney function. They could also get referred to a specialist later. And they may never learn whether their race delayed a potentially lifesaving kidney transplant. (For tips on what to do if you're concerned about your test results, see "How to Be Your Own Advocate," on page 50.)

For Eneanya, such worries hit close to home. Several years ago, one of her relatives sought care for kidney disease but was not referred for a kidney transplant evaluation because his race-adjusted GFR value was above 20. (Like Eneanya, he is Black.) Eneanya eventually persuaded him to switch to a new doctor, who ordered more testing, and ultimately he got on the waitlist.

"Those few years of back-and-forth" could have been spent on the transplant waitlist, she tells CR. "Several years were lost because of this one number."

## WHAT STUDIES SHOW, OR DON'T

To people outside the medical field, it may seem surprising that a patient's race can be used to help make profound healthcare decisions. But "there's an unwillingness to even imagine how to practice medicine outside of race," says Dorothy Roberts, JD, a professor of law and sociology at the University of Pennsylvania.

Roberts and other critics say that race adjustments are based on a flawed understanding of race. "It's promoting the idea that Black people as a race are distinguishable biologically—just because of their race—from other human beings," Roberts says. Yet races are loosely defined social categories that change over time. No genetic test or biological marker places someone

in one race or another. What if one of your parents identifies as white and the other as Black? Should your doctor use a race adjustment with a lab test? There's no meaningful way to decide.

Race adjustments for GFR can be traced to a 1999 study that found Black people had higher concentrations of creatinine than white people whose kidneys were filtering blood at the same rate. The authors proposed multiplying



could hurt Black patients. What if their kidneys start to look worse than they really are? That could lead to undermedication for pain or illnesses such as cancer, fewer chances to be included in clinical trials that require well-functioning kidneys, and even higher life insurance premiums.

One thing people on all sides of the debate agree on: Americans' health status varies by race. On average, Black

"That's not just an equation. That's human beings you're talking about. That's my body right now in this chair."

**NAOMI NKINSI,**  
MEDICAL STUDENT, UNIVERSITY  
OF WASHINGTON

a Black person's serum creatine test result by a coefficient to adjust the score. Doing that, they concluded, would give a better picture of the patient's real kidney function. A later study found similar, but smaller, differences.

No one knows just what caused the differences between Black people and others in the two studies, and many critics think that race adjustments should be eliminated for GFR and other kinds of medical tests.

But not everyone agrees. "We need to slow down as a community of physicians to figure out how best to do this," says Neil Powe, MD, chief of medicine at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital.

Powe and a number of other doctors and researchers worry that removing race adjustments without more study

Americans are more likely than white Americans to have health problems such as diabetes, stroke, high blood pressure, and childhood asthma. The question is why, and how doctors should use that information.

For instance, beyond race, asthma is strongly associated with environmental factors such as poverty, outdoor air pollution from sources including diesel exhaust, and smoking. So does it make more sense to note whether a child with asthma is Black, or what their living conditions are like?

The U.S. has a long and often ugly history of race-based medicine, which goes far beyond the infamous Tuskegee syphilis study, in which hundreds of Black men were kept in the dark about their diagnosis and went untreated for decades, while researchers observed the

devastating progression of the disease.

In one example from before the Civil War, a Southern physician named Samuel Cartwright used a device called a spirometer, which measures lung capacity, to conclude that Black people had lower lung capacities than similar white people—a “deficiency” that he said made them less alert, and unfit for freedom.

Spirometers are still used today, and modern studies find that the measurements tend to differ by race. As a result, tests of lung capacity often include a race adjustment: Some readings that seem abnormally low for a white person might fall into what’s considered a normal range for a Black person. That can affect how patients are diagnosed and treated.

“We’ve really never stopped doing these Black-white comparisons and just assuming that Black people are inherently different,” Grubbs says.

## MEDICAL SCHOOL ACTIVISM

Naomi Nkinsi, now a third-year medical student at the University of Washington, in Seattle, was sitting in a lecture hall in 2018 when she first learned about race adjustments in GFR tests. It flashed by in a slide with no explanation of why a person’s skin color would affect the way their kidneys functioned.

“That’s not just an equation,” Nkinsi says. “That’s not just an abstract concept. That’s human beings you’re talking about. That’s my body right now sitting in this chair. My mom’s body, my dad’s body, my siblings.”

Nkinsi and other students soon began meeting to discuss pushing back against a race adjustment that they saw as unfounded in science. Soon, they were talking with faculty members including the university’s interim head of nephrology, who was receptive to their arguments.

UW was already planning a switch from one race-adjusted test to another,



## HOW TO BE YOUR OWN ADVOCATE

**IF YOU’RE CONCERNED** that the treatment you or a loved one is receiving for a chronic condition such as kidney disease, hypertension, or cancer might be influenced by a race-adjusted medical algorithm, there are actions you can take.

**1. Ask your doctor how your race will be used.** “If you have kidney disease and are Black, ask ‘What does this mean for my current care?’” says University of Pennsylvania assistant professor Nwamaka Eneanya. And, “If I am unable to receive certain specialty referrals or treatments, are there alternative measurements of kidney function that can be used that do not include race?”

**2. Discuss your health and family medical history in detail.** The more your doctor knows about your specific circumstances, the less likely they may be to rely too heavily on a race-adjusted algorithm.

**3. If you think your race has influenced your treatment, ask to see a specialist.** In many cases, they will be better equipped than a primary-care doctor to evaluate health issues for your specific condition and are less likely to rely on a single test or two that may employ a race adjustment.

so the university began studying what it would mean to drop the race variable altogether. This past June, the university stopped including a race adjustment in its test results.

Other institutions are moving in the same direction. Massachusetts General Hospital and Brigham and Women’s Hospital, as well as hospitals affiliated with Vanderbilt University, Brown University, and the University of Colorado, recently removed race from the GFR algorithms they use. Groups at New York’s Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai, the University of Nebraska, and elsewhere are advocating making that change at their institutions, too.

