

**MOST RELIABLE
APPLIANCES**
EXCLUSIVE BRAND
RANKINGS

FROZEN MEALS
WE RATE THE
HEALTHY MAKEOVERS

**WHEN YOUR
INSURER DROPS
YOUR DRUG**
HOW TO FIGHT BACK

**NEED TO CALM
DOWN?**
8 SOOTHING STEPS

AUGUST 2020

CR Consumer Reports®

✔ TRUSTED RATINGS

Interior Paints

SUV Tires

Leaf Blowers

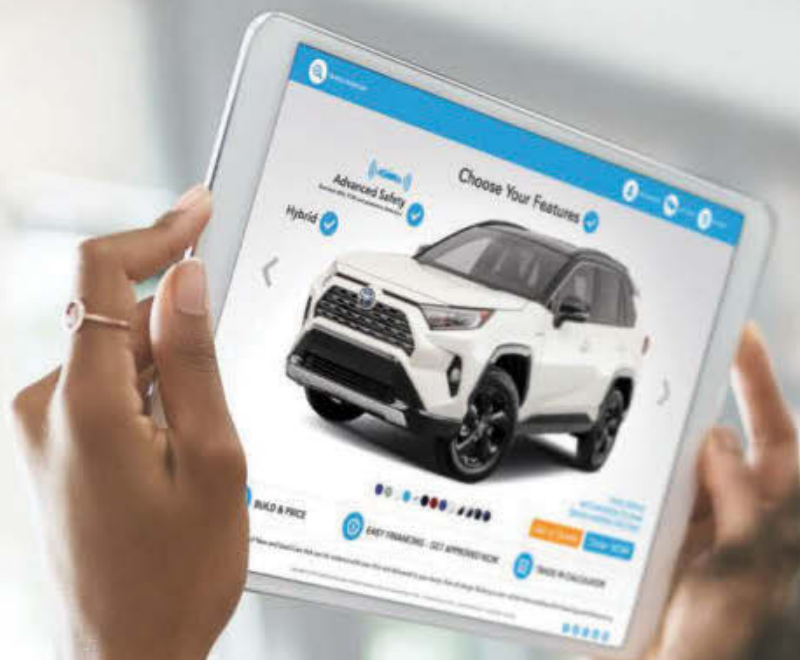
Garbage Disposals

Microwaves

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*Between 1/1/19 and 12/31/19, the average savings off MSRP experienced by consumers who connected with a TrueCar Certified Dealer through the Consumer Reports Auto Buying Program and who were identified as buying a new vehicle from that Certified Dealer was \$3,189. Your actual savings may vary based on multiple factors, including the vehicle you select, region, dealer, and applicable vehicle-specific manufacturer incentives, which are subject to change. The MSRP is determined by the manufacturer and may not reflect the price at which vehicles are generally sold in the dealer's trade area, as many vehicles are sold below MSRP. Each dealer sets its own pricing.



Hot & Healthy

Find out which frozen meals sizzle—and which fizzle—in our tests.



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CGA Payment Example

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Date(s) of Birth _____

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Consumers Drive Change



WITH SO MUCH uncertainty swirling around us, it can be daunting to try to see beyond the current pandemic and civil unrest to the world that might emerge in its wake. And while we can't know with any degree of certitude what comes next, given the economic fault lines and the tragic human toll of the crises, we can look to history for evidence of the resilience

and adaptability of the American people after events that shook our economy and social order to their cores. Such was the era when CR was born in 1936, with the rules of the marketplace taking on new shape and urgency.

Some of the changes ahead of us will be driven by necessity—like the increasingly common experience of buying a car from your couch, which you can read about in this month's issue (starting on page 56). Other changes will be prompted by consumers' rising conscientiousness about the products that come into their homes and the services they have come to rely on. But just how will that new awareness persist and help transform the marketplace in a post-pandemic world?

Whatever happens next, it is within people's power to emerge from this moment with a more consumer-friendly marketplace. The everyday choices we make today will define the new standards of tomorrow—if we base those choices on trustworthy information, quality, and safety. We can reset the balance between corporations and consumers. With so much scrambled, we have to rebuild—and the economy we rebuild could very well be designed by, and for, all the people.

As part of that effort, CR will continue to keep things honest, just as we have for more than 80 years. Together, we can help spur a marketplace that is responsive to consumers by default—where trust is the watchword, and the needs of people are put first.

Marta Tellado

Marta L. Tellado,
President and CEO
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Closing the Digital Divide

WHAT'S AT STAKE

The pandemic has made plain America's digital divide—the gap between people who have access to the internet and those who don't. Millions of us have been forced online to work, learn, see doctors, visit family, and shop for essential items. But about one-third of rural Americans lack a broadband connection at home, and only about half of lower-income households have access, compared with more than 9 in 10 high-income households.

Americans seem troubled by this: Eighty percent say internet service is as important as water and electricity, according to a nationally representative CR survey of 2,164 adults conducted in April. Yet high-speed internet is not governed or made widely available like a utility.

HOW CR HAS YOUR BACK

CR is calling on policymakers and companies to make broadband more accessible and affordable. One solution would be expanding a program called Lifeline. First established during the Reagan administration to provide discount phone service to low-income Americans, Lifeline was updated to include wireless phone service under George W. Bush and extended to broadband during the Obama administration.

More than 50,000 people have signed a CR petition to press the FCC and Congress to use Lifeline to make critical communication services more affordable, especially given the long-term impact of COVID-19 on our economy and lives.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Sign the petition at CR.org/broadband0820, and learn how libraries and schools are helping bridge the digital divide, at CR.org/bridge0820.

Debt Collection Protection

WHAT'S AT STAKE

Debt collectors generate more complaints to the Federal Trade Commission than any other industry. Many abide by regulations, but others, the FTC says, “harass and threaten consumers, demand larger payments than the law allows, refuse to verify disputed debts, and disclose debts to consumers’ employers, co-workers, family members, and friends.” CR has reported extensively on such scofflaws, including debt collectors who pressure people to pay debts that are no longer owed or were never owed in the first place and who prey on people’s lack of knowledge about their legal rights.

This issue is especially important now, with millions of Americans struggling to pay their bills amid the economic fallout of the pandemic.

HOW CR HAS YOUR BACK

CR is actively working to pass laws to provide greater



PROGRESS UPDATE

■ 61 percent of 2020 auto models come with **pedestrian detection standard** on all trim levels, up from 38 percent in 2019, when we announced that none were eligible to be a CR Top Pick without it.

■ We asked you to sign a petition demanding that **U.S. airlines give cash refunds**—not just vouchers—to people who couldn't fly because of the pandemic. By late May, more than 90,000 consumers had done so.

■ More than 80 of you wrote saying your **mortgage servicers expected repayment** in full as soon as a COVID-19-related forbearance period was over. The outpouring helped persuade federal regulators to clarify: No lump sums required.

oversight of the debt collection industry. In California we've endorsed two bills in the state Legislature that would curb some of the worst problems. The first would require all debt collectors to be licensed and examined by the state. The second would prohibit unsecured creditors from placing liens on borrowers' homes and forcing foreclosure sales as a debt collection tactic.

These reforms would allow a state agency to field complaints from consumers, investigate abuses, and put a stop to the threats and financial damage that shady collectors can cause.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Learn more about what you can do to protect your finances at CR.org/covidmoney0820.

Helping Stop the .Org Sale

WHAT'S AT STAKE

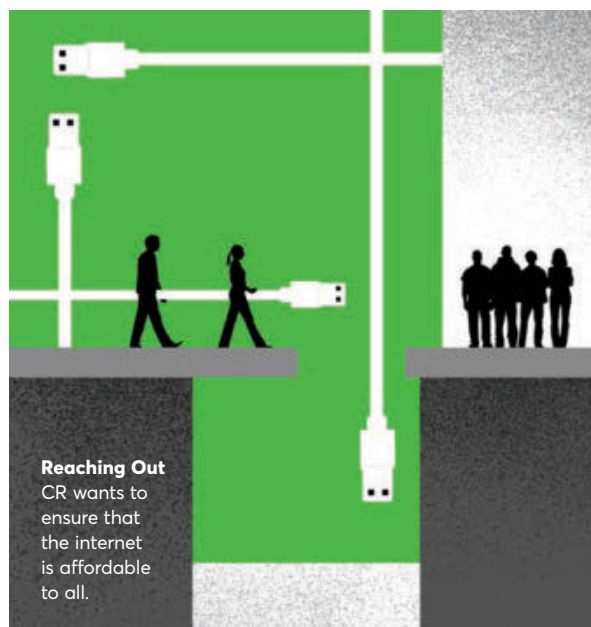
In late 2019, the Internet Society agreed to sell the Public Interest Registry—operator of the .org top-level domain used by nonprofit organizations—to a private equity firm. In the deal, the PIR would be converted from a not-for-profit entity to a for-profit one with some \$360 million of debt on its books.

HOW CR HAS YOUR BACK

CR joined with hundreds of nonprofits to stop the sale, arguing, among other things, that it would leave one company with control over who gets a domain and how much they'd pay for it. In late April, ICANN—the nonprofit charged with preserving the stability of the internet—vetoed the deal, concluding that “the public interest is better served in withholding consent.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Learn more about our digital rights work at CR's Digital Lab site, at CR.org/digital-lab.



Reaching Out
CR wants to ensure that the internet is affordable to all.



Our June investigation, “**Think You Don’t Eat Plastic?**” examined how contaminated food and water can lead to our ingesting plastic. Readers share their thoughts on how to minimize exposure and use less plastic. To add your voice, go to CR.org/plastic0820.

KUDOS FOR A penetrating and enlightening report on the problem of plastics in our personal and planetary environment, and for not dodging the inevitable conclusion that we must stop producing and using plastic.
—Maralyn Hamaker, Victoria, MN

YOUR ARTICLE was interesting, informative, and thought provoking. One question: Does microwaving the plastic trays that come with frozen dinners release plastic into the food?
—Gary Cachules, Northport, NY

EDITOR’S NOTE Frozen meal trays are often made from polyethylene terephthalate, or PET. Compounds in the plastic can get into food, although it’s not clear whether the amounts that leach out are harmful. To minimize your exposure, follow cooking directions on the package and avoid overheating. You can also pop the food out of its tray (like you would with ice cubes) and transfer it into a glass container for heating. In our review of frozen meals in this issue (on page 28), we spied one company noting that it uses a plant-based fiber bowl, but we can’t say at this time whether that is any improvement over plastic.

I NEVER REHEAT food in plastic containers, but I do reuse

plastic containers to store cooked leftovers in the fridge. Should I continue this?
—Mary Ann Ziemba, Philadelphia

EDITOR’S NOTE We wouldn’t advise reusing the plastic containers that purchased food comes in. And even though some plastic containers are sold for food storage, experts we spoke to say that storing food in them could lead to chemicals leaching into food over time. The safer bet is to store your leftovers in glass containers or foil.

YOU ADVISE THAT we should store food in glass containers. But all the glass containers I see in the stores have plastic lids. Are the lids safe?
—Thomas Clouser, Denver

EDITOR’S NOTE You can minimize your risk by not filling the container enough for the food to touch the lid while being stored—and don’t reheat foods with the plastic lid on.

REGARDING THE JUNE cover photo: The day I buy a single red pepper on a plastic tray wrapped in plastic is the day I give up shopping. I am concerned about the incremental destruction of the environment by the creation and disposal of such wasteful and unnecessary products.
—Steve Benoff, Beaumont, CA

ONE THING THAT infuriates me is the packaging of organic produce. I buy organic whenever possible because it’s better for the earth, and I hope it’s better for me. However, increasing amounts of it are encased in plastic—shrink wrap, plastic bags, clamshell containers, plastic sleeves ... individually shrink-wrapped bell peppers! It’s like I have to choose between plastic vs. fertilizers and pesticides. I hope CR will use its influence to persuade organic growers to stop this egregious practice.
—Joe Ossmann, Paw Paw, MI

EDITOR’S NOTE We are indeed aiming to do that. Meanwhile, you can help by voicing your concerns on your grocer’s Facebook or other social media page. Or use the “Contact Us” pages on corporate websites, which offer another outlet to pose concerns. Meanwhile, keep an eye out for our follow-up reports on plastic in future issues.

THE AMOUNT OF microplastic in the oceans, I understand, is huge, and the fish we eat are ingesting these microplastics. Perhaps it’s now too dangerous for us to be eating any type of fish, wherever it is from?
—Gotta BU, via CR.org



WRITE

Go to CR.org/lettertoeditor to share your comments for publication.

EDITOR'S NOTE Based on what we know now, fish and shellfish consumption is one of the top known contributors to microplastic consumption in the U.S. But scientists don't yet have enough data to say how this compares with other foods we eat, such as poultry, beef, or grains—or how potentially harmful microplastic ingestion may be. Also don't discount that eating seafood provides health benefits, such as good-for-you omega-3 fatty acids.



SLASH TV BILLS

“SAVE HUNDREDS ON CABLE BILLS” (June 2020) was very informative. However, I see only one reference to public television. PBS and local public stations offer a huge assortment of free programming via streaming. You can also join their PBS Passport service. All commercial-free, too!
—Frank Batavick, Baltimore

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EDITOR'S NOTE We agree that PBS is a great resource! Many people can get it free using an antenna. PBS Passport is a great benefit for PBS members (usually \$60 per year or \$5 monthly).

ONE OF THE BEST alternative services is YouTube TV, which offers both national and local channels for \$50 per month. I dropped my cable service over a year ago and have no regrets.
—Dieter Preiser, Corona, CA

I AM ONE of the millions who do not have broadband service. My only option is satellite internet. This is slow and cannot really be used for TV downloads. I'd be in favor of you reporting how to expand broadband to all!

—K. Fred Rist, Alma, WI

EDITOR'S NOTE Turn to *Building a Better World*, on page 7, for “Closing the Digital Divide,” to see how we have your back and how you can join the fight.



AUTO PRIVACY

I FOUND “What Your Car Sees” (June 2020) very informative. It briefly mentioned that the data collected was transmitted via cell phone back to the company collecting and selling the data. Unless the car has its own cell connection, the company is using my cell phone for its data collection. Does this not constitute unauthorized use of my cell data?
—Gary McConnell, Youngsville, NC

EDITOR'S NOTE Many modern vehicles have built-in cellular connections that communicate directly with an automaker. These connections are used for remote diagnostics, software



ARE ANY STRING TRIMMERS MADE WITHOUT PLASTIC?

The June 2020 CR issue contains an update on string trimmers, followed by an informative article on plastic consumption. I'm concerned about plastic being put into the environment by the strings as they are worn down, and I have searched for a trimmer that doesn't use plastic string. Your thoughts?
—James Simcoe, Norwich, NY

EDITOR'S NOTE All of the models we've tested so far use plastic string, but we've found that a fixed-line head will generally use a thicker string, which is less likely to break and doesn't wear down as quickly. Or, in dense areas, consider bladed heads that don't use string at all (compatible with some trimmers, such as the Ryobi on page 16 of this issue, but note they pose greater injury risks). Also, some companies claim to make strings that degrade more quickly, such as Oregon's BioTrim string.

updates, and telematics services—such as emergency assistance and remote locking/unlocking. But these same cellular connections can also be used to share data collected by vehicle sensors. If your car does not have a data connection but you connect a cell phone to your vehicle and use certain apps, you may have already agreed to a privacy policy that allows some data sharing between your car and third parties.

“WHAT YOUR CAR SEES” raises some important and alarming privacy concerns. I pay cash for tolls, rather than using E-ZPass. I also use a portable GPS unit and opt out of “map share.” No, I am not paranoid, just protective of my privacy. If I buy a car, I should own all of the data that the car generates, and I should be paid a monthly stipend by the manufacturer, Carmera, and Mobileye for using my data. I feel violated.
—Andrew Adamczyk, Ansonia, CT

I FOUND IT INTERESTING that data is being collected when I'm driving and that data is/will be a source of income for the data collection company. Doesn't that mean I'm unknowingly working for the data collection company? Seems to me I should get paid for that data.
—Richard Sieber, Fort Mill, SC

YOUR ARTICLE TOUCHES ON very scary implications—specifically the broad capabilities for third-party companies to capture, monitor, and share personal information. That's very troubling. Please work to protect our privacy rights!
—Jim Griesing, Stamford, CT

EDITOR'S NOTE We're working hard to help you take charge of your personal data. Go to CR.org/privacy0820 to learn more about our efforts.

What We're Testing in Our Labs ...

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

Countertop Microwaves

WE TESTED: 27 large models
WE TEST FOR: How evenly a model reheats a dish of cold mashed potatoes and defrosts 1 pound of frozen ground chuck, speed of heating, and more.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
Median: 67
Range: 51-86

Best Overall and Easy to Use
Panasonic NN-SE785S
\$330



86
OVERALL SCORE

Very Reliable Brand
LG LMC1575
\$220



77
OVERALL SCORE

Hot Price
Danby DMW14SA1BDB
\$120



67
OVERALL SCORE

Interior Paints

WE TESTED: 23 self-priming products
WE TEST FOR: How well a paint hides black paint in just one coat and how well a paint resists tough oil- and water-based stains.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
Median: 64
Range: 42-89

Stands Up to Stains
Behr Marquee (Home Depot)
\$45 per Gallon



89
OVERALL SCORE

Good Value
Kilz Complete Coat (Walmart)
\$27 per Gallon



75
OVERALL SCORE

Zero VOCs (Volatile Organic Compounds)
Prestige Interior Paint
\$41 per Gallon



66
OVERALL SCORE

Ask Our Experts

I hear pros tend to use primer, then two coats of paint. Should I do the same?



CONTRACTORS DO OFTEN USE a primer and two coats of paint; the primer seals the surface and improves paint adhesion. This traditional three-step process is likely out of habit, and insurance against a call back from an unhappy customer. But for a DIY job, you can save money by skipping the primer and using self-priming paint: "Self-priming paints have improved in recent years and do well in our tests all by themselves," says our paint expert, Enrique de Paz, who uses a colorimeter to measure how well a paint hides black paint. Products that do well in that test might not even need a second coat: "If your walls are smooth and your wall isn't a dark color, a single coat will do the job."

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

Noise-Canceling Headphones

WE TESTED: 27 models
WE TEST FOR: How well a model reduces ambient noise when the *active noise cancellation (ANC) feature is on, and sound quality, including clarity, detail, and more.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
 Median: 70
 Range: 42-87

Best Buds
 Sony WF-1000XM3
 \$230



87
 OVERALL SCORE

Best Studio-Style
 Bose Noise Cancelling Headphones 700
 \$400



87
 OVERALL SCORE

Excellent ANC* Bargain Buy
 Monoprice BT-300ANC
 \$45



72
 OVERALL SCORE

Tablets

WE TESTED: 30 models
WE TEST FOR: Performance, including speed and visual smoothness running apps with complex visual graphics; viewing angle; brightness and color of display; and more.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
 Median: 80
 Range: 60-88

Large and Excellent Display
 Apple iPad Pro 11 (128GB, 11") 2020
 \$800



86
 OVERALL SCORE

Long Battery Life for Videos
 Samsung Galaxy Tab S4 SM-T830 (10.5")
 \$500



84
 OVERALL SCORE

Great Performance for Less
 Lenovo Tab M10 32GB (10.1")
 \$150



68
 OVERALL SCORE

All-Season SUV Tires

WE TESTED: 7 models
WE TEST FOR: Stopping performance from 60 to 0 mph on wet and dry roads, handling, ride comfort, noise, rolling resistance (a factor in fuel economy), and tread life.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
 Median: 66
 Range: 64-68

Good Value
 Kumho Crugen Premium
 \$101 Each



68
 OVERALL SCORE

Excellent Rolling Resistance
 Bridgestone Dueler H/L 422 Ecopia
 \$139 Each



68
 OVERALL SCORE

Long Tread Life
 Hankook Dynapro HP2
 \$116 Each



66
 OVERALL SCORE

Strollers

WE TESTED: 49 models
WE TEST FOR: Safety; ease of use, including unfolding and folding, carrying, and more; and maneuverability around S-turns and on various terrain, such as grass and dirt.

ABOUT THE SCORES:
 Median: 75
 Range: 49-88

Easiest to Maneuver
 Peg Perego Booklet
 \$350



88
 OVERALL SCORE

Deal on Wheels
 Mamas and Papas Armadillo
 \$200



83
 OVERALL SCORE

Best for Jogging (But Heavy)
 Chicco Activ3
 \$300



80
 OVERALL SCORE

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

COMING NEXT MONTH Printers & More



Are some salts healthier than others?

