

Best bets in AA batteries

No one wants a camera to conk out at a holiday gathering or a brand-new gizmo to run out of juice before the new year. To keep those disappointments at bay, see our Ratings of 17 AA batteries, the size most often used in radios, flashlights, remote controls, digital cameras, and many toys. We tested four types of AAs, including rechargeables that work right out of the package without an initial charge.

How we tested. We put the batteries in identical cameras and used our usual protocol: Turn camera on, zoom in, zoom out,

zoom in, turn on flash, take five pictures with 30 seconds between each, turn off camera, wait 10 minutes, repeat. For each battery, we kept going until the cameras could not take pictures. We tested "pre-charged" rechargeables two ways: right out of the package, to see how many shots pre-charging provides; then as a regular rechargeable, using two charge/discharge cycles to obtain the number of shots used in the Ratings. (Some manufacturers claim that up to a thousand recharges are possible, but we didn't have years to test.)

What we found. There are big differences in how long batteries last. A score of excellent means that a battery provided more than 511 pictures; very good, 256 to 510; good, 128 to 255; fair, 50 to 127.

Lithium batteries did best, but two rechargeables came close. And note that the rechargeables in the Ratings are 2,000 milliamp hours (mAh). When we tried higher-capacity (2,450 mAh) rechargeables, they produced more shots, as expected. Precharged batteries were good right out of the package, providing 246 shots on



average without being charged.

There are also big differences in price per pair and per 50 shots (see Ratings). Alkalines tend to be least expensive; rechargeables are priciest, but cost per 50 shots falls the more they're recharged. You'll pay about \$15 to \$20 for a charger.

Bottom line. For digital cameras, often-used toys, and other devices drawing bursts of power, make the greener choice: rechargeables. **The Sanyo Eneloop and Sony Cycle Energy are very good and took more than 350 shots on a full charge.** Another

DID YOU KNOW?

You should store batteries separate from one another and from other metal objects in a cool, dry place (no need to store in the refrigerator). Don't mix battery types, sizes, or ages. Rechargeable batteries should be recycled to keep their heavy metals out of landfills. To find out where to recycle, go to www.rbr.org, the Web site of the nonprofit Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corp.

Why buy pricey spices?

Next time you're replenishing the spice rack, check the difference in cost from brand to brand. We've paid 35 cents per ounce for Costco's pure vanilla extract compared with \$3.34 for McCormick's, for example (quite a spread even given that the Costco was giant-sized). And when it comes to oregano, you could pay \$1.10 per ounce for Walmart's Great Value or more than \$7 per ounce for Spice Islands.

How we tested. Our trained tasters tried oreganos and cinnamons at three price levels. They tasted oregano steeped in hot water to make a "tea," in a simple tomato sauce, and on bread with melted cheese. They tasted cinnamon stirred into unsweetened applesauce, baked in sugar cookies, and on toast. The results could lead to smarter choices when you buy.

When we asked manufacturers about price differences, they cited several reasons:

- Different growing regions. Most oregano is cultivated in Turkey and the Mediterranean, for instance; the pricey Spice Islands product is grown in the wild in Mexico. (Mexican oregano is a different species, and it's "more intense and has a stronger impact," says Carol Kitchen, research manager of ACH Foods, owner of the company that sells Spice Islands.)

- Percentage of volatile or essential oils. A higher content is key, says Daniela Massey,



Great Value Oregano Leaves (Walmart)

Oregano

Great Value Leaves (Walmart)
\$1.10

McCormick Leaves
\$3.36

Spice Islands
\$7.32

Cinnamon

Great Value Ground (Walmart)
\$0.51

McCormick Ground
\$1.20

The Spice Hunter Highland Harvested Saigon
\$4.14

Prices are per ounce.

product development manager for The Spice Hunter. "Essential oils are what give plants their aroma and flavor," she says.

- Quality control. "Even in the U.S., products aren't ready to go from the field to your mouth," says Al Goetze, vice president of spice procurement for McCormick. He cites "strict quality control from the fields to grocery store shelves" to minimize exposure to allergens, metals, and bacteria.
- Packaging. Glass containers are more expensive than plastic, which are pricier than the plastic bags that hold the cheapest spices.

What we found. When the cinnamon was baked in cookies, tasters found no differences. When tasted in other recipes, the most expensive oregano and cinnamon had a slightly more intense flavor than the rest. A pricey spice could be worth trying in a simple dish (oregano on fresh tomatoes, for instance) or where it's the main ingredient (as with cinnamon buns). For recipes with many ingredients, you probably don't need to pay a premium.

When you buy, check for expiration dates. Spices lose strength over time; many should be replaced after two or three years. If dates are absent, write the purchase date on the jar. Store spices in a dark, dry, cool area.



option is a single-use lithium battery. The Energizer Ultimate took 678 pictures; the Energizer Advanced, 562.