And at UCSF, a group of physicians that included Eli’s doctor, Vanessa Grubbs, began organizing in the summer of 2019 to ask for the race adjustment to be dropped. The university is now making plans to roll out a race-free GFR algorithm across all its Bay Area hospitals and clinics.

Similar changes may be implemented across the country in the coming years. In August, the National Kidney Foundation and the American Society of Nephrology formed a working group to evaluate the use of race in GFR calculators. The University of Pennsylvania’s Nwamaka Eneanya is in the group, and Neil Powe at Zuckerberg San Francisco General Hospital is its co-chair. The recommendations could be published by the end of 2020.

Beyond nephrology, certain race-adjusted algorithms are being reconsidered. The calculator used to guide obstetricians deciding whether to recommend a C-section could be revised soon to eliminate the race multiplier. But in several other medical fields, revisions to clinical algorithms may come slowly, as specialists study how patients would be affected.

“No one is saying to throw away science,” Eneanya says. “We just want to make sure that we are not causing harm to our patients.”



NEWS & EXPERT  
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# ROAD REPORT

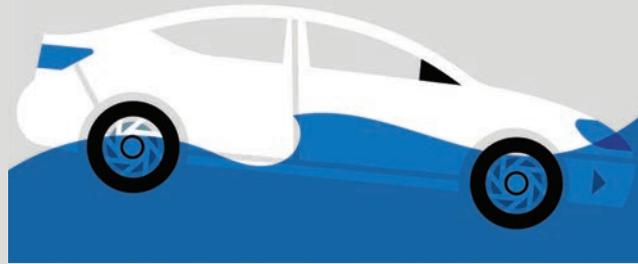
## ASK OUR EXPERTS

Will sandbags in my trunk help in winter driving?

No. In fact, they may do more harm than good. Placing sandbags in the trunk to add weight over the drive wheels in order to give them more bite in the snow is from the era when rear-drive cars were the norm. Most cars and SUVs today are front- or all-wheel drive and have traction control, which means adding weight to the trunk is not just unnecessary—it's a bad idea. It reduces the grip from the front tires and can make the vehicle more unbalanced. So forget the sandbags. Instead, prepare for winter with a good set of tires and a winter emergency kit that has a thermal blanket, small shovel, phone charger, flashlight, flares, and other essentials to keep you warm and safe in the event of a breakdown.

## TIP FROM OUR TEST TRACK

How to Avoid Buying a Flood-Damaged Car



Don't get sunk by someone else's water problems when you buy a used car. **Flooded vehicles may be shipped out of state for sale** without their title indicating "flood" or "salvage." Deep water can ruin electronics, lubricants, and mechanical systems, but the **damage may not become apparent for years.** Always pay a mechanic to inspect any used car before you buy it. At a minimum, be sure to **look for signs that the car was exposed to flooding**, such as water lines in the back of the engine compartment and rusty mounting screws on the seat bases.

## THE VITAL STATISTIC

\$22.2

The billions of dollars Mercedes-Benz owner Daimler AG will pay to settle a diesel emissions cheating investigation by U.S. authorities and claims from 250,000 U.S. vehicle owners. (Daimler denies any liability.)

## RECALL



## Ram 1500 Pickup Trucks

Fiat Chrysler Automobiles (FCA) is recalling more than 160,000 2019-2020 Ram 1500 pickup trucks because of accelerator pedals that may get stuck on all-weather floor mats while driving.

**WHAT TO DO:** Contact your local dealer, who can modify the floor mats until replacements are available. Drivers who experience a stuck accelerator in a Ram (or any other vehicle) should fully depress the brake and not release it until the truck stops. For more information, call FCA at 800-853-1403.

## MONEY SAVER

## Two Filters You Can Change Yourself



Changing two filters yourself can save you \$20 to \$50 in labor costs for each. Use the owner's manual and online videos for guidance on these quick and simple jobs.

**Engine air filter** This is in an easy-to-reach spot under the

hood in a plastic box that snaps open or unbolts.

**Cabin air filter** This is a bit trickier to change. It's usually under the dash or behind the glove box. Make sure you can remove it before spending money on a replacement filter.

# How to Choose the Right Tires for Your Car, SUV, or Truck

Top-performing tires will help you safely navigate the season's rain, snow, and ice. Here's how to find the set that's best for you.

by Jeff S. Bartlett

**T**IRES DO A LOT MORE than just stand between the road and your 2-ton car, SUV, or truck. These four rings of grooved rubber are integral to a car's performance, affecting braking, handling, ride, and even noise and fuel economy. So your tire choice really matters. But with new brands and a growing selection of models for SUVs entering the market, deciding which tire is best for you can be a challenge.

"Shoppers can be faced with an

overwhelming number of choices at a tire store, each with its own compelling claims," says Gene Petersen, Consumer Reports' tire expert. "Our extensive testing and ratings show how they truly compare."

Over the past three years, CR has tested more than 170 tire models. This year, our testing focused on SUV and truck tires across several categories.

With winter bringing potentially hazardous driving conditions, now is the right time to determine whether your tires need to be replaced. (See "Is It Time to Replace Your

Tires?" on page 54.) Don't delay: The pandemic has caused interruptions in the tire supply chain that could limit availability.

In general, unless you're getting winter tires, replacement tires should be the same type as the ones that came with the car, which means they'll most likely be able to provide the precise level of ride, handling, and grip that the automaker intended the car to deliver. You'll find the tire specifications for a vehicle on a sticker in the driver's doorjamb and in the owner's manual. You can also