While the various types of salt—for example, table, kosher, and sea salts—may impart different flavors on food, they’re very similar from a health point of view, says Amy Keating, R.D., a CR nutritionist. Sea salt comes from evaporated ocean water and retains some trace minerals, such as magnesium, but not in high enough amounts to have nutritional benefits. Table salt often has iodine added—a mineral important for preventing thyroid problems—but iodine is also found naturally in dairy products, eggs, seafood, and grains.

As for the sodium levels, “most types of salt—technically sodium chloride—are roughly 40 percent sodium by weight,” Keating says. (Chlorine mostly makes up the rest.) The main reason nutrition labels on salt packages show varying amounts

of sodium is because the serving size for salt is listed as a volume (usually ¼ teaspoon). Kosher salt and sea salt often have larger or coarser crystals than table salt; less of it fits on the spoon, so the sodium content appears lower. For example, Morton table salt has 590 mg per ¼ teaspoon, coarse sea salt has 580 mg, and coarse kosher salt has 480 mg.

Still, in recipes, if you replace table salt—teaspoon for teaspoon—with coarse sea salt or kosher salt, it may help you cut your sodium intake, and chances are your palate won’t notice a difference. The larger crystals may also deliver a strong salty hit when sprinkled on foods, so you can use less.

What’s the best way to support local restaurants during the pandemic?

Many people use third-party food delivery services, such as DoorDash, Grubhub, Postmates, and Uber Eats. But these services have come under increasing scrutiny for the delivery and service fees they levy on consumers’ orders, as

well as the commissions they charge the restaurants they work with. A recent lawsuit filed against these businesses alleges that they charge “exorbitant fees” that drive up costs for consumers and restaurants.

One way to avoid service fees is to order directly from the restaurant itself via the restaurant’s own ordering website or by phone, rather than going through a third-party delivery service. That allows the restaurant to avoid paying the commission, and more of your dollars will go directly to the restaurant.

If you do use a third-party service, order your food to pick up because some services charge the restaurant a lower commission for pickup than for delivery, says Eli Wilson, Ph.D., an assistant professor of sociology at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, who studies restaurant labor. Also, consider ordering more than one meal’s worth of food at a time (tonight’s dinner and tomorrow’s lunch). This boosts the restaurant’s revenue, and you pay only one delivery and service fee.

We recommend tipping the delivery driver the same way you would a restaurant server—at least 20 percent. DoorDash, Grubhub, Postmates, and Uber Eats all

say 100 percent of tips go directly to drivers. And even if it’s a pickup order, consider tipping the restaurant, too. Uber Eats offers consumers the opportunity to tip the establishment separately.

Should I use a tire shine gloss when cleaning my wheels?

Over time, it’s normal for tires to begin to dull in appearance. Tire shine products, called tire dressing or protectant, are meant to remedy this dullness and can achieve a soft, satin look or a shiny, wet appearance, depending on the product. Car care companies may also claim that some shine products protect tires from harmful ultraviolet light and air pollution.

While we don’t test these products, the clear consensus from tire manufacturers we asked (Bridgestone, Continental, and Michelin) was that you don’t need any aftermarket products to preserve tires, which are already formulated to resist UV light and ozone. In fact, tires have protective weathering agents that might be adversely affected by using a gloss product. You won’t get the high-shine look of using a chemical, but cleaning with plain old soap and water is better for your tires in the long run.



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

IN THE KNOW

CHILL OUT WITH BETTER HOME BREW



From left:

COFFEE GRINDER
Baratza Encore Conical Burr Grinder \$145

73 OVERALL SCORE

COFFEE MAKER
 Cuisinart Automatic Cold Brew Coffeemaker DCB-10 \$80

73 OVERALL SCORE

COLD BREW, a slowly brewed, more caffeinated version of iced coffee, has become a staple of coffee shops. But if you're not able to make your usual coffee runs because of virus restrictions, you can still have your fix and beat the heat by brewing it right at home. The secret? A cold-brew coffee maker is only as good as the ground coffee you use—and to

get the best grounds, you need to freshly grind your beans to the right size using a grinder that offers a "coarse" setting.

"The larger granules created by a coarse grind are good for the slow extraction cold brewing requires, when the ground coffee beans intermingle with water for a long period of time," says Ginny Lui, CR's test engineer

for coffee makers and grinders.

To determine how well a grinder creates coarse grounds, we grind coffee beans using the grinder's coarsest setting, then put the grounds through a number of sieves to make sure they're the correct size. The Baratza above—one of only two grinders in our tests to produce excellent coarse grounds—is your best bet for making daily

cold brew, especially if you pair it with a great cold brewer, such as the Cuisinart DCB-10, above. The DCB-10 does well across all of our brewer tests, outperforming some models that cost almost twice as much, and brews 7 cups in 25 to 45 minutes—that's fast for cold brew, which can take 12 to 24 hours in a manual brewer. Plus, it's easy to clean.

ILLUSTRATIONS: RIDRIGO DAMATI. PHOTO, TOP: JOHN WALSH/CONSUMER REPORTS

BEST HOT BREW DUO The Calphalon, far right, is a top-performing drip model in our brewing test, and it's easy to set up, operate, and clean. Pair it with the Oxo grinder at right, which rates Very Good across all of our tests, including making medium grinds—the best for hot coffee (and a size the Baratza grinder, above, rates only Good at).

Oxo Brew Conical Burr Coffee Grinder \$100

76 OVERALL SCORE

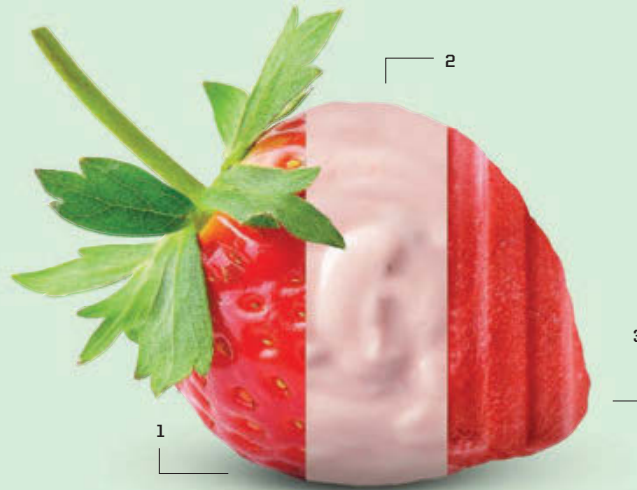


Calphalon Special Brew BVCLDCG1 \$150

85 OVERALL SCORE

HOW PROCESSED IS IT?

STRAWBERRY PRODUCTS



1. FRESH STRAWBERRIES

Strawberries have a shelf life of just 8 to 10 days. As a result, they're picked by hand and rushed to market, essentially processing-free. Deliciously sweet and inherently healthy, ½ cup of sliced berries has about 30 calories, 5 grams of natural sugars, and about 2 grams of fiber. They're rich in vitamin C and other antioxidants (more than half your daily need in ½ cup) and a compound called pelargonidin, which

gives them their striking red color. Note too that frozen berries are as healthy as fresh ones, as long as they don't contain added sugars. Consider organic; conventional strawberries can contain high pesticide residue levels.

2. FRUIT YOGURT

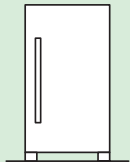
Most of the benefits of strawberry yogurt—calcium, potassium, and probiotic live, active cultures—come from the yogurt, not the berries. And fruit yogurts are far more

processed than plain yogurt to which you add sliced fruit. First, consider added sugars, which vary by brand. For example, a 4.5-ounce cup of Noosa whole milk strawberry yogurt has 11 grams of added sugars, while Siggis whole milk strawberry & rhubarb has just 5 grams. And some yogurts have additives, as well as "natural" flavors and colors; these come from natural sources but can be chemically extracted, making them highly processed.

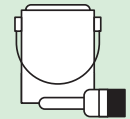
3. FROZEN FRUIT BAR

With claims such as "made with real fruit," these bars sound healthier than standard ice pops—but most don't have much fruit. In fact, they're more processed than yogurt, due to the added sugars they tend to include, such as cane sugar or high-fructose corn syrup, and the fact that they have little nutritional value. In the bars we looked at, there were about 14 to 24 grams of sugars and little or no vitamins, minerals, or fiber.

AUGUST IS THE BEST TIME TO BUY ...



FREEZERS



WOOD STAINS

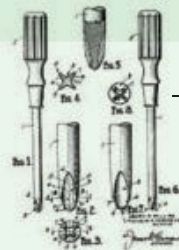


GRILLS

For more info, go to CR.org/buy0820.

CR Time Traveler HOME IMPROVEMENT TOOLS

1917 The handheld drill is patented by S. Duncan Black and Alonzo Decker. Its portable pistol grip design for single-hand use is inspired by a Colt .45 automatic pistol.



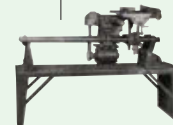
1952 We evaluate a combination table saw, lathe, drill press, and disc sander called the Shopsmith. Though fine for a novice, we advise more experienced consumers to buy individual tools instead.



1924 Ace Hardware is founded by a small group of Chicago hardware store owners.



1933 Henry Phillips forms the Phillips Screw Company; a few years later the screw is used in manufacturing Cadillacs.



1958 As portable electric jigsaws rise in popularity, "home handyman no longer need an ordinary handsaw," we report after testing 24 models.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

TRULY WIRELESS BUDS

HEADPHONES THAT ALLOW completely wire-free listening are growing in popularity. “They’ve gotten a lot better—with less static

and stuttering—since we first tested them in 2016,” says Elias Arias, a CR engineer.

True wireless headphones connect to a device, such as a smartphone, using a wireless technology standard called Bluetooth. In some models, both earpieces get this signal from the phone at the same time (1). In others, one earpiece talks to the phone while a second connection sends audio

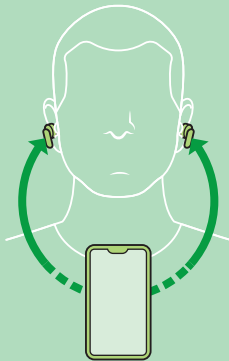
from that primary earbud to the second bud (2). Both methods must contend with interference from other devices and obstacles.

But a number of models use a third strategy called near field magnetic induction (NFMI), which transmits data from the primary to secondary bud using a magnetic field (3). Though not totally immune to interference, NFMI

doesn’t experience the same issues that Bluetooth bud-to-bud connections may have.

Manufacturers don’t often disclose which method their earbuds employ, but our testing can help guide you to an optimal pair. One of our top picks is the Anker SoundCore Liberty Air, a CR Best Buy at \$80. Digital and All-Access members can see full ratings at CR.org/earbuds0820.

1. INDIVIDUAL BLUETOOTH CONNECTIONS



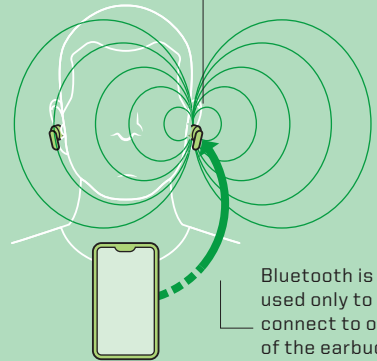
Bluetooth signal is sent simultaneously to both earbuds.

2. RELAYED BLUETOOTH CONNECTION



Bluetooth signal is relayed directly from the primary bud to the other bud.

3. NFMI AND BLUETOOTH CONNECTION



The primary bud sends a signal via NFMI to the second bud. Bluetooth is used only to connect to one of the earbuds.

PHOTOS, BOTTOM LEFT TO RIGHT: STANLEYBLACK&DECKER, ACE HARDWARE, CONSUMER REPORTS, THE ASAHI SHIMBUN/GETTY IMAGES, CONSUMER REPORTS, TOP LEFT: GETTY IMAGES

1965 We test 31 electric sanders, comparing how quickly they can sand pine board. This Black & Decker model (below) is judged a fast performer with no deficiencies.



1990 Our experts review the Quicker Tape, a tape measure with a digital display. The long and short of it? We say this is one “digital doodad” you can live without.



2020 Tackling projects around the house? This Makita is our top-rated cordless drill for general use. For home project tips, see “Do-It-Yourself Home Repairs,” on page 36.



1985 Akira Yoshino files a patent for the first commercially viable lithium-ion battery—now common in everything from laptops to battery-operated power tools.



1997 Sears heavily advertises its new self-adjusting pliers with locking jaws. Our male and female testers say they’re a smart addition to your DIY toolkit.

✓ **MAKITA**
FD07R1 \$160

71 OVERALL SCORE





DO MORE WITH ...

BATTERY LAWN TOOL SUITES

BATTERY-POWERED LAWN TOOLS have come a long way in the past decade. Once considered the weaklings of power tools, our testers say many work just as well as gas-powered models now. They also start instantly, run quietly, and have zero emissions at the source.

If you make the switch to battery, though, it's best to plan on buying all your tools from a single brand. That's because manufacturers use a standardized battery and charger across their tools. So if, for example, your string trimmer battery dies mid-chore, you can pop in the battery from your lawn mower or leaf blower to finish the job.

You can also save money by buying a few tools within a suite with the batteries and a few without, then sharing the batteries among them. Skipping the cost of a battery and charger will save you about 30 percent on a tool.

Below, we've highlighted three battery-powered tool suites worth considering, comprised of products that do well in our tests. Each lawn mower, leaf blower, and string trimmer shown has batteries that are interchangeable with the other tools in its suite; each suite also has a compatible battery chainsaw, not shown but included in the average Overall Score for the brand.

BEST PERFORMANCE
OVERALL

Ego

AVERAGE SCORE: 81

👉 Ego LM2101
\$400

75

OVERALL
SCORE



👉 Ego LB5302
\$200

80

OVERALL
SCORE



👉 Ego ST1521S
\$230

89

OVERALL
SCORE



PRO BRAND WITH
USEFUL TOUCHES

Stihl

AVERAGE SCORE: 66

👉 Stihl RMA 510
\$550

71

OVERALL
SCORE



Stihl BGA 85
\$300

71

OVERALL
SCORE



👉 Stihl FSA 56
\$200

76

OVERALL
SCORE



BUDGET-
FRIENDLY

Ryobi

AVERAGE SCORE: 64

👉 Ryobi RY401110
\$300

65

OVERALL
SCORE



Ryobi RY40460
\$160

66

OVERALL
SCORE



Ryobi RY40270VNM
\$200

IN
TEST



PRIVACY UPDATE

TELEMEDICINE VIDEOCHATS

WITH THE GROWING NEED for virtual doctor's visits, videochat apps can be a good solution: They can be safer (or less stressful) than an in-person pandemic-era visit. To encourage the use of telehealth, the government is (as of press time) temporarily letting doctors use providers such as FaceTime, WhatsApp, and apps such as Skype and Zoom. However, none of these services are required to follow HIPAA guidelines, which protect the privacy of your health data. "There's tremendous value in being able to talk to a doctor remotely—especially right now," says Justin Brookman, director of privacy and technology policy at CR. "So connecting despite the privacy risk may be worth it to you."

To follow HIPAA, a teleconferencing service needs to sign a "business associate agreement," or BAA, with the healthcare provider using it, in which the service agrees to abide by the same kinds of privacy rules a doctor would. They need to secure all the information that's in your electronic health records as well as conversations with doctors, and can't sell any data that could identify you. If your doctor can't meet with you on a service that complies with HIPAA, consider an old-fashioned phone call first.

Services that say they comply with HIPAA: Amazon Chime, Cisco Webex Meetings and Webex Teams, Doxy.me, Google G Suite Hangouts Meet, GoToMeeting, Skype for Business and Microsoft Teams, Spruce Health Care Messenger, Updox, VSee, and Zoom for Healthcare.*

FOOD IQ™

SECRETS TO A MORE SATISFYING SMOOTHIE

Store-bought smoothies may not be the healthy option you're hoping for; often they're made with juice rather than just whole fruit, which ups the sugars count. (A 15.2-ounce bottle of Naked Green Machine, for example, has 270 calories and 53 grams of sugars.) "If you have the time, and a good blender, making a smoothie at home is often healthier," says Amy Keating, R.D., a CR nutritionist. With her three tips below, you can easily make any smoothie tasty, filling, and nutritious.



'LEAN GREEN DREAM' RECIPE makes 2 servings



1½ CUPS
chopped
pineapple



½ CUP
milk or unsweetened
plant milk of choice



1 CUP
nonfat plain
Greek yogurt



4 CUPS
loosely packed,
chopped kale



2 TABLESPOONS
chia seeds
presoaked in milk



✓ Breville The Q
BBL820SHY1BUS1
Blender \$350

79

OVERALL
SCORE

1. PERFECT PAIRING

You can boost the nutritional benefits of your smoothie by adding vitamin-rich leafy greens, such as kale or spinach, or antioxidant-rich veggies like beets. But those ingredients don't need to be the dominant flavor. Spinach pairs well with blueberries, and kale gets a nice flavor kick from tangy pineapple.

2. THICK TEXTURE

Protein-rich foods, such as nuts or nut butters, and Greek yogurt not only help you feel fuller longer but also help thicken your drink for a more satisfying mouthfeel. "Or boost the texture with a handful of dry oats, which are a healthy whole grain," Keating says. Just put the oats in first, hitting "pulse" to pulverize them.

3. MINIMAL WASTE

"One of the great things about smoothies is that you can use a bruised banana or a slightly overripe strawberry without a taste or texture difference," says Keating. You can also easily freeze leftover fruits and veggies for future blends; just pop the frozen pieces straight into the blender for a refreshing icy texture—great on a hot summer day.

*This is not an exhaustive list. Go to [CR.org/telehealth0820](https://www.consumerreports.org/telehealth0820) for more tips.

ROOM MAKEOVER

A LOW-
MAINTENANCE
KITCHEN

This suite of well-rated products will make your kitchen cleanup easy as pie.



EASY-TO-WIPE SMOOTHTOP

✓ GE Profile PHS930SLSS
Range \$2,700

86

OVERALL
SCORE

A top performer in our tests, this electric induction range rates Excellent for the self-cleaning function. It also has porcelain-coated racks that are easy to wipe off between bakes, and the smoothtop is a cinch to clean because it doesn't have crumb-collecting knobs like some other models. Plus, GE electric ranges have excellent predicted reliability for the first five years of ownership.

SELF-CLEANING FILTER

Maytag MDB4949SHZ
Dishwasher \$500

70

OVERALL
SCORE

This affordable Maytag is an all-around solid performer and one of the few models we've tested with a self-cleaning filter to grind up any excess food bits. It also has a helpful "Rinse Only" cycle for when you're not ready to do a full load yet but don't want to leave gunk crusting on your dishes. And a tiered upper rack can help you fit larger items up top when you have a big dish load.

SPILL-PROOF SHELVES

✓ LG LRFXC2406S
Refrigerator \$2,500

86

OVERALL
SCORE

With a stainless steel "PrintProof" finish on the outside and tempered glass shelves that retain any spilled liquid on the inside, this LG fridge is designed for easy cleanup. Plus, it has dual evaporators, which help to keep food smells under control, as well as the added convenience of an additional icemaker so that you're always well-stocked.

FINGERPRINT-
PROOF
FINISHES

Sick of seeing smeary fingerprints all over your stainless steel fridge and having to buff them out? Some newer models still have the silver look of steel but with a fingerprint-proof finish, such as the LG fridge and Maytag dishwasher above, to help them stay smudge-free. You can also check out black stainless appliances; their darker finish helps resist and hide daily smudges. But be aware that different brands make slightly different shades of this dark steel, making it tricky to mix appliance brands within your kitchen.



RECALLS

TO STAY INFORMED ABOUT RECALLS FOR YOUR VEHICLES, READERS WITH MEMBERSHIP CAN USE OUR FREE CAR RECALL TRACKER AT CR.ORG/MORE.



**IKEA
KULLEN
THREE-
DRAWER
CHEST**

IKEA DRESSERS

Ikea is recalling about 820,000 Kullen three-drawer chests because the chest is unstable if it is not anchored to a wall, posing tip-over and entrapment hazards that may result in death or serious injuries to children. Additionally, chests imported after Aug. 12, 2019, do not comply with the performance requirements of the updated version of the U.S. consensus standard. The chests were sold at Ikea from April 2005 to December 2019 for about \$60. **What to do:** Stop using the chest if it isn't properly anchored to the wall; put it in an area that children cannot access. Call Ikea at 888-966-4532 or go to ikea-usa.com/secureit for more information on how to get a full refund or a free wall attachment anchor kit.