For flashlights, remote controls, and other devices drawing little power, consider single-use alkaline batteries, which should have a shelf life of several years. The Panasonic Evolta took 237 shots, more than any other alkaline. Almost as good and far less expensive is the Kirkland Signature, sold at Costco and only in a 48-pack. Don't buy the implied claim of the CVS Long Lasting alkaline. It produced the fewest shots of all: 92.

✓ CR Best Buy ✓ Recommended

Ratings Batteries
In performance order.

● Excellent
● Very good
● Good
● Fair
● Poor

Rec.	Rank	Brand & model	Price, pair	Cost, 50 shots	Score
A LITHIUM					
✓	1	Energizer Ultimate	\$5.00	\$0.37	●
✓	2	Energizer Advanced	4.50	0.40	●
B NICKEL OXY-HYDROXIDE					
	1	Duracell Power Pix	3.00	0.70	○
C ALKALINE					
	1	Panasonic Evolta	2.00	0.42	○
	2	Duracell Ultra Advanced	3.00	0.64	○
✓	3	Kirkland Signature	0.46	0.11	○
	4	Duracell Coppertop	2.50	0.61	○
	5	Panasonic Digital Power	1.50	0.37	○
	6	Rayovac	1.50	0.46	○
	7	Walgreens Ultra Supercell	2.50	0.77	○
	8	Energizer Max	2.50	0.79	○
	9	CVS Long Lasting	2.00	1.09	●
D RECHARGEABLE					
✓	1	Sanyo Eneloop	7.50	2	●
✓	2	Sony Cycle Energy	8.50	2	●
	3	Rayovac Hybrid	7.00	2	○
	4	Duracell	6.50	2	○
	5	Kodak Precharged	6.00	2	○

① Calculated from 4-pack price except for Kirkland, sold only in a 48-pack. ② Cost depends on number of recharges.



Perks that come with credit cards

Buy with American Express, MasterCard, Visa, or a growing number of debit cards and you're entitled to benefits that you might not even know about. To determine what perks you have and how they work, read the material that came with your card. (If you've lost it or didn't get a full explanation of benefits, ask for a copy or check the issuer's Web site.) Note the fine-print exceptions, including dollar limits on coverage. To qualify, you generally must use the card for the entire purchase. To take advantage of a benefit, you file a claim, which might involve sending your receipt or the item itself. Common benefits from Amex, MasterCard, and Visa are below. (A Discover card spokesman said some benefits are available with some cards, but he could not elaborate.) Benefits differ, so check with your card issuer.

Extended warranty. Cards often double manufacturer warranties up to one extra year on purchases up to \$10,000. The product must come with an initial warranty for no more than three to five years, depending on the card. That's one reason not to buy an extended warranty for most products.

Purchase or product protection. Cards might cover you if an item is stolen, accidentally damaged, vandalized, or lost. For damage, the card issuer will arrange for repair or, in some cases, replacement or refund. American Express covers an item for up to 90 days, with a limit of \$1,000 or \$10,000 per occurrence, depending on the card, and \$50,000 per policy year. Plans don't cover shipping and handling expenses. Coverage may apply only as backup to your own insurance.

Price protection. If you find the same product at a lower price within 60 days of purchase, some cards will reimburse you for the difference. Online purchases might be excluded.

Return protection. This provides a refund if you're unhappy with an item but the retailer won't take a return. The American Express program applies to purchases up to \$300, \$50 more than MasterCard and Visa. All have a \$1,000 annual limit.

A green light for green behavior

Asked whether they've incorporated green principles into their household, 45 percent of Americans in a recent CONSUMER REPORTS survey replied "very much" or "somewhat"; 55 percent replied "very little" or "not at all." Those 55 percent could be missing out: Taking many of the actions we asked about will benefit the environment and save money. Low-flow showerheads can save as much as \$265 per year on water bills, for instance; underinflated tires resulted in a loss of 1.3 mpg in highway fuel economy in a Toyota Camry we tested.

What we found. Nine out of 10 respondents took at least one action to lessen demand on their home heating and cooling systems (using fans instead of A/C, say), and 46 percent who bought a car within the past three years replaced an old one with a hybrid or other more fuel-efficient model. But many



STALLED Few commuters carpool, our survey found.

people are still putting recyclable items in the trash: 28 percent of those with old printer cartridges toss them even though some companies make it easy to recycle cartridges free. The tables show to what extent Americans have adopted green behaviors.

What we're doing right

Always wait for full load before running washing machine	73%
Recycle plastic	66
Maintain proper tire pressure	65
Always turn lights off when not in room	63
In cold weather, set thermostat to lower temperature at bedtime (past year)	57

What we could have done better

Carpooled to job or errands	10%
Recycled old laptop (past 2 years)	11
Improved home's insulation (past 3 years)	12
Installed water-saving fixtures (past 3 years)	27
Used natural gardening: mulch, less toxic pesticides (past 3 years)	31

Survey conducted by the Consumer Reports National Research Center, May 2009.