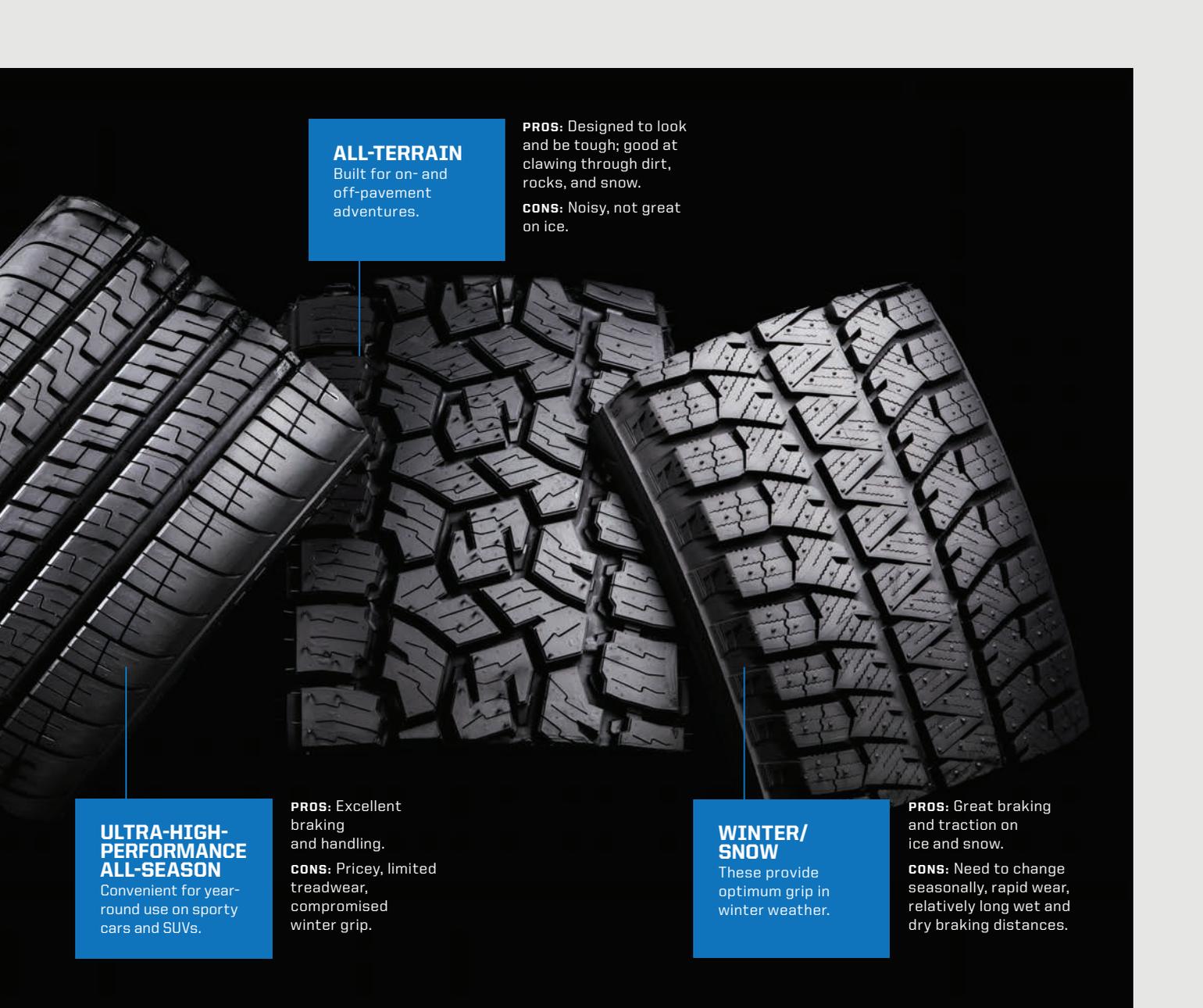
## ALL-SEASON

A general-purpose tire and the most common type for cars and SUVs.

**PROS:** Good all-around performance, low cost, long tread life.

**CONS:** They may lack the traction of more specialized tire types.





### ALL-TERRAIN

Built for on- and off-pavement adventures.

**PROS:** Designed to look and be tough; good at clawing through dirt, rocks, and snow.

**CONS:** Noisy, not great on ice.

### ULTRA-HIGH-PERFORMANCE ALL-SEASON

Convenient for year-round use on sporty cars and SUVs.

**PROS:** Excellent braking and handling.

**CONS:** Pricy, limited treadwear, compromised winter grip.

### WINTER/SNOW

These provide optimum grip in winter weather.

**PROS:** Great braking and traction on ice and snow.

**CONS:** Need to change seasonally, rapid wear, relatively long wet and dry braking distances.

use the CR tire selector, at [CR.org/tires](https://www.cars.com/cr/tires/), to find the tested models that will fit your car.

While it's fine to buy tires with increased capabilities, such as a set with a higher speed rating, stepping backward to a less capable type could hurt your vehicle's overall performance.

### Making Sense of Tire Types

Tires come in a variety of types, each designed for a specific vehicle and use. Here's a summary of the main categories you'll find at the tire shop.

**All-season:** Most cars and SUVs come with all-season tires. (Sportier cars may come with **performance all-season** tires, which have added grip, or **ultra-high-performance all-season** tires for even greater warm-weather traction.) All-season tires are good, general-purpose tires that can be used year-round. All-weather tires, a subset of all-season tires, perform a little better in the snow but without the accelerated wear and diminished braking distances of some winter/snow tires. They're also able to provide true year-round traction without the hassle of switching

tires every winter and spring, as you must with winter/snow tires. You'll find six performance all-season car tires and two all-season SUV tires in our ratings that are also all-weather tires. (They're indicated by a footnote in the ratings charts.)

**All-terrain:** These are designed for SUVs and trucks that go off-road, such as the Jeep Wrangler. You'll know them by their signature aggressive tread and squared-off sidewalls. Some have a mountain-and-snowflake symbol denoting winter traction. These can grip snow well, but past test results

have shown that they don't get quite the same grip on ice as winter/snow tires. (We did not conduct ice testing this year because of COVID-19 restrictions.)

**Winter/snow:** These have a tread with more biting edges than all-season tires have to provide optimum grip to stop, go, and to take sharp turns in snow or on icy roads. Many incorporate a softer rubber compound that remains flexible in extreme cold. These tires are suitable for any vehicle (always use them in sets of four) and are for people who must drive in snowstorms or want maximum grip in wintry weather. If you typically wait for roads to be cleared, good all-season tires can work well in winter. They can also be more affordable and more convenient to own because they don't need to be changed at the end of the season.

## IS IT TIME TO REPLACE YOUR TIRES?

TO FIND OUT, ALL YOU NEED IS 26 CENTS.