PASS & SEYMOUR ELECTRICAL RECEPTACLES

Pass & Seymour is recalling about 685,000 commercial-grade tamper-resistant duplex receptacles (where you put plugs into an outlet) because a manufacturing error in the receptacles could lead users to incorrectly force the plug into the receptacle, causing the plug

blades to overheat and posing a burn risk. The receptacles were sold at electrical equipment suppliers and other stores between October 2019 and February 2020 for \$3 to \$10. **What to do:** Stop using the receptacle and call Pass & Seymour at 833-552-0388 or go to legrand.us (look for "Pass & Seymour" in the Brands menu) for replacement and refund details.

EPSON POWER ADAPTERS

Epson is recalling about 314,000 power adapters sold with Epson scanners because the adapters can overheat, melt, and catch fire. The adapters were sold at Best Buy, Office Depot, Staples, Walmart, and other stores from January 2010 through December 2015 for \$55 to \$80 for the scanner and adapter. **What to do:** Stop use and call Epson at 888-367-2656 or go to epson.com for a free replacement.

YAMAHA DIGITAL GUITAR SYSTEMS

Yamaha is recalling about 82,000 Line 6 Relay G10, G10S, and G10T Digital Wireless Guitar Systems and USB charging cables

because the lithium-ion battery can overheat and the battery cover can separate with force, posing fire and injury hazards. The systems were sold at various retailers and online at amazon.com from March 2016 through December 2019 for about \$180 for the G10, \$250 for the G10S, \$100 for the G10T, and \$15 for the USB charging cable.

What to do: Stop using the system and call Yamaha at 877-865-4636 or go to line6.com/g10recall for details on a free guitar system repair and a full USB refund.

HARBOR BREEZE CEILING FANS

Fanim Industries is recalling about 70,000 Harbor Breeze Santa Ana ceiling fans because the fan's blade holders can break, allowing the blade to be ejected from the fan and posing an injury hazard. The fans were sold in Lowe's stores and on its website from May 2014 through January 2016 for about \$150.

What to do: Stop using the fan and call Fanim Industries at 888-434-3797 or go to fanimation.com for details and to get a free set of replacement blade holders.

GROWER'S EDGE VAPORIZERS

Hawthorne Hydroponics is recalling about 60,000 Grower's Edge vaporizers because they can overheat, and the vaporized materials can pose a burn risk if spilled or cause a fire if they fall onto a combustible surface. The Deluxe model vaporizer also poses an electrical shock hazard if a small copper piece at the base of the vaporizer is touched while in use. The vaporizers were sold at Hawthorne Hydroponics dealers, including hydroponic and indoor specialty gardening stores, and online from August 2011 through

January 2020 for \$115 to \$140. **What to do:** Stop using the vaporizer and return it to where you bought it for a full refund in the form of store credit. Call Hawthorne Hydroponics at 855-913-1678 or go to growers-edge.net for details.

LENOX TEAKETTLES

Continuum is recalling about 56,000 Lenox 2.5-quart teakettles because they can expel hot water during use and pose a burn hazard. The kettles were sold in stores from September 2013 through November 2017 for \$30 to \$50.

What to do: Stop using the kettle and call Continuum at 800-669-6385 or go to gocontinuum.com for details on getting a refund.

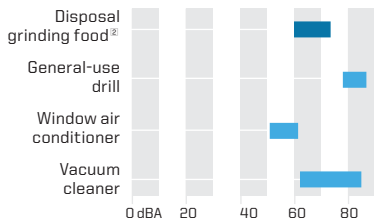
KOLCRAFT INCLINED SLEEPER ACCESSORIES

Kolcraft is recalling about 51,000 inclined sleeper accessories included with Kolcraft Cuddle 'n Care 2-in-1 and Preferred Position 2-in-1 Bassinet & Incline Sleepers because infant fatalities have been reported with other manufacturers' inclined sleep products after the infants rolled from their back to their stomach or side, or under other circumstances. The sleepers were sold from March 2011 through December 2017 for about \$140.

What to do: Stop using the accessory and call Kolcraft at 800-453-7673 or go to kolcraft.com for details and to get a \$35 voucher to use on kolcraft.com or a \$20 refund. You can continue to use the bassinet without the inclined sleeper accessory.

Due to COVID-19, some of the remedies (such as returning an item in person) may not be available at this time. Consumers should check with recalling firms for further details.

Noise range of disposals we tested compared with other appliances¹⁾



Source: Consumer Reports testing.

PRODUCT UPDATE

THE LATEST RATINGS FROM OUR LABS

Designed to Grind

Our garbage disposal ratings and buying advice will keep you from throwing money down the drain.

by Perry Santanachote

WASTEMAID
US-WM-658 \$130

57 OVERALL SCORE



INSIDE
CR'S LABS

CR Tester Kyaw Naing grinds a pound of vegetables and bones in each disposal.

GARBAGE DISPOSALS DO double duty, meeting the often competing demands of convenience and conservation. They pulverize leftovers—from peach pits to corn cobs to fish bones—so you can send them down the drain instead of hauling them to the trash.

Washing food waste down the drain also means less of it ends up in landfills, where it can emit harmful greenhouse gases as it breaks down. Instead, food waste ground in a disposal ends up at a sewage treatment plant (unless you have a septic system). When processed the right way, this is even more environmentally friendly than composting, according to David Duest, director of the Deer Island Treatment Plant in Boston. Like many major U.S. wastewater plants, Deer Island converts the gas generated from food waste into biofuel to power the plant. The remaining solids are turned into fertilizer for farms.

So if you are considering installing or replacing a disposal but are concerned about the environmental impact, find out how your local sewage treatment plant processes the town's wastewater.

A recent nationally representative CR survey of 1,000 U.S. adults shows that just over half of Americans live in homes with a garbage disposal; more than 60 percent of those who do said their disposal was already installed when they moved in.

According to the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers, these kitchen workhorses last about 11 years. How will you know when yours is about to go kaput? Leaking, taking longer to grind, and making louder noises than usual are signs. So is having to use the reset button frequently. (The button is like a circuit breaker that needs to be reset after the disposal shuts off, typically because of a strain on the motor.)

Our buying advice and ratings will help you make the best choice, depending on your situation and needs in the kitchen.



HOW TO CLEAN YOUR GARBAGE DISPOSAL

Garbage disposals seem to make leftovers vanish. But over time, tiny flecks of food build up and create foul odors. Cleaning your grinder once a week will help you avoid a stink in your sink.

Disposal maker InSinkErator recommends putting six ice cubes down the drain, followed by a tablespoon of baking soda, three thin lemon slices, and 1 teaspoon of bleach. Top that all off with six more ice cubes. Then turn the disposal on without running water until you hear the grinding stop. Then flush with cold water while the motor is running.

Moen, which also makes disposals, suggests removing the rubber splash guard attached to the opening, where food grime tends to cling. (Unplug the unit first.) Scrub it with warm water and baking soda or pop it into the dishwasher.

To help control odors, run cold water before you turn on the disposal, while grinding food, and then for about 7 seconds after you hear the grinding stop.

Can Your Pipes Handle It?

If you're considering installing a garbage disposal for the first time, make sure your pipes are up to the task. "Food debris might not present a problem in a newer home with slippery plastic drainpipes," says Paul Abrams, public relations director at Roto-Rooter. "But clog risks go up substantially if you have old cast-iron drainpipes." (Polyvinyl chloride, or PVC, piping became more common in homes built after the mid-1970s.) If your pipes already clog often, a disposal might not be for you.

You should also think twice if you rely on a septic system. Disposal manufacturers insist their products are safe to use with septic systems, but some plumbers are equally adamant that they are not. The truth probably lies somewhere in between and may depend on the size of your system and how often you pump it. If you have a septic system and want to install a disposal, check first with your septic system inspector.

"Once you're sure that your plumbing can handle it, measure under the sink to make sure you have room for a disposal," says Larry Ciuffo, who oversees CR's garbage disposal tests. The appliance attaches directly to the underside of your sink's drain opening. There is no standard garbage disposal size—the models we tested range from 10 to 16 inches high, 5 to 9 inches wide, and 6 to 13 inches deep. Generally, the more sound insulation, the bigger the unit.

Choosing the Right Type

The best model for you will depend on your budget, the size of your household, and how much food you need to grind on a regular basis.

The garbage disposals in our ratings cost between \$50 and \$500. Less expensive models usually have a small motor and a one-year warranty. A premium price doesn't necessarily buy better performance, but it does

buy a longer warranty and premium features, such as thicker sound insulation, sturdier stainless steel components, multiple grind stages, and auto-reversing grinders that help prevent jams.

For a convenient, budget-friendly disposal, consider a continuous-feed model, the most common type. Flip a switch and the grinder revs into action, so you can clean up as you go. Standard wall switches are sold separately and should be installed by an electrician. Alternatively, an air switch (also sold separately) does not require professional installation but does

require an undersink outlet and a drill.

Batch-feed garbage disposals operate only when the drain is covered, reducing the risk of injury to children. Rather than placing food waste in the disposal as it's running, you insert scraps one batch at a time. Placing a stopper over the opening turns it on. Batch-feed disposals don't require a wall switch and usually cost more than continuous-feed models.

The last major decision point? Horsepower. Garbage disposal motors come in varying power ratings, with most ranging from 1/3 hp to 1 hp. Generally, you'll get a more efficient

grinder and better sound insulation as you go up in horsepower, but the prices go up, too. (We also indicate amps—the amount of electricity the disposal draws—in our ratings chart, on the facing page. Be sure your circuit breaker can handle the demand before buying.)

An entry-level 1/3-hp garbage disposal might not hold up to heavy-duty or frequent use. It's a good option for a vacation home. Garbage disposals with 1/2 hp or 3/4 hp should be adequate for the typical home. Cooks who use the disposal on a daily basis and need to grind tougher waste, including bones, may want to opt for a 1-hp model.

FOODS YOU CAN—AND CAN'T—PUT DOWN THE GARBAGE DISPOSAL

THE TERM “garbage disposal” is actually a misnomer because these powerful grinders are designed to handle food waste exclusively. But there are even some

edible things you should avoid tossing in. Always check your model's manual for a list of foods it can and can't handle. The average garbage disposal can grind almost all the food

waste you throw at it, but your plumbing is another story. Some foods that pass the grinder with no problem could be the start of a clog down the line. In general,

always use the disposal with cold water running and avoid overloading it. CR testers have found that one last flush of water, after the disposal is off, is also a good idea.

YES



VEGETABLE SCRAPS



ICE



FRUIT SCRAPS



FRUIT PITS



COOKED MEAT
and other leftovers



SMALL BONES



CORN COBS

NO



FIBROUS FOODS
corn husks,
artichokes, celery,
asparagus



COFFEE GROUNDS



VEGETABLE PEELS



CLAM OR OYSTER SHELLS



OIL



EGG SHELLS



GREASE



STARCHY FOODS

Ratings > **Behind the Grind** We grind a lot of bones to test each model for speed, fineness, and noise. Dimensions vary widely, so be sure to measure carefully under your sink before buying.

Brand + Model	Overall Score	Price	Test Results			Specs					
			Speed	Fineness	Noise	Horsepower	Warranty (yr.)	Weight (lb.)	HxWxD (in.)	Amps	Sink connection



CONTINUOUS-FEED GARBAGE DISPOSALS

✓ GE GFC1020N	78	\$235	↑	↑	↓	1	1	12	14x9x9	7	EZ-mount
Ⓢ Moen EX75C	74	\$140	↓	↑	↓	¾	7	9	12x8x8	6	3 bolts
InSinkErator Evolution Compact	63	\$220	↑	↓	↑	¾	4	16	11x9x10	10	3 bolts
KitchenAid KCDI075B	63	\$210	↑	↓	↑	¾	4	16	11x9x10	10	3 bolts
WasteMaid US-WM-658	57	\$130	↑	↓	↓	1¼	10	13	14x9x9	8	3 bolts
InSinkErator Evolution Excel	54	\$320	↑	↓	↓	1	7	19	12x9x10	10	3 bolts
KitchenAid KCDS100T	54	\$380	↑	↓	↓	1	7	19	12x9x10	10	3 bolts
InSinkErator Septic Assist	47	\$220	↓	↓	↑	¾	4	18	12x9x13	10	3 bolts
Moen GX Series GX575C	47	\$120	↓	↓	↓	¾	5	10	12x7x7	6	3 bolts
GE GFC525N	44	\$165	↓	↓	↓	½	1	8	11x5x6	5	EZ-mount
Everbilt 10-US-EB750 (Home Depot)	44	\$140	↓	↓	↓	¾	10	11	13x9x9	6	3 bolts
Waste King L-3300	43	\$115	↓	↓	↓	¾	10	10	13x9x10	6	EZ-mount
Waste King L-8000	42	\$115	↓	↓	↓	1	20	13	14x9x9	7	EZ-mount
Waste King L-111	37	\$50	↓	↓	↓	⅓	2	7	11x5x6	4	EZ-mount
InSinkErator Badger 5 (BGR5)	28	\$95	↓	↓	↓	½	2	12	10x6x7	6	3 bolts
Whirlpool WG1202PH	28	\$115	↓	↓	↓	½	2	12	10x6x7	6	3 bolts
Moen GX Series GXL100C	28	\$315	↓	↓	↓	1	10	14	15x8x7	7	3 bolts
Everbilt 10-US-EB500-MD (Home Depot)	28	\$90	↓	↓	↓	½	5	9	12x7x7	5	3 bolts
Moen GX Series GX50C	24	\$95	↓	↓	↓	½	4	10	12x8x7	3	3 bolts

BATCH-FEED GARBAGE DISPOSALS

✓ InSinkErator Evolution Cover Control Plus	80	\$255	↑	↑	↑	¾	7	19	15x9x10	10	3 bolts
✓ KitchenAid KBDS100T	80	\$500	↑	↑	↑	¾	7	19	15x9x10	10	3 bolts
✓ Waste King L-8000TC	72	\$215	↓	↑	↓	1	10	14	16x8x9	7	EZ-mount
Moen GX Series GXB75C	63	\$250	↑	↓	↓	¾	8	11	14x7x8	6	3 bolts

HOW WE TEST: Overall Score is based on the performance of the disposal in all our tests. For **Speed**, we grind pieces of beef rib bones for 1 minute with

cold running water and measure how much food is still left in the disposal. The more food that's left, the longer it

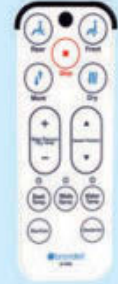
takes to grind and the lower the score. **Fineness** is an assessment of how small the disposal grinds a 1-pound mix of bones and raw vegetable scraps.

Noise is measured in decibels during the fineness test.

Love at First Flush

A bidet seat or attachment can reduce toilet paper use, plus take freshening up in the bathroom to another level.

by **Haniya Rae**



**Brondell
Swash 1000 \$600**

This seat provides an endless supply of warm water and is operated by remote control.

IN THE REALM of home improvement projects, installing a bidet seat on your toilet is definitely more luxury than necessity. In fact, there's a good chance you've gone your entire life without ever using—or even seeing—one.

But a growing chorus of enthusiastic bidet seat owners are saying that once you've experienced the cleansing, warm-water spritz that most bidet seats provide, you may wonder how you ever lived without one.

Because bidet seats and bidet attachments (a more basic, less expensive alternative) spray you clean, they offer the practical advantage of reduced toilet paper use, which was especially relevant early in the coronavirus pandemic, when consumers faced widespread shortages of this vital commodity. "I would estimate our toilet paper consumption has gone down by half," a participant said in a recent CR evaluation of bidet seats and attachments. (While many bidet seats come with an air-drying function, Allen P. Chudzinski, M.D., a fellow of the American Society of Colon and Rectal Surgeons, says that people should always pat themselves dry after using one to guard against problems associated with excessive moisture.)

But owners report benefits that extend well beyond saving money and trees. "My experience has been great," said Chu D., who owns a Brondell Swash 1000 bidet seat. "It makes me feel so much cleaner and reminds me of a day spa." It's no wonder that Kohler, the kitchen and bathroom fixture manufacturer in Wisconsin, reported an eightfold increase in bidet seat sales this past

March compared with the same time last year. Japan-based Toto, one of the largest makers of bidet seats, says demand in the U.S. is growing rapidly with customers across a wide range of income brackets.

The Basics of Bidets

Though they're both used for cleaning our nether regions, bidet toilet seats are very different from the squat, freestanding porcelain bidets common in European bathrooms and descended from the primitive versions that first made a splash on the Continent about 300 years ago.

Bidet seats replace your existing toilet seat, drawing water from the toilet's clean water supply line and, in most cases, electricity from a nearby outlet. (Some nonelectric seats attach to hot-water supply lines or simply provide cold water.) They're easy to install without calling a plumber, but electric models require a three-prong ground fault circuit interrupter (GFCI) electrical outlet nearby.

Bidet seats will work with toilets made by any manufacturer, but not every model will fit perfectly on every bowl. Pay particular attention to whether you need a round or elongated design, and double-check the specs before buying to ensure that the seat is compatible with your setup.

Features to Consider

Bidet toilet seats typically feature a heated seat, a warm-water spray, an adjustable nozzle or two, and a heated air-dryer. Some also come with a deodorizing function and even allow you to program preferred settings for various users, similar to the way you can program the driver's seat

position in a high-end automobile.

Prices range from a few hundred dollars for a basic model to well over \$1,000 for one that comes with bells and whistles. For example, Toto's top-of-the-line S550e bidet seat, which features a night light, a function called Premist that helps clean the bowl, a lid that opens and closes automatically, and memory settings for two users, has a retail price of \$1,200.

The following are popular features you may want to look for.

Remote control. Bidet toilet seats can be controlled by a small panel on the side of the unit, by remote control, or both. Some users prefer a remote control because it can be used without needing to turn and look down at a control panel.

Tankless water heater. Most bidet toilet seats are outfitted with mini water tanks that heat and store water until it's needed. Tankless bidet seats heat the water on demand, which means they can provide a limitless warm spray. (Tank models can run out of warm water in under a minute, but that's enough time for most users.) Tankless models also usually have a more streamlined profile that some consumers prefer.

Automatic open/shut lid. Some high-end models have a seat lid that raises automatically when a user approaches, then closes when the user leaves the bathroom.

One-button operation. Many models have buttons on the remote to adjust temperature, water pressure, water direction, and other functions. Some models also have a one-button option that washes and dries for a set time at a set temperature for ease of use, and so that guests won't require a tutorial.

Oscillating spray. This function provides a short-motion oscillating spray for wider cleansing.

User presets. These allow people to program the remote with their preferences for water temperature, pressure, and spray position so that they don't need to make adjustments with each use.

An Affordable Alternative

If you don't want to spring for a bidet seat, a bidet attachment, which fits under the seat rather than replacing it, also provides a cleansing spray to your undercarriage but typically comes with fewer features and is much less expensive. Tushy, which sells several bidet attachment models directly to consumers, says its sales have more than doubled in the past year.

'Using the bidet at home is such a great experience that it's now hard for us to use public restrooms.'

—NICK R.

While electric bidet seats start between \$200 and \$300, you can expect to pay just \$60 to \$120 for an attachment (though some are available for half that much). Usually mounted between the rear of the existing toilet seat and the bowl, bidet attachments are easy to install and don't require electricity. Like

bidet seats, they connect to the same clean water supply line that feeds the toilet. Most offer only a cold-water spray. (Models that offer warm water must be connected to the nearest hot-water supply, which is often under the bathroom sink.)

While bidet attachments don't offer air-drying, seat-warming, or many other features that bidet seats can, most of the owners of bidet attachments in the CR evaluation were more than satisfied.

Andrew S., who owns a Luxe Neo 120 bidet attachment, said: "My experience has been nothing but positive. It's life-changing. I don't know how I ever lived without one."

Rachel B., who owns the same model, was equally enthusiastic: "I love it! I even bought another and took it on the plane to Florida to install in my sister's guest bedroom."

How We Evaluated Bidets

The reviews on the facing page are based on evaluations by more than two dozen owners of six popular bidet seat and attachment models from Bio Bidet, Brondell, Luxe Bidet, Toto, and Tushy, conducted by CR's consumer experience and usability research team. (Owners were screened from more than 1 million consumers who signed up to participate in research on common products and services.)

Participants were asked to score their bidet seat or attachment on four usability tasks using a five-point scale, and to describe their experiences with those tasks. They also scored their bidets on a 10-question System Usability Scale on such factors as whether they needed professional help to install it or use it, how much troubleshooting they had to do, whether they liked using the product, how intuitive the functions were, and how well the functions were integrated into the design. Each bidet was evaluated by four to six participants.



CLEAN UP YOUR ACT

The user experience scores on installation, key features, and usability for these bidet seats and attachments are based on systematic owner evaluations conducted by CR's consumer experience and usability research team.

BIDET SEATS

Brondell Swash 1000 \$600

INSTALLATION	USABILITY
5/5	5/5
WATER-PRESSURE ADJUSTMENT	WATER-TEMPERATURE ADJUSTMENT
5/5	5/5
STREAM-ANGLE ADJUSTMENT	
5/5	

The Swash 1000 lets you control water pressure and water temperature, seat temperature, the air-dryer, and other features with a remote control. It has an oscillating function and provides a continuous supply of warm water, though a few users said they would have preferred water that was even warmer. All of the owners of this model said it reduced their toilet paper use. One wished that it were programmable for multiple users. Many commented that they felt very clean after using this seat.

Bio Bidet BB-600 Ultimate \$400

INSTALLATION	USABILITY
4/5	4/5
WATER-PRESSURE ADJUSTMENT	WATER-TEMPERATURE ADJUSTMENT
5/5	5/5
STREAM-ANGLE ADJUSTMENT	
5/5	

The spray on the Bio Bidet BB-600 Ultimate can be adjusted fore and aft and has an oscillating function for wider cleaning. It comes with a warm-water tank, which one owner said heats water quickly. (Models with tanks provide a limited supply of water before needing to refill and heat again.) Some owners raved about its seat-warming capabilities. They also said it's a good value. It has a side-mounted control panel, which one owner thought was set too far back and had buttons that were "impossible to see at night" without turning on a light.

Toto Washlet C200 \$715

INSTALLATION	USABILITY
4/5	5/5
WATER-PRESSURE ADJUSTMENT	WATER-TEMPERATURE ADJUSTMENT
5/5	5/5
STREAM-ANGLE ADJUSTMENT	
5/5	

The Washlet C200 comes with a remote to control all of the features (including oscillating and wide-spray functions). This model can also store two individual preference settings so that there's no need for users to adjust them each time they use the toilet. One owner observed that the remote could be ideal for someone unable to see the buttons on a side control panel. Some said the warm water could be even warmer. One owner said that the Premist function, designed to keep the bowl clean, was actually messy. Another said the Toto "cut toilet paper usage by 70 percent."

BIDET ATTACHMENTS

Tushy Classic \$90

INSTALLATION	USABILITY
5/5	5/5
WATER-PRESSURE ADJUSTMENT	STREAM-ANGLE ADJUSTMENT
5/5	4/5

The Tushy Classic bidet attachment has a dial to adjust the water pressure as well as three nozzle position settings fore and aft. A few users said it was easier to reposition themselves rather than adjust the nozzle, so if you have limited mobility this bidet attachment may not be a great option. Some users found that it shifted a bit under the toilet seat. One said the water pressure could be quite strong: "It can really give you a blast!" Most users found the Classic easy to install and operate.

Brondell SimpleSpa Thinline \$50

INSTALLATION	USABILITY
4/5	5/5
WATER-PRESSURE ADJUSTMENT	STREAM-ANGLE ADJUSTMENT
5/5	4/5

This bidet attachment is one of the slimmest on the market, at just 0.2 inch thick. It has a single nozzle for rear cleansing (a two-nozzle version for front-and-rear cleansing is available for \$70) and just one knob, which controls the water pressure. While most users reported being happy with the adjustable water pressure, the stream was too strong for some. "If you are not careful," one noted, "the stream of water might hit you a little too hard!"

Luxe Bidet Neo 120 \$60

INSTALLATION	USABILITY
4/5	5/5
WATER-PRESSURE ADJUSTMENT	STREAM-ANGLE ADJUSTMENT
5/5	3/5

The Luxe Neo 120 bidet attachment provides a posterior wash with adjustable water pressure. One user disliked the water pressure, noting that it was "too powerful." Some users said the clasp on the attachment that secures it to the toilet seat created a space between the two that was difficult to clean. Most users said this model helped them conserve toilet paper, cutting their usage by about half. One owner went even further: "I don't use TP anymore."

WHY FROZEN MEALS

FROZEN ENTRÉES HAVE GOTTEN A HEALTHY MAKEOVER. WE ATE AND RATE 30 OF



LS ARE NOW HOT

IF THEM TO FIND OUT IF YOU SHOULD STOCK UP. BY RACHEL MELTZER WARREN



PREVIOUS SPREAD

1
✓ Healthy
Choice Power Bowls
Falafel & Tahini

77

2
✓ Amy's Light & Lean
Quinoa & Black Beans with
Butternut Squash & Chard

80

3
Stouffer's Fit
Kitchen Protein
Bowls Cali Chicken

64

4
✓ Green Giant
Harvest Protein
Bowls Asian Style

73

5
✓ Sweet Earth
Curry Tiger

75

2 —





A

As Americans seek to limit the number of trips to the grocery store due to the coronavirus pandemic, they've been giving frozen meals a closer look.

Along with filling their cupboards with long-lasting staples like canned beans, fish, and soup, consumers have been stocking up on frozen meals. Sales increased by 48 percent in April this year compared with the same month last year, according to the American Frozen Food Institute.

That coincides with a growing interest in packaged foods that have healthier, less-processed ingredients—as well as a willingness to sample a wider variety of cuisine. “Manufacturers of frozen meals have been hitting the reset button and changing a lot about their product offerings in order to meet consumers where they are,” says Dewey Warner, senior food and nutrition analyst at Euromonitor International, a market research company. These kinds of meals are largely what’s driving the growth in sales. “Salisbury steak and potatoes may be a tough sell, but consumers may be interested in a fire-grilled sriracha steak bowl,” Warner adds.

As a result, we decided to check out the newer offerings in the freezer case.

There are still plenty of old-school dishes—lots of meat-and-potatoes “man dinners” and petite, bland diet meals. But we found just as many that feature global flavors, plant proteins such as beans and tofu, and fewer processed ingredients.

“Consumers see frozen meals as an easy way to experiment with these trends,” says Ellen Klosz, the CR nutritionist who oversaw our testing. “So we opted to evaluate 30 meals that fit into these categories rather than ‘classic’ frozen meals.”

Our food experts found plenty of choices that are healthier and much tastier than you may have imagined. And while none of the meals in our tests received our highest taste rating, 18 were rated Very Good. Here are the changes we noted.

More Grains and Fiber

Portion sizes for frozen meals in general are still pretty small. The total amount of food in the entrées we tested ranged from $\frac{3}{4}$ to 2 cups. And the calorie counts for this newer generation of frozen

entrées are, in some cases, similar to those for old-style favorites. Stouffer's Chicken à la King, for instance, has 360 calories and Marie Callender's Chicken Parmigiana has 440, while Evol Vitalize Grilled Chicken with Grains and Vegetables (in our ratings) has 410.

The difference is in the nutritional quality of the ingredients. The new breed of frozen dinners includes high-fiber whole grains, beans, vegetables, and even nuts and seeds. The Vitalize Grilled Chicken, for example, has plentiful brown rice, lentils, and vegetables—and 8 grams of filling fiber. In fact, when we measured and weighed the amount of vegetables, legumes, and whole grains in the meals, we found that most of them had 1 to 1½ cups of those healthy ingredients, and about half of the meals had 8 to 20 grams of fiber. (Daily fiber needs range from 25 to 31 grams.) In contrast, Stouffer's Chicken à la King is mostly white rice with chicken chunks in a cream sauce and has no fiber whatsoever.

Fewer Additives

A healthier frozen meal should have “mostly whole-food ingredients like quinoa, veggies, legumes, lean beef, chicken, and seafood,” says Nancy Farrell Allen, R.D.N., a spokesperson for the Academy of Nutrition and Dietetics. While technically speaking, frozen meals are processed foods, many of the ones in our ratings wouldn't be considered ultraprocessed. “Ultra-processed means the ingredients are far from their natural state—think soy protein isolate instead of tofu,” Klosz says. They also tend to be loaded with added sugars, sodium, and ingredients that you wouldn't use at home, such as phosphates, flavorings, and gums. The distinction is important; eating too many ultraprocessed foods may raise the risk of obesity, heart disease, and other health problems. “We took these factors into consideration in calculating our nutrition score,” Klosz says.

A LITTLE SOMETHING ON THE SIDE

If the average frozen meal doesn't fill you up, try preparing one of these simple, satisfying accompaniments.

BULK UP THE DISH

- Microwave 2 cups of frozen cauliflower rice and mix into your frozen meal
- Sprinkle a handful of nuts or seeds on top
- Steam ½ cup of frozen shelled edamame or another frozen or fresh vegetable to add to your meal

SERVE ON THE SIDE

- A slice of 100 percent whole-grain toast with 1 tablespoon of nut butter
- A red bell pepper, sliced, with ¼ cup of hummus
- A microwaved sweet potato topped with cinnamon and nutmeg
- Sliced tomato and fresh mozzarella
- A green salad with sliced vegetables and nuts or seeds
- A zucchini cut into rounds and microwaved, then sprinkled with olive oil, Parmesan cheese, and dried oregano

International Flavors

American palates have become more adventurous, and the offerings in the freezer case read like menus at Asian, Indian, Mediterranean, and other international restaurants. Flavorful ingredients that are standard in global cuisines, such as serrano peppers, tahini, tamari, tomatillo, fenugreek leaves, and turmeric, are now regularly featured. The vegetable choices in the meals we tested were nicely varied, too, including butternut squash, chard, and sweet potatoes, in addition to tried-and-true carrots and broccoli.

And while grains in the old-style meals are limited to white rice or pasta, you can now find brown rice and other whole grains, such as quinoa, red rice, farro, or wheatberries, and legume pasta.

The plant-based trend is well represented in the frozen meal category, and meals made only with vegetables, whole grains, and beans tended to score the highest in our ratings, especially if the vegetables were flavorful and had a firm texture, and the seasonings tasted fresh (not dried) and were well-blended.

But meals with chicken were more likely to get lower taste scores. “The meat was often dry and chewy,” Klosz says. “Possibly this is because chicken's texture may be affected when it's processed and reheated.” What's more, the best-tasting chicken dishes—Saffron Road Chicken Pad Thai with Rice Noodles and Good Food Made Simple Chicken Black Bean—scored only a Fair for nutrition.

Spices, Not Sodium

While frozen meals have traditionally been high in sodium, we found several lower-sodium options. “In many of the dishes,” Klosz says, “the combination of ingredients and spices added so much flavor that you didn't need all the salt.”

Of the 18 that got a rating of Very Good for taste, 13 had 600 mg of sodium or less. (The U.S. Dietary Guideline for sodium is less than 2,300 mg per day.)

1 —



— 2



1

✓ Birds Eye
Steamfresh
Superfood Blends
Chickpeas & Spinach

76

2

✓ Healthy Choice
Simply Steamers
Mediterranean-Style
Lentil Bowl

77

Ratings > **Frozen Meals Get a Makeover** Our tests of 30 entrées found that healthfulness doesn't have to come at the expense of flavor. Some don't taste like they came out of the freezer at all.

Product	Overall Score	Pricing		Rating		Nutritional Information							Flavor & Texture Description	
		Price per package	Package size (oz.)	Nutrition score	Sensory score	Calories	Total fat (g)	Saturated fat (g)	Protein (g)	Carbohydrates (g)	Fiber (g)	Added sugars (g)		Sodium (mg)
 Amy's Light & Lean Quinoa & Black Beans with Butternut Squash & Chard ^{1 2}	80	\$5.50	8	👍	👍	240	5	0.5	10	38	11	0	440	Distinct pieces of squash and chard with flavors that come through nicely. Hints of garlic and ginger. Contains plenty of beans.
Performance Kitchen So Cal Kale & Bean ²	80	\$5.50	10.25	👍	👍	300	7	0.5	10	53	11	0	360	Slightly sweet, with some tang from red-wine vinegar and a little heat. Shitake mushrooms and raisins add a unique, appealing taste.
Kashi Plant-Powered Bowl Sweet Potato Quinoa ²	79	\$4.50	9	👍	👍	270	6	1.0	9	48	12	4	280	Complex and flavorful mix of red quinoa, brown rice, and vegetables. Slightly sweet and piquant tomato base. Jalapeños add heat.
Healthy Choice Simply Steamers Unwrapped Burrito Bowl ^{1 2}	78	\$3.50	9	👍	👍	270	4	1.0	9	50	12	1	350	Spicy, flavorful rice and bean dish in a slightly tart tomatillo sauce. Heat builds.
Healthy Choice Simply Steamers Mediterranean-Style Lentil Bowl ^{1 2}	77	\$3.50	9	👍	👍	250	5	0.5	13	39	10	2	600	Flavorful blend of red peppers, carrots, spinach, and plentiful lentils and chickpeas in a sauce with hints of garlic, oregano, and black pepper.
Healthy Choice Power Bowls Falafel & Tahini ²	77	\$3.50	9.6	👍	👍	360	13	1.5	11	49	10	2	600	Well-blended flavor in this mix of falafel (chickpea patties with spices), mixed grains, greens, and vegetables in a tahini (sesame seed) sauce.
Birds Eye Steamfresh Superfood Blends Chickpeas & Spinach ²	76	\$4.00	10	👍	👍	320	7	1.0	9	51	10	0	450	Mild-tasting, with fresh citrus flavors and a hint of herbs and black pepper.
Amy's Bowls Harvest Casserole ^{1 2}	76	\$5.50	10	👍	👍	360	10	1.5	17	51	9	2	660	Big bean flavor; slightly tangy sauce with notes of soy, miso, and ginger. Pumpkin seeds add crunch. Sparse tofu pieces.
Performance Kitchen Great Karma Coconut Curry ²	76	\$5.50	10	👍	👍	330	15	5.0	10	45	9	1	390	Curry sauce is fairly spicy and a little sweet with a hint of coconut. Unique mix of regular and green chickpeas and black lentils.
Kashi Plant-Powered Bowl Chimichurri Quinoa ²	76	\$4.50	9	👍	👍	240	7	1.0	10	41	12	0	330	Blend of potatoes, peppers, quinoa, corn, and kale with bold, spicy-hot flavors. Chimichurri sauce was zingy with a vinegar note.
Sweet Earth Curry Tiger ²	75	\$4.00	9	👍	👍	330	17	9.0	15	32	8	5	400	Strong curry flavors with a little heat. Plenty of vegetables and lentils. Seitan pieces (a meat alternative made from wheat gluten) were slightly chewy rather than tender.
Performance Kitchen Mighty Masala & Greens ²	74	\$5.50	10	👍	👍	300	13	3.5	11	41	9	0	390	Fairly spicy with a coconut note. Cashews were sparse and slightly soft. Plentiful vegetables with brown rice and lentils.
Green Giant Harvest Protein Bowls Asian Style ²	73	\$3.00	10	👍	👍	280	8	1.0	14	42	8	6	580	Hearty mix of edamame, red peppers, and carrot sticks. Al dente grains added a satisfying texture.
Lean Cuisine Origins Coconut Chickpea Curry ^{2 3}	73	\$3.50	9.25	👍	👍	260	7	3.0	11	38	20	0	700	Zesty curry-style sauce. Hints of coconut and slight heat. Mostly chickpeas with some grains; sparse veggies.
Amy's Bowls Light in Sodium Brown Rice & Vegetables ^{1 2}	72	\$5.50	10	👍	👎	260	9	1.0	9	36	5	0	270	Mild-tasting overall, with pleasant caramelized onion flavors. Tofu was slightly chewy rather than tender.
Evol Vitalize Grilled Chicken with Grains & Vegetables	68	\$3.50	8.5	👍	👎	410	22	4.0	19	41	8	0	530	Tangy cheese sauce. Mostly tender white meat seasoned chicken pieces but some were tough, and there weren't a lot of them.

Product	Overall Score	Pricing		Rating		Nutritional Information								Flavor & Texture Description
		Price per package	Package size (oz.)	Nutrition score	Sensory score	Calories	Total fat (g)	Saturated fat (g)	Protein (g)	Carbohydrates (g)	Fiber (g)	Added sugars (g)	Sodium (mg)	
Amy's Light in Sodium Indian Mattar Paneer ¹	66	\$5.50	10	↓	↑	370	11	4.0	13	54	6	0	390	Complex flavors. Tomato-based sauce was well-balanced with garlic, turmeric, and Indian spices.
Stouffer's Fit Kitchen Protein Bowls Cali Chicken	64	\$4.00	10	↑	↓	340	11	2.0	24	37	7	0	570	Whole-grain rice blend with veggies, and slightly dry and chewy white meat chicken. Garlic and black pepper sauce had hints of lime. Some heat.
Marie Callender's Cheesy Chipotle Rice & Beans Bowl	62	\$6.00	11.5	↓	↑	370	11	5.0	12	56	7	0	780	Flavorful. A smoky note with a hint of sweetness from corn and spicy heat. Reminiscent of burrito filling.
Frontera Chicken Fajita Bowl	60	\$4.00	11.3	↑	↓	260	2.5	0.5	22	36	8	5	700	Sweet, slightly smoky, tangy sauce with some tomato flavor. Plentiful vegetables. Slightly chewy dry chicken pieces detracted from the overall taste.
Healthy Choice Café Steamers Tortellini Primavera Parmesan	60	\$5.00	9.5	↑	↓	260	7	2.5	10	38	5	3	510	Veggies with good flavor were a highlight, but the variable texture of the tortellini and slight dried herb notes in the sauce detracted from the taste.
Lean Cuisine Origins Sicilian-Style Pesto with Lentil Pasta ^{2,3}	59	\$3.50	8.5	↑	↓	320	8	1.5	15	47	5	4	470	Sweet tomato "pesto" was more like sauce with big garlic and black pepper flavors. Slight bitter note. Tasted notably of dried spices.
Sweet Earth Filipino Adobo Chik'n ^{1,2}	57	\$4.00	8.5	↑	↓	170	2.5	0.5	12	23	2	2	590	Flavors weren't well-blended and vegetables were muted by a sour brown gravy. Seasoned "chik'n" (soy protein-based) was slightly spongy.
Healthy Choice Power Bowls Chicken Feta & Farro	56	\$3.50	9.5	↑	↓	310	9	2.0	23	34	6	<1	600	Had a spicy, tangy, garlicky sauce with black pepper. Pleasantly chewy farro, but chickpeas were dry and chicken was tough and dry.
Healthy Choice Simply Steamers Chicken & Vegetable Stir Fry	55	\$3.50	9.25	↓	↓	190	4	1.0	23	15	4	6	500	Plentiful tender and moist white-meat chicken; large vegetable pieces in a well-blended sauce of sweet soy, ginger, and garlic. Vegetable flavor and texture were just so-so.
Performance Kitchen Orange Mango Chicken	54	\$5.50	9.0	↓	↓	250	10	1.0	13	28	3	3	350	Tropical flavors of mango and a hint of coconut. Sauce had a sweet-tart taste with ginger notes. Slight heat. Some chicken pieces were dry.
Lean Cuisine Origins Mushroom & Vegetable Shepherd's Pie ³	50	\$3.50	8.5	↓	↓	150	3	1.5	6	25	4	1	680	Visually unappealing, but the variety of mushrooms added a pleasant flavor so it tasted better than it looked. The thick brown gravy tasted like it came out of a jar.
Smart Ones Crustless Chicken Pot Pie	44	\$3.30	9	↓	↓	190	3.5	1.5	18	20	3	0	560	A mediocre dish. The dumplings and some of the chicken pieces were chewy, not tender.
Good Food Made Simple Chicken Black Bean	40	\$5.00	9.5	↓	↑	350	12	6.0	19	41	4	0	710	A hearty dish in a tangy tomato-based sauce. Notable lime flavor. Shredded chicken was tender and well-seasoned, but there wasn't a lot.
Saffron Road Chicken Pad Thai with Rice Noodles	40	\$4.00	10	↓	↑	430	11	2.0	19	64	2	13	650	Flavorful sweet-spicy peanut, garlic, and soy sauce nicely coated the plentiful noodles. Chicken pieces were slightly dry. Chili pepper adds heat.

HOW WE TEST: Overall Score is based on nutrition and sensory quality. CR evaluated 30 frozen meals

representing different types of international cuisines for **nutrition**, **sensory quality** (taste and texture), physical quality (amount of vegetables,

whole grains, legumes, protein, fruit, and nuts), and price. In choosing the products to be tested, we looked for

those that featured vegetables, whole grains, and legumes, or any combination of those ingredients, with or without chicken.



DO-IT-YOURSELF

HOME REPAIRS

These easy and affordable projects will make your home safer and more functional, and maybe even lift your spirits. Plus, use our advice to save time and ensure that you do the job right.