**2/32 INCH**

**PENNY TEST**  
If the top of Lincoln's head is visible, the tread is so worn that the tire is no longer safe to drive on. Replace your tires immediately.



**4/32 INCH**

**QUARTER TEST**  
Insert a quarter upside down into the tire tread. If you can see all of Washington's head, the tire may need to be replaced soon.

Brand + Model	Overall Score	Price	Three-Season Driving				Winter Driving		Comfort		Other	
			Dry braking	Wet braking	Handling	Hydroplaning resistance	Snow traction	Ice braking	Ride	Noise	Rolling resistance	Tested tread life (miles)
<b>ALL-SEASON TRUCK TIRES</b>												
Continental TerrainContact H/T	69	\$166	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑↑	NA	↑	↑↑	↑	95,000
General Grabber HTS60	62	\$166	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑↑	75,000
Michelin Defender LTX M/S [T]	62	\$229	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑↑	NA	↓	↑↑	↑↑	80,000
Laufenn X Fit HT	57	\$157	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	55,000
Kumho Crugen HT51	56	\$139	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑↑	55,000
Bridgestone Dueler Alenza H/L Plus	55	\$189	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	NA	↓	↑	↑	65,000
Falken Wildpeak H/T HT02	54	\$169	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA	↓	↑	↓	45,000
Nokian Rotiiva HT	54	\$177	↑	↓↓	↑	↑	↓	NA	↓	↑	↑	60,000
Firestone Destination LE3	54	\$151	↓	↓↓	↓	↑	↑↑	NA	↑	↑↑	↑↑	60,000
Hankook Dynapro HT	54	\$155	↑	↓↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	60,000
Sumitomo Encounter HT	53	\$139	↑	↓↓	↓	↑	↓	NA	↓	↑	↑	65,000
Toyo Open Country H/T II	51	\$169	↓	↓↓	↓	↓	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	75,000
Nitto Dura Grappler	51	\$164	↑	↓↓	↓	↓	↓	NA	↓	↑	↓	70,000

ICONS: ELIAS STEIN

**Ratings** > **Top Treads** CR has evaluated more than 170 tire models over the past three years. These ratings charts highlight some of the best performers in several categories for cars, SUVs, and pickup trucks.

Brand + Model	Overall Score	Price	Three-Season Driving				Winter Driving		Comfort		Other	
			Dry braking	Wet braking	Handling	Hydroplaning resistance	Snow traction	Ice braking	Ride	Noise	Rolling resistance	Tested tread life (miles)
<b>ALL-TERRAIN TRUCK TIRES</b>												
✔ Continental TerrainContact A/T	62	\$166	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA	↓	↑	↑	55,000
✔ Michelin LTX A/T2	61	\$222	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↓	↑	100,000
✔ Bridgestone Dueler A/T Revo 3	60	\$233	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	55,000
✔ Vredestein Pinza AT	60	\$169	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA	↑	↑	↑	75,000
Cooper Discoverer AT3 4S	58	\$171	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	60,000
General Grabber APT	58	\$154	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↓	↓	60,000
GT Radial Adventuro AT3	58	\$144	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	NA	↓	↑	↑	40,000
Mickey Thompson Deegan 38	57	\$179	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	NA	↑	↑	↑	65,000
Firestone Destination A/T2	57	\$168	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	60,000
Toyo Open Country A/T III	57	\$195	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↓	↓	60,000
Falken Wildpeak A/T3W	57	\$166	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA	↓	↓	↓	50,000
Hankook Dynapro AT2	55	\$166	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	60,000
Nexen Roadian AT Pro RA8	55	\$159	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	NA	↓	↑	↓	55,000
Pirelli Scorpion All Terrain Plus	54	\$159	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	55,000
Nokian Rotiiva AT	54	\$166	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	50,000
Sailun Terramax A/T 4S	53	\$133	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	NA	↓	↑	↑	40,000
Maxxis Bravo A/T 771	50	\$134	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	NA	↓	↓	↓	50,000
Nitto Terra Grappler G2	48	\$179	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↓	↑	70,000
<b>ALL-SEASON SUV TIRES</b>												
✔ Michelin CrossClimate SUV	74	\$206	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA	↑	↑	↑	40,000
✔ Vredestein HiTrac	69	\$169	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	55,000
✔ Kumho Crugen HP71	66	\$139	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	NA	↑	↑	↑	55,000
Pirelli Scorpion Verde All Season Plus II	65	\$169	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA	↑	↑	↑	45,000
Falken Ziex CT60 A/S	65	\$159	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	60,000
Sumitomo HTR Enhance CX2	65	\$146	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	75,000
Continental CrossContact LX25	64	\$169	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↑	↑	↑	85,000
Michelin Defender LTX M/S [H]	64	\$191	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA	↓	↓	↑	90,000
Sentury Crossover	63	\$80	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	NA	↓	↑	↑	50,000
Nokian WR G4 SUV	63	\$185	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↑	↑	↑	55,000
Nokian eNTYRE C/S	62	\$159	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	60,000
Hankook Dynapro HP2	61	\$159	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	85,000
Nexen Roadian GTX	60	\$151	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	45,000
Nitto NT421Q	58	\$148	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↓	60,000

Brand + Model	Overall Score	Price	Three-Season Driving				Winter Driving		Comfort		Other	
			Dry braking	Wet braking	Handling	Hydroplaning resistance	Snow traction	Ice braking	Ride	Noise	Rolling resistance	Tested tread life (miles)
												