BY SAL VAGLICA





Spruce up your washer/dryer

Maximize cupboard space

Mend a leaking hose

Americans have been spending a lot more time at home lately, which means that all the little projects around the house that we've been putting off aren't quite so easy to overlook anymore.

Like that clogged showerhead you were eventually going to fix, or the kitchen drawer so full of loose batteries, tangled extension cords, twine, and other junk that you cringe every time you open it.

The good news is that these and many other home maintenance matters are quick and simple to tackle on your own; many don't even require a tool. They can also come with unexpected rewards. "You'd be surprised how just putting a fresh coat of paint on your front door can help you enjoy your home more," says John Galeotafiore, associate director of product testing at Consumer Reports. "And you don't have to spend a lot of time or money to make many improvements."

To help you get started, we've come up with 19 easy projects with big payoffs that you can do on your own. We've even organized them by category and the length of time they may take to complete.* Now, all you have to do is pick one—and get off the couch.



TIDYING & ORGANIZING

Bring more order and neatness to heavily used spaces.

Double Your Cabinet Storage

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 30 MINUTES

Is the undersink cabinet in your bathroom or kitchen a jumble of cleaning products? Tension rods are made for hanging curtains, but you can hang spray bottles from them, too (they hold 1 pound per foot). Mount a 7/16- or 5/8-inch-diameter rod high in the cabinet (you usually twist the bar from the middle until the rubber ends hold it steady), and hang bottles from their triggers. Always keep cleaning products in their original containers and use cabinet safety latches if children are ever in your home.

Declutter Your Drawers

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 30 MINUTES

Bring order to your catch-all drawers with organizing trays. You can buy them in various shapes and configurations online at places like Home Depot and Bed Bath & Beyond. Measure your drawer first to assure a proper fit, and avoid mesh trays, which can snag paper clips and pencil tips.

Maximize Cupboard Space

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 30 MINUTES

Attach adhesive strip caddies from brands such as Command to the inside of the cabinet doors to store frequently used lightweight products, like toothbrushes in a bathroom, spices in a kitchen, or binder clips in a home office. These removable bins come in various sizes; clear ones let you easily see what you're reaching for.



EASY UPGRADES

These small home improvements can yield big rewards.

Silence Your Toilet Seat

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 30 MINUTES

Installing a toilet seat with a soft-close hinge so that it no longer "bangs" down is an investment in serenity. It costs around \$25 to \$50 at home improvement stores and takes about 10 minutes to install. "Look for one with a quick-release feature," says John Galeotafiore, who oversees Consumer Reports' toilets tests. "These allow you to pull off the seat and lid when cleaning without removing the bolts."

Modernize Your Faucet

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 1/2 DAY

Installing a touchless faucet in your kitchen can "eliminate the need to touch the kitchen faucet, reducing the risk of cross-contamination by germs," says James. E. Rogers, Consumer Reports' director of food safety research and testing. Touchless faucets look like regular faucets, but they also have motion sensors that turn the water on and off with the wave of a hand (you set the default water temperature with the manual handle of the faucet). They come in a variety of styles and finishes, and cost around \$200 more than a regular faucet. Buy one that's battery powered, unless you have an outlet under the sink.

Give Floors a Facelift

TIME REQUIRED UP TO A FULL DAY

Vinyl floor planks give the look of wood but resist stains and moisture, and can go directly over concrete, tile, hardwood, or other old flooring. Just put the planks down and snap them into place. They come in a variety of sizes and wood looks, such as Consumer Reports' recommended pick Armstrong Pryzm Elements of Heritage Vintage Multi, which resembles weathered barnwood, or our CR Best Buy option, the Armstrong Vivero D10 Homespun Harmony Rugged Brown,

which is a wide plank. Get the thickest product you can, advises Joan Muratore, who tests flooring for CR. "Thin vinyl could show indentations if the surface it's installed on isn't perfectly level," she says.



CLEANING & MAINTENANCE

Keep appliances and other household items working better—and longer.

Refresh Your Refrigerator

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 30 MINUTES

Your refrigerator's condenser coils collect dust, dirt, and other debris that tax the compressor and could lead to a breakdown. To help prevent this, vacuum the coils every six months. (Check the manual for their location; they're usually near the compressor beneath the refrigerator.) Cleaning the door gasket and surrounding surfaces with a mild cleaner and damp sponge from time to time will ensure a good seal, preventing cold air from escaping the refrigerator, which makes the compressor work harder. Another tip to keep your fridge humming along: "Don't overpack the fridge or freezer," says Larry

Ciufo, Consumer Reports' test engineer who evaluates refrigerators. "Jamming items in could keep the doors from closing properly, which, again, makes the compressor work harder. And never place items where they block the air vents along the back or side walls."

Make Your Oven Sparkle

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 1/2 DAY

Most of us have been eating out a lot less, which means our ovens are getting pretty gunked up. If your oven has a self-clean mode, take some precautions. "Turn on the exhaust fan and open windows before starting, and remember you can't use the



cooktop during the 3 to 5 hours it takes for the oven to self-clean,” says Tara Casaregola, who oversees range testing for Consumer Reports. Never use a spray-on oven cleaner in an oven with a self-cleaning mode: Residue from it can damage the oven interior under high heat. For ovens without a self-cleaning function, scrub with a nonabrasive cleaner and sponge.

Make Over the Microwave

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 30 MINUTES

A clean, great-smelling microwave can be yours in three easy steps: (1) Wash the glass plate and the round rail it sits on with warm, soapy water. (2) For over-the-range models, remove the mesh grease filters from underneath the microwave and run them through the dishwasher if the manual says you can. Otherwise, soak them in soapy water and scrub them clean with a bristle brush. (3) Place a bowl of water with a quarter-cup of lemon juice in the microwave and run it on high for 1 minute. Remove the bowl and wipe the inside of the oven; the condensation should make it easy to get it clean.

Spruce Up Your Washer/Dryer

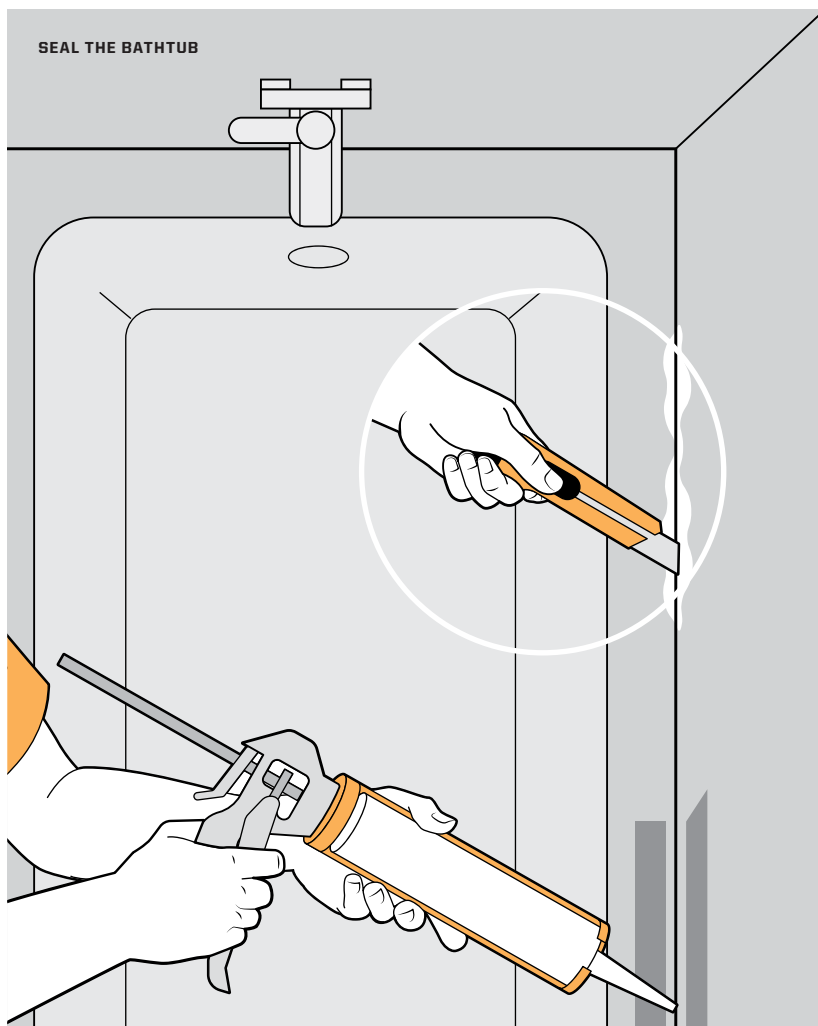
TIME REQUIRED UP TO 2 HOURS

If the rubber water hoses on the back of your washer look brittle, swap them out for durable, braided stainless steel versions that you can get from a home improvement store (these should be replaced about every five years). To maintain the dryer: Carefully pull the unit away from the wall, disconnect the air duct from the back, and vacuum lint out of the duct and the port. Then clean both with a brush for dryer ducts and vacuum again. Doing this once a year will help prevent a lint fire, says Don Huber, director of product safety for Consumer Reports. If your dryer has an accordion-style vent, replace it with a rigid, smooth metal one that's less prone to collecting lint.

Clean Your Filters

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 2 HOURS

It's always a good idea to clean the filter in your dishwasher and change the water filter in your refrigerator (if it has one) from time to time. With the heavy use these appliances are getting now, they should be cleaned more often. Larry



Ciuffo, who tests dishwashers at CR, recommends rinsing food debris out of a dishwasher's manual filter (located on the bottom of the tub) once a week instead of the usual once a month. You may also need to replace your refrigerator's water filter more often than every six months, as most manufacturers recommend. For window air conditioners, "check the filters at least once a month during periods of heavy use and clean as needed," says Chris Regan, who oversees window air conditioner testing at Consumer Reports. "Vacuum off any larger debris and then wash the filter with warm, mildly soapy water. Then rinse and dry it completely." Change the filters in your central heating and cooling units as often as the filter

manufacturer recommends, which is typically every three to 12 months.

Add Shower Power

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 2 HOURS

A clogged showerhead makes washing up far from invigorating. To clear the hard-water minerals that are probably the cause, remove the metal or plastic showerhead and let it sit submerged in a bowl of distilled white vinegar for an hour; then wipe it clean with a sponge. Repeat if necessary. For showerheads you can't easily remove, fill a zip-top bag with vinegar. Open the bag around the showerhead and hold it in place with a zip tie; leave it for an hour.

Seal the Bathtub

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 1/2 DAY

Brighten your bathroom by replacing dingy or molding caulk around your tub or shower. It's not difficult, but before you start you'll need to have all of the following on hand: caulk (pure silicone or siliconized latex/acrylic), a caulk gun, a bottle of caulk remover, mildew remover spray, a utility knife, a putty knife, and painter's tape. Soften the old caulk with caulk remover, then run a utility knife against the wall to lift it out. Use a putty knife to clear out any remaining bits of caulk, then spray the area with mildew remover and let it dry. For a clean line, put painter's tape on either side of where you want the caulk to go. Load your caulk gun with the new caulk, and push out a ribbon wide enough to fill the joint, about 1/8 inch, working from one corner of the tub to the next. Run a wet finger along the caulk to smooth it out. Remove the painter's tape before the caulk dries.

Rearm the Alarms

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 2 HOURS

You should press the test button on smoke alarms once a month, says CR's Don Huber. "If you don't hear any beeps, check the expiration date on the back to see whether you need a new one; if not, replace the batteries." (Some detectors are designed to be replaced entirely when the batteries expire.) Consumer Reports suggests getting separate smoke and carbon monoxide detectors. Choose smoke detectors that detect both flaming and smoldering fires. Put them on the ceiling or wall (within 12 inches of the ceiling) right outside your kitchen doorway and in hallways, each bedroom, the basement, the attic (if it's finished), and near an attached garage. Place carbon monoxide detectors in the same locations, except for the bedrooms.

Realign a Door

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 2 HOURS

Privacy is probably in short supply if everyone is home more. So being able to close a door is key. If you have a door that isn't closing properly, the problem is probably a loose hinge screw or the door is out of plumb, says Robert Robillard, a remodeling contractor from Concord,

Mass. First, check whether a hinge is loose. If so, simply tightening the screws should fix the problem. If the screws spin in their holes, take them out, coat two or three toothpicks with wood glue, pound them into the screw hole and let them dry. Then replace the screw—the wood you added should give the screw threads something to bite into, pulling the door back into alignment.



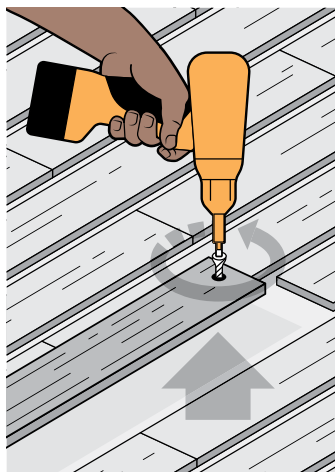
PAINT, REPAIR & RETOOL

Tackle these while the weather is warm.

Salvage Your Deck

TIME REQUIRED UP TO A FULL DAY

It's easier than you might think to replace a rotten or broken board in a deck. Purchase a new wood board that matches the one you're replacing at a home improvement store or lumberyard (most decks are made with pressure-treated pine, cedar, or a hardwood like mahogany). Ask for your new board to be cut to the length of your old one. If the boards in your deck are attached with screws through the top of the board, unscrew the old board and save the screws to attach your new board. If your board is attached using hidden fasteners that grip onto the edge, you may need to remove the two or



three boards adjacent to the one you're replacing to get at the fastener, says Joseph Pacella, who tests decking at CR. Put the new board in place, and secure it by screwing the fastener.

Freshen Up the Front Door

TIME REQUIRED UP TO A FULL DAY

Few painting projects pack the punch of a freshly coated front door. Remove the hardware but leave the door on its hinges (it can be difficult to put a door back on properly if you take it off entirely). Wipe the door with a mild detergent to remove grime and dirt, then dry it with a rag. Whether your door is made of wood, metal, or fiberglass, use sandpaper that's between 80 and 120 grit to sand down the door. Go over it again with sandpaper that's between 240 and 320 grit to remove any of the first round's scratch marks and level off the surface. Vacuum and wipe the door with a damp rag to get rid of any dust. Using a 2 1/2-inch-wide synthetic brush, prime the door with an acrylic primer, then paint it with 100 percent acrylic latex paint.

Smooth Your Path

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 1/2 DAY

For small cracks in walkways, use a hammer and a masonry chisel (sold at home improvement stores) to make the crack a small V-shaped trench so that the filler has more surface area to grab onto (be sure to wear safety glasses and gloves). Brush the crack clean and fill it with a gray, sanded acrylic latex caulk, like Quikrete Concrete Repair sealant, then smooth it out with a putty knife or trowel. Let it dry for at least 24 hours.

Mend a Leaking Hose

TIME REQUIRED UP TO 30 MINUTES

A leaking garden hose is easy to fix with a \$5 hose repair kit from your home improvement store or online. "I prefer the two-piece plastic versions, because they don't have the sharp metal ends of traditional hose clamps," says Bernie Deitrick, who tests hoses at Consumer Reports. Choose a kit for the diameter hose you're repairing (most hoses are 1/2 or 5/8 inch wide). Cut out the leaky section of hose, insert the repair kit's inner tube into the cut ends, then tighten a clamp over each end of the inner tube using the supplied screws.

HOW THE BRANDS

STACK UP

The ultimate home upgrade is to buy an appliance that won't need repairs.

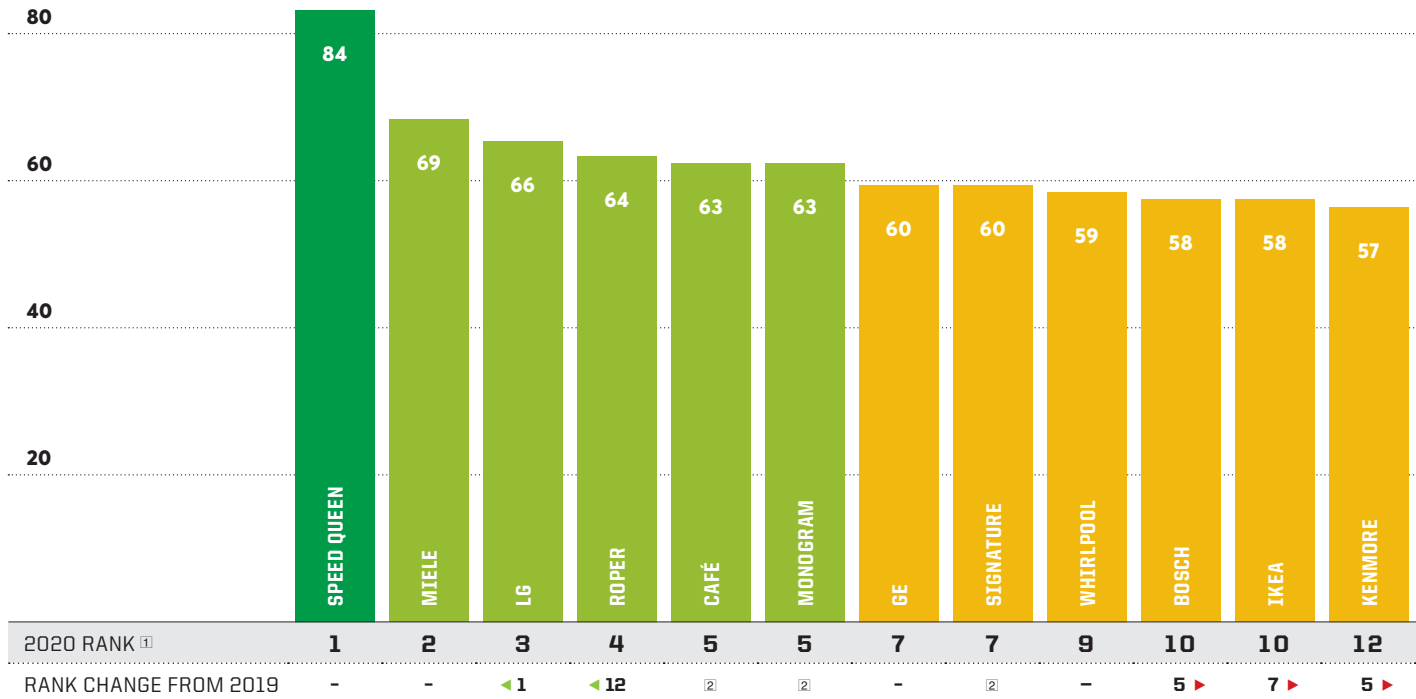
No matter how well you maintain your appliances, there will come a day when they need to be replaced. **You can help get the most use from your appliances by buying models that will last.**

A good place to start is with the chart below, our second annual Appliance Brand Reliability Rankings. It shows how reliable one brand is relative to another across multiple appliances. The results are based on data CR

collected from our member surveys on more than 592,000 kitchen and laundry appliances purchased between 2009 and 2019.

To calculate predicted reliability, we ask members how many times their appliances broke or stopped working as well as they should. **We use that data to estimate how a given brand's new models will hold up over the first five years of use.**

AVERAGE PREDICTED RELIABILITY SCORE



PRODUCT RELIABILITY, BY APPLIANCE

Appliance Type	Speed Queen	Miele	LG	Roper	Café	Monogram	GE	Signature	Whirlpool	Bosch	Ikea	Kenmore
REFRIGERATORS	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆
DISHWASHERS	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆
RANGES	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆
COOKTOPS	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆
ELECTRIC WALL OVENS	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆
OTR MICROWAVES	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆
WASHING MACHINES	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆
CLOTHES DRYERS	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆	⬆

The chart below includes only brands for which we have reliability ratings in at least two categories of major appliances.

The average predicted reliability score for each brand has been adjusted to account for differences among types of appliances. A brand that earns relatively high marks for its French-door refrigerators, for example, will get a bump in its score because

French-door models are less reliable than other refrigerator types. Without this statistical adjustment, a brand that makes only top-freezer refrigerators—the most reliable type—would have an unfair advantage over brands that make multiple types.