<b>WINTER/SNOW TRUCK TIRES</b>												
✓ Michelin Latitude X-Ice XI2	72	\$189	↓	↔	↓	↓	↑	NA	↑	↑	↑	NA
✓ Nexen Winguard Winspike WS62	72	\$128	↓	↔	↓	↓	↑	NA	↑	↓	↑	NA
✓ Nokian Hakkapeliitta R3 SUV	71	\$170	↓	↔	↓	↓	↑	NA	↑	↑	↑	NA
✓ General Grabber Arctic	70	\$129	↓	↔	↓	↑	↑	NA	↑	↑	↑	NA
✓ Bridgestone Blizzak DM-V2	69	\$169	↓	↔	↓	↓	↑	NA	↑	↓	↑	NA
Hankook i*Pike RW11	67	\$166	↓	↔	↓	↑	↑	NA	↑	↓	↑	NA
Goodyear WinterCommand	66	\$155	↓	↔	↓	↓	↑	NA	↓	↓	↓	NA
Firestone Winterforce 2 UV	65	\$139	↓	↔	↓	↑	↑	NA	↓	↑	↑	NA
<b>ALL-SEASON CAR TIRES</b>												
✓ General Altimax RT43 (T)	70	\$87	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	80,000
✓ Michelin Defender T+H	67	\$115	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	90,000
Continental TrueContact Tour	66	\$97	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	95,000
Falken Sincera SN201 A/S	66	\$79	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	80,000
Falken Sincera SN250 A/S (T)	66	\$81	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	80,000
Nexen Aria AH7 (T)	66	\$91	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	90,000
Yokohama Avid Ascend (T)	65	\$92	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	100,000
BFGoodrich Advantage T/A Sport (T)	63	\$88	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	75,000
Hankook Kinergy PT	63	\$92	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	80,000
Kumho Solus TA11	61	\$79	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	75,000
Pirelli P4 Four Seasons Plus	60	\$107	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	85,000
Bridgestone Ecopia EP422 Plus	60	\$113	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	70,000
Toyo Versado Noir	60	\$99	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	75,000
<b>PERFORMANCE ALL-SEASON CAR TIRES</b>												
✓ Michelin CrossClimate + <sup>†</sup>	75	\$171	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	75,000
✓ Continental PureContact LS	71	\$128	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	90,000
General Altimax RT43 (V)	66	\$99	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	70,000
Goodyear Assurance WeatherReady <sup>†</sup>	64	\$142	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	75,000
Michelin Premier A/S	64	\$158	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	80,000
Pirelli Cinturato P7 All Season Plus	64	\$140	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	70,000
Vredestein Quatrac 5 <sup>†</sup>	62	\$104	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	50,000
Firestone WeatherGrip <sup>†</sup>	61	\$144	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	60,000
Atlas Force HP	61	\$52	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑	65,000
Bridgestone Turanza QuietTrack	61	\$171	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	70,000

<sup>†</sup>All-weather tires.

Brand + Model	Overall Score	Price	Three-Season Driving				Winter Driving		Comfort		Other	
			Dry braking	Wet braking	Handling	Hydroplaning resistance	Snow traction	Ice braking	Ride	Noise	Rolling resistance	Tested tread life (miles)



**PERFORMANCE ALL-SEASON CAR TIRES** continued

Falken Sincera SN250 A/S (V)	61	\$94	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	75,000
BFGoodrich Advantage T/A Sport (V)	60	\$106	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	80,000
Firestone Firehawk AS	60	\$92	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	60,000
Nokian WRG4	59	\$159	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	60,000
Yokohama Avid Ascend (V)	59	\$117	↑	↓	↓	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	↓	75,000
Bridgestone Turanza Serenity Plus	59	\$147	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	65,000
Toyo Celsius	53	\$113	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	60,000

**WINTER/SNOW CAR TIRES**

✓ Bridgestone Blizzak WS90	71	\$127	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	NA
✓ Cooper Discoverer True North	70	\$92	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	NA
✓ Hankook Winter i*Cept iZ2	70	\$101	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA
✓ Continental WinterContact SI	69	\$121	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	NA
✓ Michelin X-Ice XI3	68	\$98	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	NA
✓ Nokian Hakkapeliitta R3	68	\$147	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	NA
General Altimax Arctic 12	67	\$84	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	NA
Nexen Winguard Ice Plus	66	\$99	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	NA
Falken HS449 Eurowinter	64	\$91	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	NA

**ULTRA-HIGH-PERFORMANCE ALL-SEASON TIRES**

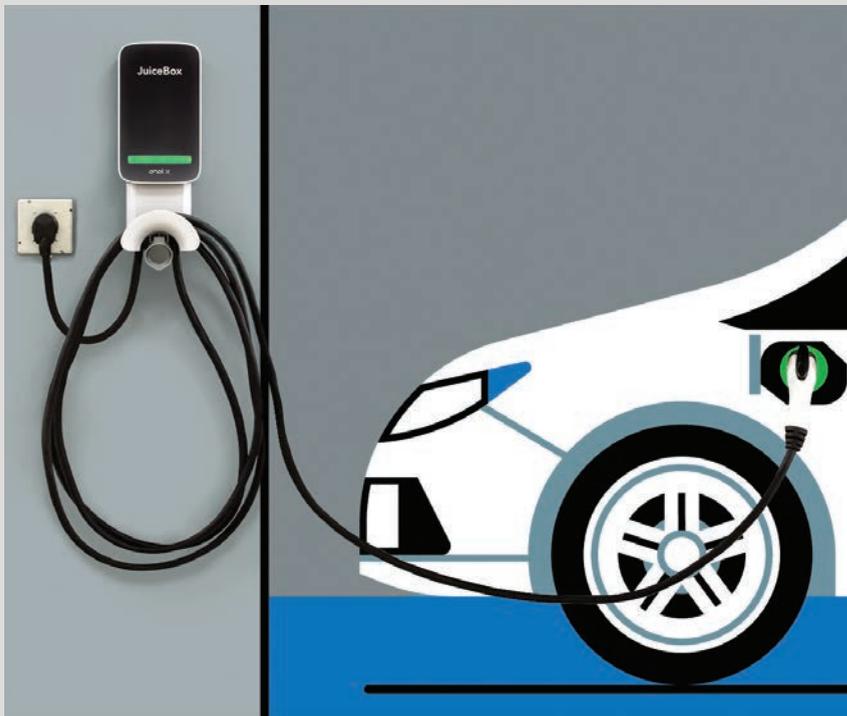
✓ Goodyear Eagle Exhilarate	68	\$159	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↓	45,000
✓ Michelin Pilot Sport A/S 3+	67	\$159	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	55,000
✓ General G-Max AS-05	66	\$112	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	65,000
BFGoodrich g-Force Comp-2 A/S	66	\$126	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	65,000
✓ Vredestein Quatrac Pro	66	\$151	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	60,000
Pirelli P Zero All Season Plus	64	\$144	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	55,000
Continental ExtremeContact DWS06	64	\$148	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	50,000
Bridgestone Potenza RE980AS	63	\$172	↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	40,000
Kumho Ecsta PA51	62	\$134	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↓	50,000
Cooper Zeon RS3-G1	61	\$119	↑	↓	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	55,000

➤ Digital and All Access members can find the latest, complete ratings at [CR.org/tires](https://www.cricr.org/tires). Find the right tires for your car, SUV, or truck.

**HOW WE TEST:** Overall Score is based on the performance of the tire in all our tests. **Braking** tests on dry and wet pavement are from 60 mph; on ice, from 10 mph. **Handling** combines steering feel with how well a tire performed in the wet-handling test and an emergency handling maneuver. **Hydroplaning resistance** denotes resistance to skimming along the surface of standing water. **Snow traction** indicates how far a vehicle has to travel to accelerate from 5 to 20 mph on flat, packed snow. **Ride** and **Noise** are evaluated subjectively on rough and smooth roads. **Rolling resistance**, as measured by a dynamometer, is a factor in fuel economy. **Tested tread life** indicates wear potential based on our 16,000-mile vehicle driving test. **Price** is for the tested size.



# EV Chargers That Deserve a Plug



**PLUG-IN HYBRID CARS** can be charged in a few hours using a standard 120-volt household outlet, but an all-electric car can take 20 hours or more using the same method. A 240-volt wall charger, officially known as Electric Vehicle Supply Equipment (EVSE), charges three to five times faster, meaning you can spend less time juicing up your EV and more time driving it.

CR recently evaluated eight wall chargers, most of which plug right into a 240-volt NEMA 14-50 receptacle and don't need to be hardwired. We prefer the plug-in models: You can easily upgrade to another model in the future or take it with you if you move. All of the units we evaluated are available online and cost \$300 to \$700. Note that the cheapest EVSEs often don't charge as quickly as more expensive units and may not be certified for safety by UL or a similar group. The national average installation cost is \$750, according to HomeAdvisor.

Below are highlights of the three favorites from our evaluation. To see what we thought of the others, go to [CR.org/evchargers](https://www.crisp.com/evchargers).

## BLINK HQ 100

PRICE \$400

This affordable charging choice is easy to install but also a foot wider than more compact models, which could potentially limit the places where it can be mounted. It has a hook for the relatively short 18-foot cable and can delay the start of charging with the push of a

button to take advantage of off-peak electricity rates. It also resumes charging automatically after a power outage. The Blink HQ 100 lacks WiFi connectivity and charges at just 30 amps, but most non-Tesla EVs won't benefit much from higher amperage anyway.

## JUICEBOX 40

PRICE \$599

The midpriced JuiceBox 40 checks all the important boxes, making it a solid, versatile choice. It has WiFi connectivity and a dedicated app that can be scheduled to charge at off-peak times to save on electricity costs. It's also easy to install and comes with a long

25-foot cable, which adds flexibility in terms of the mounting location. It restarts charging after a power outage and can charge up to 40 amps, which for some cars will reduce the length of time needed to keep the EV plugged in.

## CHARGEPOINT HOME FLEX

PRICE \$699

The ChargePoint brand is well-known for its public charging units; the Home Flex is the company's residential model. We liked its compact and sleek design, attention to detail, and quality craftsmanship. Hooking and unhooking the coupler feels

smooth and precise, and the holster is illuminated. The cable is 23 feet long, and the current can be ramped up to an impressive 50 amps. It's WiFi-enabled and will resume charging after a short delay following a power outage.



### HYBRID CARS

## Hyundai Sonata Hybrid

Great Fuel Economy, With Compromises

73

OVERALL SCORE

### ROAD-TEST SCORE 76

**HIGHS** Fuel economy, trusty handling, available tech features

**LOWS** Ride, gear selector, rough shifts

**POWERTRAIN** 192-hp, 2.0-liter 4-cylinder hybrid engine; 6-speed automatic transmission; front-wheel drive

**FUEL** 44 mpg on regular fuel

**PRICE** \$23,600-\$33,500 base price range \$31,515 as tested

**THE SONATA HYBRID**, like its gas-only sibling, stands out among mid-sized sedans for its sleek styling. But it comes with performance compromises that cause it to score lower in our tests than the previously tested gas-only version. Its chief attraction is—as you’d expect—fuel economy. The hybrid shines with 44 mpg overall, 13 mpg better than the regular Sonata. But that’s still less than hybrid competitors from Honda and Toyota.

As with many hybrids, Hyundai made concessions in refinement to achieve that competitive fuel economy. Specifically, the Sonata’s hybrid powertrain sounds busy and feels strained at times when it’s pushed. The transmission also lacks the polish of most of today’s automatics, sometimes shifting with a jolt, mostly in lower gears. To its credit, the Sonata Hybrid avoids the high-revving

tendency common in hybrid CVTs. The car can propel itself on electric power at low speeds, up to about 20 mph with a light foot on the gas pedal. According to our testing, the hybrid version is a half-second slower from 0 to 60 mph and has a longer braking distance when compared with the regular Sonata.

Beyond the powertrain, the two versions have similar attributes. They’re fairly roomy and rich with features. The infotainment systems are well-designed, and most controls are user-friendly, except for the push-button gear selector, which can be tricky to use without taking your eyes off the road. The rides are somewhat stiff, causing passengers to feel bumps more than in rival sedans.

The hybrid comes standard with FCW, AEB with pedestrian detection, and BSW.