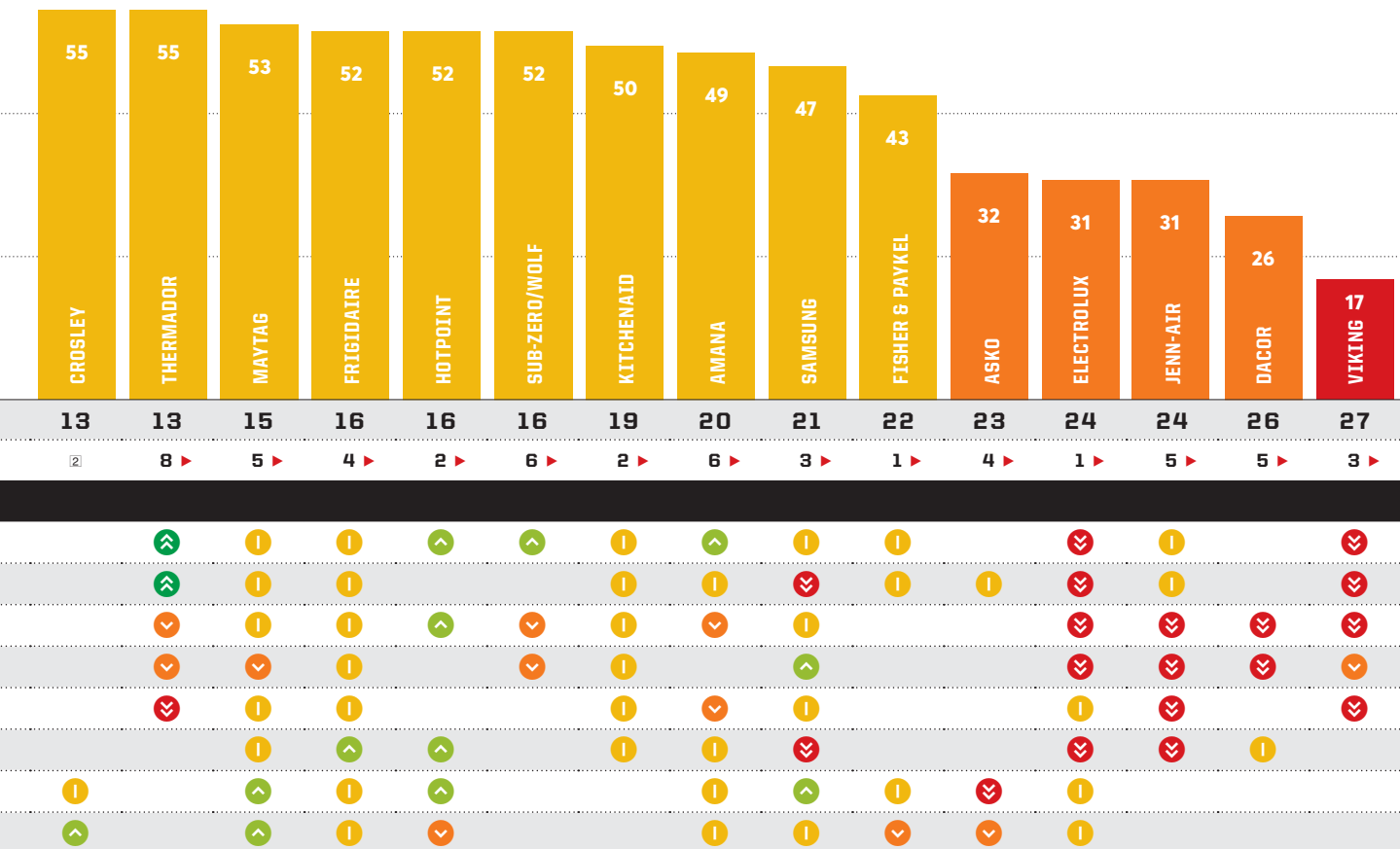
The predicted reliability ratings for the appliance categories from each brand are an average of the ratings for all types of that brand's

appliances (for example, front-loaders, top-loaders, etc., for washing machines).

There are a few brands that are new to our reliability rankings, which may account for some of the changes in rank order. Café and Monogram debut this year, as they are now separate brands from GE, their parent company. The same is true of Signature, which is owned by LG. Roper and Crosley are

brands owned by enough CR members to include this year.

Remember that our predicted reliability ratings are not an indicator of performance. Speed Queen, for instance, tops our reliability ratings for washers and dryers, but its machines don't always perform well in our lab tests. So even when you settle on a reliable brand, you'll want to check our full ratings to pick a specific model.



Empty cells indicate that either the manufacturer doesn't make that appliance or we have insufficient data to calculate a reliability rating. A dash (-) represents no change in rank from last year. [1] Some brands share a rank due to a statistical tie of their average predicted reliability scores. [2] The brand is appearing in the chart for the first time.

HOW TO SOOTHE YOUR SOUL

Anxiety levels are on the rise, mental health experts report, because of the strains of adjusting to life during this pandemic. These pointers can help you feel calmer and more centered. **BY JESSICA BRANCH** • ILLUSTRATIONS BY STEPHEN CHEETHAM



WE ARE A NATION physically separated from each other but united by stress and worry. Every day, we head into battle, working to keep our homes stocked with food, masks, and cleaning products, strategizing about money, and trying hard not to freak out about the uncertain future.

In a nationally representative CR survey of 2,164 U.S. adults conducted between April 2 and April 14, 76 percent of Americans said they were extremely or very concerned about the widespread transmission of COVID-19—the disease caused by the coronavirus—in the U.S. Additionally, in a mid-March survey of 1,004 American adults, sponsored by the American Psychiatric Association (APA), 57 percent of people reported being worried about running out of supplies and 68 percent about the pandemic’s long-term economic effects. Another nationally representative CR survey, of 2,085 U.S. adults, conducted between May 8 and May 18, found that

38 percent of Americans said they’ve experienced depression or anxiety as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak in the U.S.

Emotions such as anxiety, fear, and grief are to be expected in situations like these. “Some stress response is normal,” says Dana Rose Garfin, Ph.D., assistant adjunct professor at the Sue & Bill Gross School of Nursing at the University of California, Irvine, who studies how negative life events and community disasters affect health. “It reminds you to be on guard leaving the house, to remember not to touch your face. You want that to kick in.”

But when stress is ongoing, it can lead to constant activation of the fight-or-flight response, which, in some people, can hike the risk of an anxiety disorder. That can cause shortness of breath, chest pain, heart palpitations, agitation, disturbed sleep, weight gain, and rumination—rolling the same thoughts over in your mind repeatedly.



Experts report that you can take steps to rein these feelings in. “You can learn resilience,” says Shevaun D. Neupert, Ph.D., a psychology professor at North Carolina State University in Raleigh. “It’s important to recognize that our lives are very disrupted right now, and your tried-and-true coping strategies may not work. You may need new ones.”

Here are traditional strategies, along with some newer ones, that may help.

EAT, SLEEP, EXERCISE

Getting enough sleep, exercising regularly, and eating a healthy diet can help you manage stress and reduce anxiety, and they help maintain a strong immune system. Ongoing stress leads to elevated levels of cortisol, which can make you feel more hungry. In addition, chronic stress may prompt you to choose to snack or overeat (usually high-calorie foods) in order to feel better, according to Joyce A. Corsica, Ph.D., director of outpatient psychotherapy and director of bariatric psychology at Rush University Medical Center in Chicago. In particular, people may crave sweet, fatty foods, which can stimulate the brain’s reward centers and dampen feelings of anxiety. Before you give in to a food craving, ask yourself whether you’re actually hungry or if you’re instead feeling frustrated, sad, empty, or lonely? Once you identify and label your feelings, it’s easier to consider making better choices, Corsica says.

Your exercise regimen might have been disrupted, too. That means you’re probably not getting your usual stress-relieving dose of the feel-good endorphins that exercise provides. But most areas allow solitary outdoor walks and runs, and today there are more ways to exercise in your home than ever. And you don’t need to do marathons: Even a 15-minute walk can lift your mood.

While it’s not surprising that stress can keep you from sleeping well, a lack of sleep and an abundance of stress can create a vicious cycle: Lying in bed

awake can lead you to ruminate even more, and those swirling thoughts can further keep you from dozing off. Basic bedroom sleep hygiene—keeping the room cool and dark, staying off electronics before bed—is a good place to start. Some sleep and relaxation apps that block out noise, such as Relax Melodies and White Noise Generator, may also be helpful.



KEEP UP KEY CONNECTIONS

Whatever communities are most important to you—whether it’s your religious congregation (one recent study suggests attending religious services regularly may offer emotional benefits to people with depression), gym buddies, or book group—try to stay in touch.

You might not be going out much, but technology today provides us with multiple ways to connect with other people. For instance, your gym or house of worship may be holding livestream sessions or putting recorded ones online. And you can “see” friends and family on your smartphone, tablet, or computer by using videoconferencing services such as Google Meet, Skype, or Zoom, which offer free versions. (Be aware, though, of potential privacy concerns. For more information, go to [CR.org/videoconference0820](https://www.cro.org/videoconference0820).)

For those who miss catching a favorite show with a friend, Netflix Party, a free extension for Google Chrome, lets you watch at the same time as invited guests in other homes and chat with each other online.

And if you have the opposite

problem—you’re in close quarters and getting too much contact with others—“make sure to carve out private time for yourself, and let each family member do the same,” Garfin says.

BE IN THE MOMENT

It’s hard right now not to wonder how the pandemic will be resolved, but thinking shorter-term has been found to be a more useful way to handle stress, according to a study led by Neupert and published in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences*.

“My lab’s study found the best recipe for dealing with everyday stressors is to try to simultaneously plan ahead about what you can control and stay in the moment mindfully,” Neupert says. “That means recognizing what’s going on in the present without trying to change it. That’s the best combination.”

Mindfulness—which has been defined as staying focused on the present—has long been known to help reduce stress. There are techniques you can use to get better at it, such as yoga and meditation. The UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center provides free online guided meditations.

Mapping out and following a plan for the week or just the next day can also help because it gives you a sense of control. Clinical and forensic psychologist Paula A. Madrid, Psy.D., of New York City recommends that even if you’re feeling overwhelmed, try creating a daily schedule of achievable actions: Call a friend, take a run on the treadmill, recycle those old clothes. And maintain your prior habits as much as you can. For example, if you’re working from home, don’t lounge around in pajamas; instead, shower and dress, says Garfin at UC Irvine.

PLAN FOR A POSITIVE FUTURE

It may feel like we’ve all spent an eternity social distancing, but so far, it has been only about five months

out of a lifetime, and the pandemic will eventually end, or at least morph into something more manageable, Madrid says. And while there's no way to know what in your life may change permanently, it's fine to put your imagination to work in a positive way.

"Project your mind into the future, to a year or even a few months from now, to give you a sense of relief from the present," Madrid says. For instance, planning a winter vacation or figuring out the details of your next landmark anniversary party can remind you that there are happy occasions to look forward to.

Another productive pursuit: Working on projects around the house (see "Do-It-Yourself Home Repairs," on page 36) or learning skills you can use after the pandemic—taking up a new language—can be helpful. "Tasks that distract you now but also benefit you in the future are wonderful," Corsica says.

NUZZLE UP TO NATURE

Feeling a connection with nature has real, restorative effects on your sense of well-being. According to a 2019 study from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, even 20 minutes at a time can measurably reduce levels of stress hormones. That's especially true if you can get a little exercise while you're outside. Just be sure to maintain social distancing, Garfin says.

For those who are stuck indoors, research suggests that looking out at a natural setting—trees, a lawn, a garden—can reduce stress symptoms, as can having household plants or windowsill herb gardens. Even sitting near a window that provides sunlight can help improve your sleep and quality of life, which in turn can ease feelings of anxiety. If none of that is available to you, consider going on virtual tours of national parks (find them at [nps.gov](https://www.nps.gov)) or viewing live cams of waterscapes (search [explore.org](https://www.explore.org) or [montereybayaquarium.org](https://www.montereybayaquarium.org)—the

Jelly Cam is amazing). Some research suggests that even looking at still images of nature can reduce stress.

DO GOOD TO FEEL GOOD

Hardship can be easier to bear when you feel it's for the good of the larger community, according to the authors of a February 2020 review of quarantine studies. Research also shows that giving to others in some way—whether it's sewing masks or shopping for an at-risk neighbor's food—can make you feel less stressed.



BREATHE ... DEEPLY

Making a conscious effort to breathe slowly and deeply—aiming for five to six deep breaths per minute—for a quarter-hour or so a day, is an effective way to relieve anxiety and stress. "Deep breathing slows down your physiological stress response," Garfin says.

Corsica recommends diaphragmatic breathing, a form of slow, deep breathing that involves a purposeful expansion and contraction of the diaphragm and belly. A small study published in 2017 found that people who engaged in 15 minutes of diaphragmatic breathing 20 times over eight weeks showed improved attention and mood, and lower levels of the stress hormone cortisol, compared with a group that didn't do the breathing sessions. Want to try? The University of Michigan's Michigan Medicine website provides instruction.

KNOW WHEN TO GET HELP

"If you realize that your thoughts, behaviors, or feelings are preventing you from functioning or being able to get through the day, that's a sign to reach out," Neupert says. This includes "having trouble getting out of bed, or losing interest in activities, or feeling really hopeless."

Finding counseling or a medication consultation via phone or computer is far easier than it was just a few months ago. The APA has been training member doctors in telehealth, and regulations on the practice have been temporarily relaxed.

If you have a therapist or psychiatrist, ask whether he or she can "see" you virtually. (Check your insurance coverage first.) Many health insurers are also now offering telehealth services, or your primary care provider may be able to recommend a mental healthcare provider who does virtual counseling.

Your local hospital may also have sliding scale mental health services, and some local health department websites offer contact information for social service resources. Companies such as Amwell and MDLive offer telehealth psychiatry as well as psychological therapy. (Costs vary depending on insurance; out-of-pocket fees are usually around \$100 or less.)

The National Alliance on Mental Illness has a long list of mental health resources, including hotlines—and "warmlines," for nonemergency situations. The APA has a resource list as well, along with advice for families of those who are struggling emotionally.

Seek help immediately if you've thought of harming yourself or others. If you don't have a mental health provider, call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (800-273-8255), which offers free help. (Check with your carrier to see how the number will appear on your bill.)

—Additional reporting by Nadia Torres

WHEN YOUR INSURER DROPS YOUR DRUG

In recent years,
the number of
prescription drugs
that insurers have
stopped covering
has skyrocketed,
making medications
unaffordable to
some people
who desperately
need them.

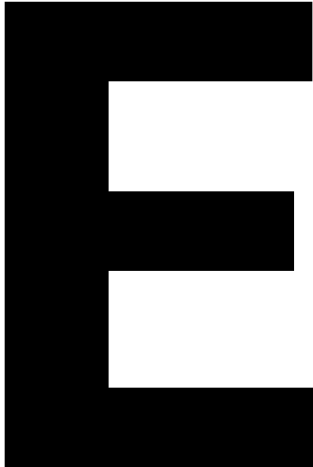
BY LISA L. GILL





HERE'S WHAT
YOU CAN DO
TO PROTECT
YOURSELF AND
YOUR FAMILY.





EVERY MONTH FOR several years, April Flowers filled her 14-year-old daughter's prescription for anti-seizure medication expecting to pay nothing once she met her deductible. Then one day just before Christmas in 2019, when Flowers went to pick up a refill, her Walgreens pharmacist had shocking news: Her out-of-pocket cost had gone up—to \$1,700.

The family, which runs a small citrus business in McAllen, Texas, couldn't manage an astronomical price hike like that for long. And yet the drug was essential. "My daughter must take her medication at the same time every day," Flowers says. "If she misses even one dose, the seizures begin."

After several frantic phone calls, Flowers learned that her insurer had suddenly stopped covering the medication. With her doctor's help—and with just two days' worth of medication left—she applied for and was granted a last-minute exception.

It's not uncommon to find out your insurer won't cover a drug you need. In a 2020 national poll by National Public Radio and two other groups, more than a third of people with insurance that covers drugs said they or a household member had experienced that problem in the previous 12 months.

The number of drugs that insurers exclude from coverage has risen dramatically over the past nine years, especially the past three, according to Adam Fein, Ph.D., a drug pricing expert at the Drug Channels Institute, a research firm. As a result, more people, like Flowers, may find that a drug that has long been covered by their insurance no longer is.

The Role Profit Plays

As with many matters having to do with how healthcare is paid for in this country, the reasons drugs get dropped by insurance are complicated.

To start, the formulary—the list of drugs an insurer covers—is decided by middleman companies called pharmacy benefit managers (PBMs) that your insurer contracts with. PBMs generally set formularies in the fall, in time for health insurance open enrollment.

That's why it's important when you renew coverage to see whether your plan will still cover a drug you need. But insurers and PBMs can drop drugs at any point during the year. And while in some cases consumers are given 30 to 60 days' warning, people often, like Flowers, report not getting a heads-up.

Consumers are caught in the middle of a profit play. PBMs exclude or

threaten to exclude drugs to negotiate better deals from competing drug companies with similar medications. That's because to get on a PBM's formulary, drugmakers offer rebates, says Stacie Dusetzina, Ph.D., associate professor of health policy at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville, Tenn., who studies drug pricing. If a PBM gets a bigger rebate from one company, it may include that company's drug in its formulary, Dusetzina says.

Bait and Switch

Some drug exclusions can save consumers money, such as when a low-cost generic version of a drug becomes available and the insurer stops covering the more expensive branded one, Dusetzina says.

But drug exclusions can also leave consumers vulnerable, especially those with chronic conditions, says Aaron Kesselheim, M.D., a professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School in Boston who studies pharmacoeconomics.

Three in 10 adults said they didn't take a drug as prescribed in the past year because of the cost, according to a 2019 poll by the nonprofit Kaiser Family Foundation. Of those, 3 in 10 said their conditions worsened.

"It's unfair to spring these changes on consumers at the pharmacy counter, especially when a consumer's health is at risk," says Chuck Bell, programs director for advocacy at Consumer Reports. "People sign up for health plans expecting that the drugs they need will be covered. Insurers should be required to honor those promises."

The American Medical Association, which represents doctors, has described midyear formulary changes as a bait and switch. Consumers chose their plan "because their drugs were going to be covered and affordable," the association said as part of a recent campaign critical of PBMs' role in

setting prescription drug availability.

Some states have limited midyear formulary changes. Nevada and New Mexico have curtailed the practice, and Texas banned it outright. But similar bills in Florida and New York failed.

As a result, many consumers across the country may still find themselves at the pharmacy counter with a prescription their insurer suddenly won't cover. If that happens to you, here are some steps you can take to get drugs affordably without using insurance or to get your insurer to reconsider its decision.

Enlist Your Pharmacist

Because the process of getting your insurer to reconsider its decision to exclude your drug can be complicated, it's best to start at the pharmacy counter. The pharmacist may clear up confusion about what caused the plan to reject your drug, or help you get your drug at a price you can afford.

■ **Make sure the pharmacy has your up-to-date insurance information.** Sometimes claims are denied simply because the drugstore computer system has old insurance information for you, says Brian Caswell, Pharm.D., owner

of Wolkar Drug in Baxter Springs, Kan., and president of the National Community Pharmacists Association, which represents independent pharmacies. So take your insurance card and make sure the pharmacy has current information, he says.

Also make sure that another pharmacy doesn't have a duplicate prescription for you, as can happen when you're transferring prescriptions from one pharmacy to another, and that any drug discount coupons you used in the past are deleted. Either scenario could lead to claim denial.

■ **Confirm the drugstore is in your insurer's network.** Most health plans, including Medicare Part D plans, encourage you to use a specific network of pharmacies to fill prescriptions. If you go outside that network, your insurer may require you to pay more, or all, of the cost, Caswell says. Note that an insurer's list of in-network pharmacies can change at the beginning of each year, so check when you renew your plan each year.

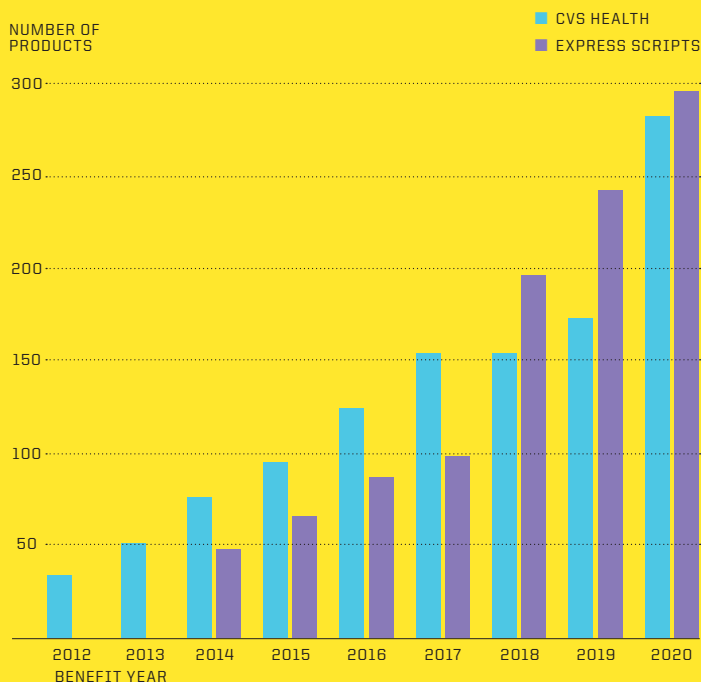
■ **See whether you must use mail order.** About a quarter of plans require you to fill certain prescriptions through mail-order pharmacies, according to the Pharmacy Benefit Management Institute, an industry research group. So if your drug suddenly went up in price, or stopped being covered, check to see whether coverage would be better through mail order.