### MID-SIZED CARS

## Porsche Taycan

Pricy EV Plays Second Fiddle to Tesla

77

OVERALL SCORE

### ROAD-TEST SCORE 86

**HIGHS** Acceleration, ride, handling, front-seat comfort, doesn’t consume gas or emit tailpipe emissions

**LOWS** Controls, price, long charging time, limited range, visibility

**POWERTRAIN** 562-hp, electric motor; 2-speed direct drive; all-wheel drive

**RANGE** 203 miles

**PRICE** \$103,800-\$185,000 base price range \$128,520 as tested

**THE ALL-ELECTRIC TAYCAN** stands as the most serious challenger yet to the Tesla Model S in the ultra-luxury EV category. While its driving performance, handling agility, ride comfort, and workmanship are impressive, the Porsche’s limited range and long charging times can’t match Tesla’s benchmarks.

The long, low, and wide Taycan handles like a premium sports car, capably tackling corners. It’s what you would expect from a Porsche. Even more striking is how well the car rides. The suspension masterfully absorbs bumps even with the optional 20-inch wheels and tires, which on some cars can amplify road imperfections.

The Porsche unleashes its available power the instant the driver pushes the accelerator pedal, resulting in a thrilling, 4-second 0-to-60 mph sprint. But the Taycan’s EPA-rated

range is just 203 miles vs. 348 miles for the lowest-rated Model S. And it takes nearly 11 hours to charge the Taycan’s 93-kWh battery on 240 volts.

The interior is austere, lacking any luxury-like materials. The controls are split between two touch screens, making it a challenge to complete some tasks while driving, such as changing the audio source. As in recent Teslas, adjusting the airflow direction is done through a screen, which provides zero benefit over hand-adjusted controls.

It’s likely you’ll run out of range before wanting to exit the supportive and comfortable front seats. But the back seat isn’t as nice, and it’s hard climbing in under the sloping roofline. FCW and AEB with pedestrian detection are standard, but BSW is optional, a glaring omission for a \$100,000-plus vehicle.



FULL-SIZED PICKUP TRUCKS

## Ram 1500 Turbodiesel

Better MPG Comes at a Cost

58

OVERALL SCORE

**THE RAM 1500** is the kinder, gentler pickup among full-sized models on the market, thanks to its quiet, upscale cabin and class-leading ride comfort. Opting for the turbodiesel engine over the gas-powered V8 gets you much better fuel economy, but overall it's a less refined driving experience.

The 3.0-liter diesel (which costs \$3,500 more than the 5.7-liter V8) is nowhere near as quick as its V8 counterpart. But the diesel's immediate grunt of power off the line lends itself perfectly to towing boats and heavy trailers. We measured 23 mpg overall—6 mpg better than the V8 and matching the Chevrolet Silverado 1500 diesel. (We haven't tested the new Ford F-150 diesel yet.) When the throttle is pushed hard, the somewhat gritty diesel sound steals a bit of the Ram 1500's famous cabin solitude. Still,

ROAD-TEST SCORE 83

**HIGHS** Ride, quietness, cabin room, controls, fuel economy

**LOWS** High step-in height

**POWERTRAIN** 260-hp, 3.0-liter V6 turbodiesel engine; 8-speed automatic transmission; four-wheel drive

**FUEL** 23 mpg on diesel fuel

**PRICE** \$32,145–\$57,515 base price range \$54,310 as tested

no other full-sized pickup rides as comfortably, due in part to the unique coil-spring rear suspension, which absorbs bumps and ruts with remarkable fluidity. Handling is surprisingly responsive for a full-sized truck, giving drivers confidence when taking on turns and twisty roads.

There's lots of head and elbow room inside the big Ram, along with generously sized front seats. But a proper left footrest is missing, which is especially noticeable on long trips. The Ram's cabin looks more upscale than its competitors, and the controls continue to be a model of simplicity, including the touchscreen infotainment system.

We don't like that you have to buy a pricey options package to get AEB, FCW, and BSW. We believe that at a minimum, AEB and FCW should come standard on all of the Ram's trim lines.

COMPACT SUVs

## Honda CR-V Hybrid

A Popular SUV Gets More Efficient

75

OVERALL SCORE

**NEW FOR 2020**, the CR-V Hybrid is a more fuel-efficient version of an already popular compact SUV. For the most part, Honda's first hybrid SUV takes what we like about the regular CR-V and gives it better gas mileage and standard AWD. We measured fuel economy at a respectable 35 mpg, which is 7 mpg better than the gas-only model we previously tested.

There's a lot to like here. The CR-V is small enough to navigate in tight parking spaces but roomy enough to comfortably fit five adults. FCW and AEB come standard, it's easy to get in and out of, and there's generous space for cargo. We also liked that it felt secure on the road when pushed to its handling limits, including during our avoidance maneuver, a test that simulates swerving to avoid an obstacle.

EX models and above come

ROAD-TEST SCORE 80

**HIGHS** Fuel economy, interior room, handling, competitively priced and well-equipped

**LOWS** Ride, infotainment system, sluggishness, engine noise

**POWERTRAIN** 212-hp, 2.0-liter 4-cylinder hybrid engine; continuously variable transmission; all-wheel drive

**FUEL** 35 mpg on regular fuel

**PRICE** \$27,850–36,050 base price range \$31,380 as tested

with standard BSW, more supportive seats, matte wood trim, and a 7-inch touch screen that's compatible with Android Auto and Apple CarPlay. We weren't impressed with Honda's sluggish infotainment system, which often required multiple distracting steps while driving to complete simple tasks.

There are a few quirks specific to the hybrid model. It's louder than the gas-only version, and it has a slightly stiffer ride. The brake pedal feels more sensitive, too, and it comes with a push-button gear selector that takes some time getting used to. The vehicle also feels rather slow off the line, requiring drivers to push deeper on the gas pedal, waking up the gas engine with an unpleasant roar. In this segment, shoppers should also consider the Toyota RAV4 Hybrid. It gets 37 mpg and is quicker than the Honda, too.

**Ratings** > **Fuel-Economy Strategies** The four tested models this month employ various powertrain technologies to bolster efficiency. But there are some trade-offs with each.