■ **Look into whether you can get your preferred drug at a better price without your insurance.** That's possible more often than you may think, especially if discounts are available. Websites such as Blink Health, GoodRx, and RxSaver are good resources for discount coupons.

If you can't find a coupon for your medication, ask the pharmacist what the lowest cash price they can offer is. Independent pharmacies in particular have more leeway than bigger chain pharmacies to negotiate, Caswell says.

DROPPED DRUGS ARE ON THE RISE

Pharmacy benefit managers—companies that help to determine which drugs insurers will pay for—have slashed the number of covered drugs over the past nine years. Here are exclusions from CVS Health and Express Scripts, two of the largest PBMs in the U.S.



Appeal to Your Insurer

If the above steps fail to make the price of your preferred medication affordable, it's worth trying to get your insurer to cover your drug. Here's how.

■ **Request an exception.** The first step is to ask your insurer to help cover the cost of a drug that's not on the formulary. It's best that your doctor, not you, make the request, to establish the medical need and ensure that key health information—such as your diagnosis, other treatments tried, and why they were stopped—is included.

In some cases, your doctor may have already been notified by your insurer that a drug was dropped, and provided information about how to file an exception request, says Trey Hollern, a spokesperson for CVS Health, the largest PBM in the U.S. If your doctor doesn't have the information, they should contact the insurer for details.

Hollern recommends that your doctor request an expedited review if you need an answer within 72 hours.

If your drug coverage is through Medicare Part D, answers to exception requests typically come within 72 hours, according to Medicare Rights, an organization that helps seniors find and use Medicare plans. If you need it faster, ask for an expedited review. And with these plans, your doctor might not need to submit any paperwork and might be able to at least start by simply making the case over the phone.

If you have an Affordable Care Act plan purchased through HealthCare.gov or from your state, you can first ask your insurer for a one-time refill, which will give you time to enlist your doctor's help to request an exception.

■ **Consider hiring a patient advocate.** If you need help navigating the appeals process, and can afford it, you could consider hiring a professional for help.

One option is a patient advocate, a professional trained in helping consumers deal with insurers and healthcare providers. Patient

SPECIAL CASE

YOU PREFER A TIME-RELEASE DRUG



SOMETIMES INSURANCE

drug formularies exclude certain versions of particular medications. For example, in its 2020 formulary Express Scripts said it would not cover a branded, extended-release version of Lyrica, a drug used to treat pain from diabetes and other ailments, which allows a patient to medicate just once a day. But it would cover pregabalin (the generic version of Lyrica), which requires a patient to take the pills multiple times a day.

Insurers typically make this change because it helps them save money; the original version costs much less than the newer one, says Stacie Dusetzina, Ph.D., who researches drug pricing at Vanderbilt University School of Medicine in Nashville, Tenn.

WHAT TO DO: Before you ask your insurer for an exception allowing you to stick with the extended-release version, talk with your doctor about whether the standard version could work for you. Using strategies such as pill timers and pillboxes can make it easier to track when you need to take your medication.

advocates' fees can start around \$125 per hour, according to Trisha Torrey, founder of the Alliance of Professional Health Advocates.

You can find patient advocates in your area at the APHA's website, at advconnection.com. Then confirm that the advocate is certified by the Patient Advocate Certification Board by searching at pacboard.org/bcpa-certificant-list.

If you have an ACA plan, you can also use a health insurance agent or broker who works with marketplace plans. Find one in your area by going to localhelp.healthcare.gov. Some but not all may be free, so be sure to ask about cost.

■ **Contact your employer.** If you don't get immediate traction with the insurance company, your employer's human resources department may be able to help.

That's especially true if your employer self-insures, meaning it pays its employees' healthcare costs with its own money and contracts with an insurer to perform administrative functions. About 60 percent of U.S. workers with employer insurance are in self-insured plans.

Those employers have more leeway in determining individual coverage decisions, says Adam Brackemyre, vice president of state government relations at the Self-Insurance Institute of America, which represents employers that self-insure.

The best-case scenario: Your HR plan administrator approves your coverage or works with your company's insurance broker to get approval.

That's what finally worked for April Flowers, who had to pay more for her daughter's seizure drug after her insurer dropped it.

■ **File a formal appeal.** If your insurance company denies your request for an exception, you can file a formal appeal, first to the insurance company and, if that fails, to an external review board.



In both cases, your doctor should again take the lead, providing even more detailed information about your medical history and why you need this specific drug, says Dianne Savastano, founder of Healthassist, a company that helps consumers navigate the healthcare system.

The Patient Advocate Foundation, which helps consumers with health insurance problems, recommends that you and your doctor include any medical studies or other documents that establish the need for your requested drug.

An appeal made to your insurer takes up to a week for Medicare Part D plans and up to 30 days for an ACA plan or most employer plans. In all cases, you can ask for an expedited review if your medical situation is serious.

For ACA plans, some states offer help with the formal appeal process through a consumer assistance program. To find one, go to [cms.gov/ccio/resources/consumer-assistance-grants](https://www.cms.gov/ccio/resources/consumer-assistance-grants). And for Medicare Part D plans, contact your State's Health Insurance Assistance Program at [shiptacenter.org](https://www.shiptacenter.org) or call 800-633-4227.

If that appeal to your insurer fails, you can ask for a review with an external review board. By law, your insurer must provide information on how to take this step, Savastano says.

Certain employers who self-insure don't have to offer these appeals, though yours might—be sure to ask. The decision on whether to grant an exception can be influenced by the employer, so the Patient Advocate Foundation suggests that your appeal go directly to senior leadership.

If you have a Medicare Part D plan and your previous requests for exceptions have been denied, it's time to file for something called a "redetermination." Your plan should provide instructions on how to do this. A standard redetermination takes up to seven days; an expedited one, 72 hours.

SPECIAL CASE

YOU'RE ASKED TO TRY ANOTHER DRUG FIRST



BEFORE AN INSURER agrees to cover a newer and more expensive version of a drug, it sometimes requires that you try an older medication first. This is called "step therapy" in insurance lingo, and one example involves medications called TNF blockers, used to treat rheumatoid arthritis.

These drugs, which include Cimzia, Humira, and Simponi, are typically injected and can cost more than \$4,000 per month. Before agreeing to pay for them, insurers might require patients to see whether an older drug called methotrexate—which costs under \$20 per month—works well enough.

WHAT TO DO: If you've recently received a diagnosis, talk with your doctor to see whether the older treatment makes sense in your case, says Aaron Kesselheim, M.D., professor of medicine at Harvard Medical School in Boston.

If you switch plans during open enrollment, your new insurer might ask you to try step therapy even if you've already tried and failed with the drug in the past. If that happens, you and your doctor should appeal to the insurer to allow you to stay on the newer drug.

If that doesn't work, you have several more options. First, appeal to an independent review board, then to the Office of Medicare Hearings and Appeals (if your drug costs \$170 or more). Next, try the Medicare Appeals Council, then, finally, appeal to the U.S. District Court in your area (if your drug costs at least \$1,670). Medicare Rights suggests getting legal help for any appeal after the independent review board.

Search for Financial Aid

If you've exhausted all ways of getting your insurer to cover your drug, there are some ways that you may be able to get it at a reduced cost. But these are generally steps to take as last resorts, in part because they typically don't provide a long-term solution.

■ **Search for prescription assistance programs.** These are special programs that offer low-cost drugs, based on income levels and other criteria. They're run or funded by drug companies. These programs may limit how many prescriptions you can fill, or have expiration dates. And there's no guarantee that the program will remain in place for as long as you need it, says Rich Sagall, M.D., president of NeedyMeds, a nonprofit that connects consumers to drug and healthcare affordability programs.

To find a patient assistance program, go to [needymeds.org](https://www.needymeds.org) or another nonprofit service, at [rxassist.org](https://www.rxassist.org).

■ **Consider a charitable pharmacy.** There are about 50 such pharmacies and nearly 700 charitable clinics with on-site pharmacies in the U.S., often run by charities such as the Society of St. Vincent de Paul, which offer low-cost or free drugs to people in need.

Some require information about your income or insurance status. To look for charitable clinics, go to the National Association of Free & Charitable Clinics, at [nafcclinics.org/find-clinic](https://www.nafcclinics.org/find-clinic).

—Additional reporting by Donna Rosato



NEWS & EXPERT
ADVICE TO
KEEP YOU
AHEAD OF
THE CURVE™

ROAD REPORT

ASK OUR EXPERTS

Why don't all cars have safety ratings?

All mass-market vehicles sold in the U.S. must meet federal safety standards, but crash-test ratings from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration and the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety tell consumers which cars are safest. It can take months or years for cars to be rated, so consumers who buy a model when it first comes to market might not have access to crash-test data. (Some vehicles, such as certain sports cars and other high-end models, are never rated.) CR advises consumers to wait to purchase a newly introduced model until crash-test ratings are available.

AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Smart New Picks for City Driving



These new **cars and SUVs, all recommended by CR,** are fuel-efficient, are the right size for on-street parking, and have standard **automatic emergency braking** with pedestrian detection, a key safety feature for driving in urban environments.

CAR **Toyota Prius**

OVERALL SCORE **79** 43 MPG CITY
PRICE RANGE: \$24,325-\$32,500

CAR **Mini Cooper**

OVERALL SCORE **79** 23 MPG CITY
PRICE RANGE: \$23,400-\$38,400

SUV **Lexus UX**

OVERALL SCORE **80** 32 MPG CITY
PRICE RANGE: \$32,300-\$39,700

SUV **Mazda CX-3**

OVERALL SCORE **73** 20 MPG CITY
PRICE RANGE: \$20,640-\$22,040

THE VITAL STATISTIC

44%

Percentage of car owners who say fuel economy is the attribute that most needs improvement in their vehicle. It was cited above all other attributes, including purchase price (32%) and maintenance costs (29%).

Source: Nationally representative 2020 CR survey of more than 2,000 Americans.

TIP FROM OUR TEST TRACK

Double-Check Dealer Claims

In a recent CR investigation, 6 out of 38 salespeople stated that a vehicle was equipped with automatic emergency braking (AEB), even though it was not. "Consumers should always confirm what a dealer says about a vehicle's safety features," says Jennifer Stockburger, director of operations at CR's test track. Because AEB saves lives—and to avoid such confusion—CR has called for AEB with pedestrian detection to come standard on all vehicles.

TRENDS

Risky Driving Rises During Pandemic

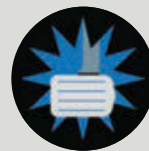
With fewer cars on the road, dangerous driving behaviors rose on U.S. roadways in March and April. "It's never safe to speed or be distracted, no matter how few cars are on the road," says Jake Fisher, CR's senior director of auto testing.



27%
INCREASE IN
SPEEDING



38%
INCREASE IN
PHONE USAGE



25%
INCREASE IN
HARD BRAKING

Source: Zendrive study of more than 100,000 U.S. drivers from March 16 to April 19, compared with the previous five-week period.

The Right Time to Buy Is Now

Dealers are offering special financing and incentives on new and used cars as they look to move inventory. Do your homework to lock in the best offers—all of which you can do from the comfort of your couch.

by Benjamin Preston



BY THE TIME the coronavirus was sweeping the nation, Ali Jian, 42, a consultant in northern Virginia, already knew he wanted to replace his 2014 Subaru Forester with something bigger for his growing family. He decided on a new minivan but held off buying because dealers wouldn't budge much on price.

But the pandemic forced many dealerships to close in March and April, and auto sales plummeted. The glut of inventory from the slowdown

in sales led to deals and incentives, including 0 percent financing, deferred payments, and big discounts. Jian decided that last spring was the time to buy. He focused on a 2020 Honda Odyssey he found through Costco's car buying service, which gave him access to a nationwide network of more than 3,000 dealers. Costco offered a guaranteed price that was more than \$6,000 below the manufacturer's suggested retail price (MSRP), and connected him with a local dealership that had the vehicle in stock and a buy-at-home option. The dealer offered to

bring the car to Jian for a test drive, as well as other models for comparison. He decided instead to stop by the dealership to test-drive the Odyssey alone and also to look at other colors.

The sales staff, who had sanitized the car and wore masks and gloves, stayed 6 feet away from him.

After Jian confirmed the purchase, dealership representatives—wearing masks and gloves—delivered the minivan to his house with the final papers he needed to sign.

"We worked on the patio; they didn't even come in the house," Jian says. "In



5 or 10 minutes, we were all done.”

As foot traffic dried up earlier this year, car dealerships were forced almost overnight to change how they sell cars. Buy-at-home “contactless” options were already a small but growing part of the market, but the pandemic significantly increased the number of dealers taking part.

Michelle Denogean, chief marketing officer at Roadster, a company that specializes in helping dealers set up the infrastructure for online sales, says these transactions used to comprise 5 to 10 percent of car sales. By mid-May

that had risen to about 27 percent. “The pandemic threw us five years into the future in about five days,” she says.

Depending on where they live, many prospective buyers can now arrange all aspects of a new- or used-car purchase from their couch, including securing financing and arranging for a test drive.

Specific rules vary from state to state, but a typical online sale involves several steps outlined below. CR recommends doing a lot of research on models and dealerships beforehand.

Choose a car. If you have a model in mind, you can probably build

a vehicle virtually by mixing and matching options on a “configurator” application at an automaker’s website. It can be helpful to keep a spreadsheet of attributes—such as cargo space, passenger room, available safety systems, and fuel economy—so that you can easily compare different vehicles.

All-Access and Digital CR members can go to our ratings of tested models at [CR.org/cars](https://www.consumerreports.org/cars) to find high performers and those with the three advanced driver assistance systems (ADAS) we think are essential for safety: forward collision warning (FCW), blind

spot warning (BSW), and automatic emergency braking (AEB) with pedestrian detection. We also offer ratings for predicted reliability and reliability history based on member surveys that typically cover more than 400,000 cars of various makes and model years.

Our April 2020 print edition of the magazine is dedicated exclusively to vehicle ratings. Car shoppers can go to our online store at [CR.org/books](https://www.consumerreports.org/books) to order it or one of our specialty publications featuring ratings and buying advice, such as our New Car and Used Car buying guides.

Find a local dealer. Search online for a dealer that has the car you want and offers a buy-at-home option. Most new-car dealers have an online presence, and a simple search will find one nearby that has the model you want or can order it from another dealer. You can usually negotiate the price and any options you want with a salesperson by email or phone.

Car buying services like Costco's can also usually find the model you want at a nearby dealer. Autopia, another service, allows online users to input options they want into an algorithm that searches for incentives and finds the best deals nearby.

CR members can use our Build & Buy program, a service that allows them to configure the car they want, compare local transaction prices, and have dealers provide their best offer. Our service taps TrueCar's network of more than 15,000 dealers, many offering contactless buying or buy-at-home options, including at-home test drives and home delivery, which might be offered by dealers that don't advertise it.

Set up the test drive. Make sure the dealer you choose offers an at-home test drive, if that's what you want. In some cases, a dealer might agree to bring you more than one car

to test-drive so you can compare. It's important to understand how the car feels on the road, says Gabe Shenhar, associate director of CR's auto test program. You can also test the controls and experience other features, such as gauging seat comfort and assessing how easy the infotainment system is to use. Dealers that won't bring a car to you may let you take a test drive without a salesperson if you show your driver's license and proof of insurance.

Secure financing and other incentives. Many dealers now offer

special financing approvals online. It means you'll never have to set foot inside the dealership's finance and insurance office, where someone might try to sell you extras, such as an extended warranty. Most automakers are offering low- or no-interest financing if you have good credit, and some dealers are also willing to negotiate. Some loans from other online sources can be finalized with electronic signatures; others require paper documents with signatures.



IF YOU CAN BUY NEW, BE SURE TO GET A DEAL

DESPITE THE PANDEMIC and economic uncertainty, this might be the perfect time to buy a new car.

To entice consumers worried about job security—and to clear out an inventory glut due to slow sales—car manufacturers and dealers have pushed low-interest and 0 percent financing and loan terms of seven years and longer for new cars, with initial payments sometimes deferred by two or three months. Other common incentives include cash back or deep discounts off the manufacturer's suggested retail price (MSRP).

In conversations with dealers, analysts, and other industry insiders, Consumer Reports found that dealers last spring had about a four-month supply of vehicles on hand—the norm is one or two months—so they've generally been willing to accommodate potential customers.

According to data from TrueCar, the average savings below MSRP was about 10 percent in April compared with 8.6 percent at the same time last year. For example, Chevrolet was offering

up to \$8,500 cash back on certain Silverado pickups, in addition to 0 percent 84-month financing or 120-day payment deferments. Subaru was offering 0 percent for 63 months. Jeep was offering \$3,250 cash back and 0 percent for 84 months on certain Grand Cherokees. There are also deals at local individual dealers.

In general, CR's experts advise caution in taking out long-term loans, though in the right situation they can represent big savings over time. By stretching out the loan terms without additional interest, you can buy more car while keeping monthly payments the same or lower. But you should remember that at some point over the course of the loan, the car will be worth less than what you owe. In the event of an accident that totals the car, you could end up still owing money on the loan even after the insurance payment.

Eric Lyman, senior vice president of ALG, TrueCar's analytics and forecasting division, says the idea behind the deals and special offers



is to increase consumer confidence during a time of economic uncertainty. For someone who can keep a vehicle for seven or eight years, a longer-term loan at 0 percent can be beneficial. But consumers who switch vehicles every few years might be better off with a lease, he says.

Alain Nana-Sinkam, TrueCar's vice president of strategic initiatives, says that consumers who take out 0 percent loans on new cars can come out ahead if they invest the money they would have spent on interest payments in something that could gain interest or something like a mortgage that would lower financial liability. "A savvy and engaged consumer would take the 0 percent 84-month loan and siphon the monthly savings into an investment," he says.



CONSIDER THE MERITS OF BUYING USED

EVEN IN A healthy economy, the smart money is usually on buying used.

And pricing aside, there are advantages to buying used, especially models that have low mileage and are only a few years old. These are the used vehicles most likely to have up-to-date advanced driver assistance systems (ADAS), as well as the best reliability, as judged by our CR member surveys.

The advantage over new cars is well-known: Depending on the model, depreciation can make used cars a lot less expensive. A new car

on average loses slightly more than half of its value in the first three years. But if you buy a highly rated, CR-recommended used vehicle, you might be happy for years to come.

Wholesale used-car prices fell 10 to 15 percent in April but rebounded in the first half of May, according to the Manheim Used Vehicle Value Index. As the volume of used cars picks up over the summer and into the fall, retail prices are expected to fall as well.

For used-car buyers, the good news is that the supply is expected to spike

as more leased vehicles than usual are turned in over the next few months. That's because automakers earlier this year extended leases by several months for customers in part because dealerships were closed due to the pandemic, and many customers had nowhere convenient to drop them off. Those vehicles will have to be turned in eventually, adding to the usual flow of used cars and putting downward pressure on prices.

With travel at a near standstill in the spring, rental car companies also started unloading vehicles from their fleets, adding to the used-car surplus.

The economic slowdown affected used-car vendors in much the same way it hit new-car dealers: Inventory sat on the lot while potential customers stayed home.

According to a survey by the National Independent Automobile Dealers Association (NIADA), an organization that represents used-car dealers, about a quarter of its members were open for business as usual by the end of April.

"Every month a car sits on a lot, the dealer pays for it somehow," Shenhar says. "If cars have collected and gathered dust for two, three, or four months, dealers are going to bend over backward to clear them off. That goes for used-car dealers, too."

If a dealer offers online sales and other buy-from-home options for its new cars, it's likely to offer the same services for its used-car inventory. Carvana, a national used-car sales platform, has more than 21,000 cars that consumers can browse and buy online. Once a deal is reached, depending on where the buyer lives, documents are either signed electronically or sent through the mail. In many places, the buyer can receive delivery of the vehicle at home.

In late March, Carvana announced in a news release that "all vehicles are

available for home delivery, as well as the peace of mind of a 7-day return policy."

All-Access or Digital CR members can search our Used Car Marketplace at [CR.org/cars](https://www.cars.com) for vehicles for sale in their area, sorting by the factors that matter most. The listings include CR's reliability and owner satisfaction ratings, and most vehicles include a free Carfax report, which gives a detailed history of each used car.

Members can also access ratings and information on used vehicles as

far back as 20 years. The best way to choose a vehicle that will go the distance is to look at its reliability history, which CR provides online with our standard vehicle ratings.

Our list of the best used vehicles on the facing page includes CR's Best Bets (shown in bold). These are models that can be considered the top choices among used cars. They all performed well in our road tests when they were new and have multiple years of better-than-average reliability in our Annual Auto Surveys of CR members.



MAKE YOUR CURRENT CAR LAST ... AND LAST

EVEN WITH GREAT deals out there, not everyone is in a financial position to take advantage of the savings. Sometimes you just have to love the car you're with.

If you own one of CR's best used cars likely to go 200,000 miles or more, you already have an advantage. Whether you have a Toyota Camry, the top car on the list, or a Jeep, not nearly as reliable, staying on top of periodic maintenance is a must if you want your vehicle to last.

More consumers are following this course. According to ALG, TrueCar's analytics and forecasting division, the average age of cars on the road has risen to nearly 12 years, an all-time high. For a car that's been driven 15,000 miles per year, that would put it at 180,000 miles. What follows are strategies for keeping your car going.

Follow the manual. For starters, stick with the maintenance schedule in your vehicle's owner's manual. If you've lost the manual, you can order another online or buy one at the dealership. Owner's manuals for many vehicles—a 2012 Honda Accord, for instance—can

be downloaded free as a PDF.

Oil changes and other fluids. Oil, transmission fluid, coolant, and even brake fluid should be checked regularly. The best rule of thumb is to follow the manufacturer's recommendations. Note any fluid loss and look for impurities that could be a telltale sign of a larger problem.

Belts and hoses. Periodically inspect them for fraying and cracks; have them replaced if they're worn. Cracked hoses can cause engine damage, and worn brake and fuel lines could cause an accident and life-threatening injuries. A broken belt can leave you stranded.

Avoid cheap parts and fluids. If you're buying parts, avoid cheap knockoffs, which can fail sooner than original parts from the manufacturer. Consult the manual to make sure that the fluids you're adding are compatible with manufacturer specifications. For example, using a noncompatible coolant or oil can damage or destroy the engine, and putting the wrong brake fluid in the reservoir can have catastrophic consequences in terms of safety. Use

USED CARS THAT GO THE DISTANCE

Our best used cars did well in CR testing when they were new, and they've proved to be among the most reliable models over time, according to CR member surveys. The list here also includes vehicles that our members reported were most likely to reach 200,000 miles and beyond with the fewest problems. The top contenders are Hondas and Toyotas, with several models appearing on our list.

CR Best Bet
SHOWN IN BOLD

Likely to go 200,000+ Miles
SHOWN IN BLUE

SMALL CARS



TOYOTA PRIUS

	\$20,000	\$10,000
ACURA TSX	————	2011-12
HONDA CIVIC	————	2013-14
HONDA FIT	2020	2012-13
KIA SOUL	2019	2015
LEXUS CT 200H	————	2011-12
MAZDA3	2017-18	2013-14
SCION XB	————	2015
TOYOTA COROLLA	2018	2015-16
TOYOTA PRIUS	2017-18	2012-13

SMALL SUVs



MAZDA CX-5

	\$20,000	\$10,000
ACURA RDX	2015-16	2011
BUICK ENCORE	2017-19	————
HONDA CR-V	2015-16	2010-11
MAZDA CX-5	2017-18	2013-14
NISSAN ROGUE SPORT	2018-19	————
TOYOTA RAV4	2016-17	2010-11

MINIVANS/WAGONS



TOYOTA SIENNA

	\$20,000	\$10,000
HONDA ODYSSEY	2015-16	————
TOYOTA SIENNA	2015-16	2011-12
TOYOTA PRIUS V	2017	2013
VOLVO XC70	2015-16	2012

MIDSIZED SEDANS



TOYOTA CAMRY

	\$20,000	\$10,000
ACURA TL	————	2012
HONDA ACCORD	2015-17	2011-12
HYUNDAI AZERA	————	2013-14
MAZDA6	2016-17	————
SUBARU LEGACY	————	2012-13
TOYOTA CAMRY	2016-17	2012-13
TOYOTA AVALON	2015-16	2011-12
LEXUS ES	2015-16	2011
LEXUS GS	2013-14	————
LEXUS LS	2011-12	2007-08

MIDSIZED SUVs



TOYOTA HIGHLANDER

	\$20,000	\$10,000
CHEVROLET EQUINOX	2017-18	2014
HONDA PILOT	2014-15	2011
HYUNDAI SANTA FE SPORT	2016-17	2014
LEXUS RX	2013-14	2010
NISSAN MURANO	————	2012-13
TOYOTA 4RUNNER	2011-13	2006-07
TOYOTA HIGHLANDER	2014-15	2008-09
TOYOTA VENZA	2015	2010-11

PICKUP TRUCKS



HONDA RIDGELINE

	\$20,000	\$10,000
HONDA RIDGELINE	2013-14	2008-09
TOYOTA TUNDRA	2011-12	2006-07

premium fuel if recommended; lower grades can cause damage to the engine and its sensors over time.

Don't overdo it. There's such a thing as overmaintaining a vehicle with unnecessary services. Be wary of repair services that push maintenance not spelled out in the owner's manual, such as changing the oil every 3,000 miles.

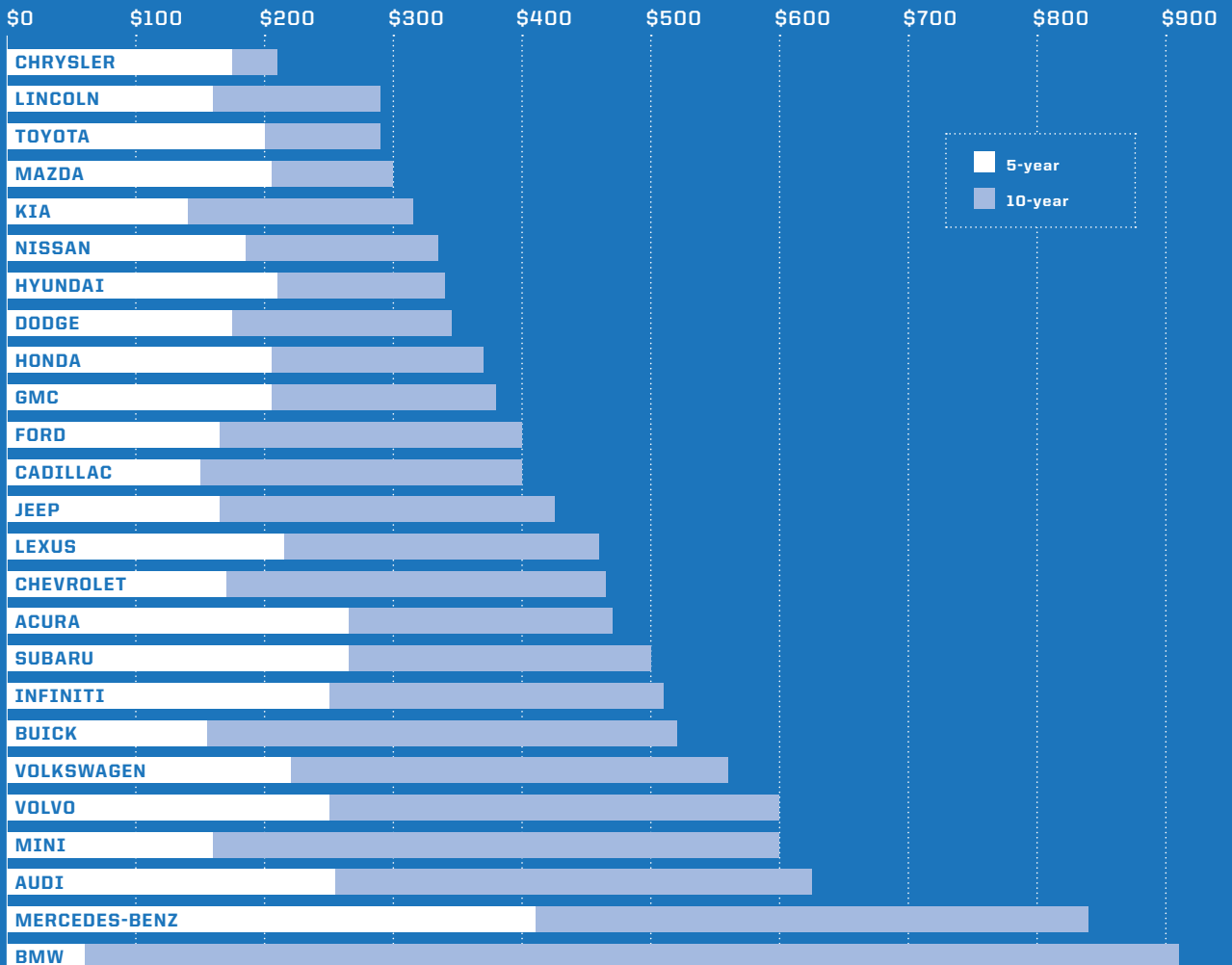
It may not be too late to start. If you've fallen behind on scheduled maintenance, you can still get back on track. Have your mechanic inspect the vehicle for obvious problems. Use touch-up paint on chips and scratches, and repair small rust spots before they spread. When you're driving, listen for odd noises that could indicate that

something needs to be fixed.

Eventually, there will come a time when you need to say goodbye to your old car. That's when it becomes unreliable despite frequent repairs, rust damage compromises the structural integrity, there's serious damage from flooding or an accident, or a repair is just too expensive to justify keeping it.

WHAT IT COSTS TO OWN THESE BRANDS OVER TIME

5- and 10-year model average maintenance and repair costs, from CR's Annual Auto Survey.





Under Pressure: Tire Inflators



PROPERLY INFLATED TIRES are essential for safety, optimal fuel economy, and maintaining even treadwear. You should check the pressure monthly. With reduced car use due to pandemic restrictions, you may discover that your tires have lost pressure. A cordless portable inflator allows you to top off tires at home without the hassle of tangled power cords or handling a filthy hose at the gas station. Many can also be used to inflate other items, such as basketballs, air mattresses, and bicycle tires.

The team at our test track put the following inflators through their paces, noting their speed, accuracy, and overall convenience. They're listed here in order of our experts' preferences (left to right), but any one of them will get the job done. Having one on hand will help you maintain proper tire inflation easily.

DEWALT 20V MAX INFLATOR

Very easy to use, with an intuitive design and clearly marked buttons and knobs, the DeWalt can be powered from a 12-volt car plug or with the separately sold battery and charger. Its swift and quiet performance contributed to making it our favorite. **HIGH-VOLUME HOSE:** Yes. **12-VOLT CAR PLUG:** Yes. **PRICE:** \$99 for the inflator and \$119 for the battery and charger at Home Depot.

MILWAUKEE M12 COMPACT INFLATOR

The Milwaukee is a small but capable inflator with an easy-to-read display. It gives accurate readings and was the quickest to fill a flat, but it lacks a high-volume hose, so you can't use it to inflate items like air mattresses or rafts. **HIGH-VOLUME HOSE:** No. **12-VOLT CAR PLUG:** No. **PRICE:** \$99 for the inflator, including battery, and \$55 for the charger at Home Depot.

CRAFTSMAN V20 INFLATOR

The Craftsman is among the most versatile of the inflators we evaluated. It can operate from a 12-volt car plug and a 120-volt wall plug, as well as with the Craftsman battery and charger. It's quiet, has a fast top-off time, and comes with a high-volume hose to fill other inflatables. **HIGH-VOLUME HOSE:** Yes. **12-VOLT CAR PLUG:** Yes. **PRICE:** \$75 for the inflator and \$129 for the charger and battery at Lowe's.

MAKITA 12V MAX CXT LITHIUM-ION INFLATOR

The Makita is a solid performer. It's easier on the budget and more compact than some of the other models. But it is slightly noisier, lacks a high-volume hose to inflate items other than tires, and unlike the other models, requires the user to hold the trigger while operating it. **HIGH-VOLUME HOSE:** No. **12-VOLT CAR PLUG:** No. **PRICE:** \$73 for the inflator and \$69 for the battery and charger at Home Depot.

BAUER 20V CORDLESS INFLATOR/DEFLATOR

The Bauer is a real bargain if you're willing to power it only with the 12-volt car plug. But even adding the expense of the battery and charger, it still costs less than any other model we tried. It has an intuitive design and comes with a high-volume hose, though it was somewhat slower than the other models. **HIGH-VOLUME HOSE:** Yes. **12-VOLT CAR PLUG:** Yes. **PRICE:** \$45 for the tool, \$25 for the battery, and \$23 for the charger at Harbor Freight Tools.



LUXURY SUVs

Mercedes-Benz GLB

A Pleasure to Drive, With Extra Room

68

OVERALL SCORE

ROAD-TEST SCORE 81

HIGHS Handling, braking, acceleration, fuel economy, fit and finish

LOWS Controls, low and flat rear seat

POWERTRAIN 221-hp, 2.0-liter turbocharged 4-cylinder engine; 8-speed automatic transmission; all-wheel drive

FUEL 26 mpg on premium fuel

PRICE \$36,600-\$38,600 base price range \$47,435 as tested

THE NEW GLB has excellent visibility, offers generous passenger and cargo room, and is easy to get in and out of, thanks to its upright, boxy styling. The result is the rare compact luxury SUV where function wins over style.

The GLB250 uses the same engine as its A-Class and CLA sedan counterparts, but the GLB has smoother acceleration. That's because it has a better-tuned 8-speed dual-clutch automatic transmission that makes for more seamless shifts instead of the 7-speed used in the A-Class and CLA. There's plenty of power no matter the speed, and the GLB's 26 mpg overall is impressive for its class.

We enjoyed driving the GLB on back roads and on the highway. The suspension keeps the SUV settled and soaks up bumps. Because of its quick-to-respond steering and restrained body lean, the

GLB inspired confidence when driven hard on our track.

The cabin is quiet and the various high-grade materials are well-assembled. The elevated driving position provides a commanding view through large windows. And there's plenty of room for five passengers. Buyers can even add an optional—albeit tiny—third-row seat.

The front seats provide plenty of support, though some of our drivers found them a bit narrow. The rear seat is way too low, with a short cushion that doesn't provide adequate thigh support for most passengers.

We think the biggest knock against the GLB is its infotainment system, which is overly complex and distracting to use. And while FCW and AEB with pedestrian detection are standard, BSW is only optional on the already pricey base model.

SUBCOMPACT SUVs

Kia Seltos

Good Handling, But a Noisy Cabin

68

OVERALL SCORE

ROAD-TEST SCORE 72

HIGHS Fuel economy, braking, controls, visibility

LOWS Ride, noise, base trim lacks standard advanced safety features

POWERTRAIN 146-hp, 2.0-liter 4-cylinder engine; continuously variable transmission; all-wheel drive

FUEL 28 mpg on regular fuel

PRICE \$21,990-\$27,890 base price range \$24,820 as tested

THE ALL-NEW SELTOS offers roomy versatility and excellent fuel economy at a reasonable price. But its stiff ride, loud cabin, and lack of standard advanced driver assistance system features on the base model keep it from earning our recommendation. The safety systems are available only on the more expensive trims.

That said, the Seltos has its strengths. The large door openings make accessing the cabin a breeze. Even tall test drivers had plenty of headroom. The front seats are adequate for short trips, and the rear-seat area is spacious. Tall windows and mostly slim roof pillars mean few blind spots and good visibility.

The base four-cylinder engine in the car we tested never felt like it had much power in reserve, but we were pleased with how the continuously variable

transmission performed like a regular automatic, complete with simulated "shifts." The SUV's 28 mpg overall is good for an AWD in this class.

Our testers felt confident taking the diminutive Kia through our avoidance maneuver, where it posted a high speed due to responsive handling and a well-tuned stability control system. But the stiff suspension transmits bumps straight into the cabin, and the ride is also jumpy. The Seltos is a less-than-ideal long-haul companion: It has a boisterous cabin, a plastic center console that can bother the driver's right knee, and little lower-back support in the front seats.

The compact profile could make the Seltos a strong urban option for narrow streets and tight parking. But it would be less competitive in the suburbs due to scant power, excessive noise, and its unrefined ride.

PHOTO: JOHN POWERS/CONSUMER REPORTS

Ratings > **Practical Packaging** Most of the compact and subcompact SUVs below offer urban-friendly dimensions, along with seating for five passengers and their cargo.

Make + Model	Overall Score	Survey Results		Road-Test Results											Advanced Safety					
		Predicted reliability	Owner satisfaction	Road-test score	Overall mpg	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.	Cargo volume, cu. ft.	FCW	AEB, city	AEB, pedestrian	AEB, highway	BSW
SUVs \$35,000-\$45,000																				
✔ Lexus NX300 2.0T	80	↑	↓	74	24	↑ / ↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↑	49.5	7.5	132	28.5	S	S	S	S	0
✔ Lexus UX250h 2.0H	80	↑	↑	71	37	↑ / ↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	54.0	8.8	137	18.0	S	S	S	S	0
✔ Audi Q3 2.0T	78	↓	↑	84	23	↑ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	↑	52.5	7.8	126	24.5	S	S	S	S	0
✔ Volvo XC40 2.0T	72	↑	↑	71	24	↑ / ↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↑	54.0	7.3	132	25.5	S	S	S	S	0
✔ BMW X1 2.0T	72	↑	↓	74	26	↓ / ↓	↑	↓	↓	↑	↑	53.0	7.9	134	27.0	S	S	S	-	-
Mini Cooper Countryman 2.0T	69	↓	↑	82	25	↑ / ↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	53.0	8.3	120	23.5	S	S	S	-	-
Mercedes-Benz GLB250 2.0T	68	↓	↓	81	26	↑ / ↓	↓	↑	↑	↑	↑	54.5	6.8	125	28.5	S	S	S	S	0
Acura RDX 2.0T	61	↓	↓	82	22	↑ / ↑	↓	↑	↓	↑	↑	52.0	7.0	127	33.0	S	S	S	S	0
SUVs \$20,000-\$30,000																				
✔ Subaru Crosstrek 2.0L	85	↑	↑	87	29	↓ / ↑	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	54.5	10.2	125	27.5	0	0	0	0	0
✔ Hyundai Kona 2.0L	78	↑	↑	71	26	↑ / ↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	56.0	11.1	129	22.5	S	S	0	S	0
✔ Nissan Rogue Sport 2.0L	78	↑	↓	72	26	↑ / ↓	↑	↑	↑	↓	↑	52.5	10.3	134	24.5	S	S	S	S	S
✔ Mazda CX-3 2.0L	73	↑	↓	64	28	↓ / ↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↑	53.5	9.6	135	18.0	S	S	S	S	S
Kia Seltos 2.0L	68	↓	↑	72	28	↓ / ↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	55.0	9.0	128	28.0	0	0	0	0	0
Ford EcoSport 2.0L	68	↑	↓	61	24	↓ / ↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	54.0	10.7	132	22.5	-	-	-	-	0
Honda HR-V 1.8L	66	↑	↓	66	29	↓ / ↑	↑	↓	↓	↓	↑	55.0	10.5	132	32.0	0	0	0	0	-
Mazda CX-30 2.5L	61	↓	↓	64	27	↑ / ↓	↓	↓	↓	↑	↑	54.0	8.7	133	21.5	S	S	S	S	0
Chevrolet Trax 1.4T	53	↓	↓	55	25	↓ / ↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	↓	54.0	10.8	130	26.0	0	-	-	-	0
Jeep Renegade 2.4L	48	↓	↓	56	24	↓ / ↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	51.5	9.9	130	30.5	0	0	-	0	0
Fiat 500X 1.3T	35	↓	↓	50	23	↓ / ↓	↑	↓	↓	↓	↓	52.5	9.8	130	19.5	0	0	-	0	0

> All-Access and Digital 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.

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Low-Hanging Fruit

These summer sales aren't quite as juicy as they seem





Dole-y Guacamole!
That's one way to sweeten up your usual dip recipe.
Submitted by Diane Westphal, Davis, CA


Feral Fruit
Just curious: What kind of bait do you use to catch a blueberry?
Submitted by Hillary Berry, seen in Coeur d'Alene, ID



Sweet as Feet
Actually, we prefer the strawberry option.
Submitted by Dennis Rau, via email



Seed Money
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Submitted by Tim Chase, via email

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