Make + Model	Overall Score	Survey Results		Road-Test Results											Advanced Safety						
		Predicted reliability	Owner satisfaction	Road-test score	Overall MPG/MPGe	Seat comfort front/rear	Usability	Noise	Ride	Fit + finish	Routine handling	Avoidance-maneuver speed, mph	Acceleration 0-60 mph, sec.	Dry braking 60-0 mph, ft.	Suitcases + duffels/ Cargo volume, cu. ft.	FCW	AEB, city	AEB, pedestrian	AEB, highway	BSW	
<b>SEDANS \$25,000–\$35,000</b>																					
Subaru Legacy 2.5L	87	↑	↑	89	28	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	54.5	8.9	131	4+1	S	S	S	S	0
Toyota Camry Hybrid 2.5H	86	↑	↑	89	47	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	54.5	7.8	138	3+1	S	S	S	S	0
Toyota Camry 2.5L	84	↑	↑	86	32	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	53.5	8.0	126	3+1	S	S	S	S	0
Nissan Altima 2.5L	84	↑	↓	81	31	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	53.5	7.6	131	4+0	S	S	0	S	0
Honda Accord 1.5T	82	↓	↑	89	31	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	54.5	7.7	135	4+1	S	S	S	S	0
Honda Accord Hybrid 2.0H	82	↓	↑	89	47	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	52.5	7.4	139	4+1	S	S	S	S	0
Mazda6 2.5L	80	↑	↑	79	28	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	54.0	9.2	133	3+2	S	S	S	S	S
Hyundai Sonata 2.5L	77	↓	↑	81	31	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	56.0	7.5	127	3+2	S	S	S	S	0
Hyundai Sonata Hybrid 2.0H	73	↓	↑	76	44	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	54.0	8.0	135	3+2	S	S	S	S	0
<b>SUVs \$25,000–\$35,000</b>																					
Subaru Forester 2.5L	84	↓	↑	90	28	↑ / ↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	53.0	9.2	130	36.5	S	S	S	S	0
Mazda CX-5 2.5L	84	↑	↑	80	24	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	54.0	8.6	133	30.5	S	S	S	S	S
Honda CR-V 1.5T	77	↓	↑	82	28	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	↑	↑	52.0	8.2	137	36.0	S	S	S	S	0
Honda CR-V Hybrid 2.0H	75	↓	↑	80	35	↑ / ↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	53.0	8.5	133	34.0	S	S	S	S	0
Toyota RAV4 Hybrid 2.5H	75	↓	↓	76	37	↑ / ↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	52.0	7.8	139	30.5	S	S	S	S	0
Toyota RAV4 2.5L	72	↓	↓	72	27	↑ / ↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	54.0	8.3	131	30.5	S	S	S	S	0
Ford Escape Hybrid 2.5H	67	↓	↑	82	34	↓ / ↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	51.0	8.3	128	30.5	S	S	S	S	S
Ford Escape 1.5T	62	↓	↑	73	26	↓ / ↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	53.0	8.9	128	30.5	S	S	S	S	S
<b>ELECTRIC CARS OVER \$75,000</b>																					
Tesla Model S	83	↓	↑	97	102 <sup>EV</sup>	↑ / ↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	54.0	5.1	129	4+3	S	S	S	S	–
Porsche Taycan	77	↓	↑	86	69 <sup>EV</sup>	↑ / ↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	52.5	4.0	130	1+3	S	S	S	S	0
<b>FULL-SIZED PICKUP TRUCKS</b>																					
Toyota Tundra 5.7L	62	↑	↑	59	15	↑ / ↓	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	44.5	6.7	153	NR	S	S	S	S	0
Ram 1500 5.7L	58	↓	↑	83	17	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	47.5	7.1	137	NR	0	0	–	0	0
Ram 1500 Diesel 3.00	58	↓	↑	83	23	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	47.0	8.8	138	NR	0	0	–	0	0
Ford F-150 (2020) 2.7T	57	↓	↑	74	19	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	47.0	6.8	145	NR	S	S	S	S	0
Chevrolet Silverado 1500 Diesel 3.00	55	↓	↑	78	23	↓ / ↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	47.0	7.9	144	NR	0	0	0	–	0
Chevrolet Silverado 1500 5.3L	55	↓	↑	78	17	↓ / ↑	↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	49.5	6.9	136	NR	0	0	0	–	0

> Digital and All Access members can find the latest, complete ratings at [CR.org/cars](https://www.cars.com). When you're ready to buy, configure the vehicle and find the best price in your area by clicking the green "View Pricing Information" button on the model's dedicated page.

**HOW WE TEST:** Recommended models did well in our **Overall Score**, which factors in **Road-Test Results**, **Predicted reliability**, **Owner satisfaction**, and

**Advanced Safety**, which includes crash-test results and the availability of crash-prevention features, such as forward collision warning, automatic emergency

braking, pedestrian detection, and blind spot warning. – means no such safety system is offered; 0 means it's available but not as standard equipment; S means

it's standard on all trims. We deduct points if a model's gear selector lacks fail-safes. Digital or All Access members can go to [CR.org/cars](https://www.cars.com) for complete ratings.



<sup>EV</sup> Miles-per-gallon equivalent (MPGe)

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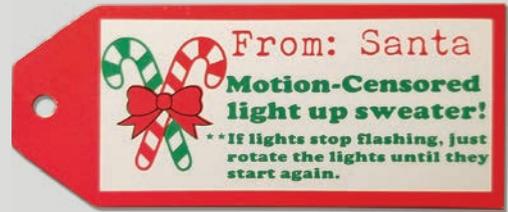
# Seasonal Slip-Ups

Our gift to you: Some seriously funny holiday fails

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Here's a holiday card that will blow you away. Submitted by Ralph Mastroberte, Silver City, NM

Second Nature greeting cards explode when the recipient takes them out of the envelope. This creates a memorial experience for your friend or loved one.



## Christmas Sweater Trouble

Is this sweater so ugly that you get censored just by walking around in it? Submitted by Cheri Carter, Spring Grove, IL

## Some Very Big Cranberries

Look what they're growing at the North Pole these days! Submitted by Dennis Hart, Orem, UT



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Steer clear of gift cards that give you less the longer you look at them. Submitted by Lewis Baumgardner, Edmond, OK



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