

HOW TO CHOOSE

Decide how much capacity you need. Freezers are available in four general sizes: compact (5 cubic feet); small (6 to 9 cubic feet); medium (12 to 18 cubic feet); and large (more than 18 cubic feet).

Weigh manual vs. self-defrost. Manual-defrost freezers cost less and tend to be quieter and more energy-efficient, but defrosting is a hassle.

Shop smart

Chest freezers make it harder to organize contents but let out less cold air when you open the door.

Consider local power problems. If the area where you live is prone to brownouts or power failures, consider a chest freezer, which lets out less cold air

when you open its door.

Check the controls and lights. Easy-to-reach controls make adjusting the temperature simple. An interior light makes it easier to find foods, especially if the freezer is in a dimly lit area. A power-on light on the outside of the freezer lets you see at a glance that the freezer is on—a feature we wish all models included.

Related CR Report: June 2007 (found at www.ConsumerReports.org)

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KITCHEN SINKS AND FAUCETS

What do you get when you pay top dollar for a sink or a faucet? Our tests show the answer can be less money to spend on the rest of your kitchen remodel.

Despite all the hype, sink and faucet prices have little to do with performance. We've also found that who made your

sink or faucet isn't as important as what it's made of.

WHAT'S AVAILABLE

Major brands for sinks and faucets include American Standard, Delta, Ellery, Grohe, Kohler, and Moen. You'll also find several major types:

Top-mount sinks. Also called drop-in and self-rimming sinks, these sinks sit directly on top of the counter. They're the easiest kind to install and can work with any countertop material. But they tend to attract grime around the lip and can detract from fancy countertops. Price: \$100 to \$500.

Under-mount sinks. These offer a sleek look and easy cleanup, since you can wipe counter spills and crumbs directly into them. Faucets are installed into the counter or mounted on a wall. But they tend to be pricey and work only with waterproof countertop materials, not laminate or most woods. Price: \$200 to \$1,000.

Farmhouse sinks. Also called apron-front, these work well with traditional or country kitchens, though stainless versions also work with modern designs. Most are deep, single-bowl designs with the faucet in the countertop or wall. But they're pricey and require a special cabinet. Water can drip on the cabinet, causing damage. Price: \$900 to \$3,700.

Trough sinks. These long, narrow sinks typically serve as prep or bar sinks, spanning 8 to 14 inches wide and up to 50 inches long. Longer versions can be used by more than one person at a time. But they're pricey and too narrow to fit drawers beneath. Price: \$500 to \$2,100.

Faucets. You'll find them with single or dual handles and an array of spout styles. Single-handle pull-out faucets are the fastest-growing style and combine the sprayhead and spout for added flexibility.

Typical finishes include bronze, chrome, epoxy, nickel, and stainless steel. Price: \$90 to \$300 for chrome or epoxy, \$170 to \$500 for nickel or bronze, and \$130 to \$400 for stainless steel.

FEATURES THAT COUNT

For sinks

Kitchen sinks typically come in enamel over cast-iron or steel, as well as in solid stainless steel, solid surface (made by Corian, among others), and acrylic. Stainless-steel sinks come in different thickness, or gauges. While thicker stainless sinks typically cost more, thinner sinks resisted dents, stains, and scratches and suppressed noise as well as thicker ones. Double-bowl sinks let you perform two tasks at once, though narrow bowls may not accept large pots or roasters. Single-bowl sinks save space in tight areas.

For faucets

Single-lever faucets take the least counter space. Those you can turn off without losing the temperature setting are better than models that require you to reset the temperature. A spray/stream selector provides convenient buttons on the side of the sprayhead for switching from spray to stream. Straight spouts are compact and often inexpensive, but you might need to move the faucet to fit a big pot under it. Gooseneck spouts have higher clearances, but can cause splashing with shallow sinks. A PVD finish (physical vapor deposition) is essentially a metal plating that can imitate brass, bronze, copper, nickel, and other finishes. It's especially tough and scratch-resistant. A long hose for the pullout spout gets into corners of the sink more easily, while a counterweight helps the hose and spout retract properly. Most faucets also offer a base plate for covering leftover holes in your sink or counter.

HOW TO CHOOSE

For sinks, go by material. Enamel on cast iron or steel proved toughest overall, followed by stainless steel, which gives up some stain resistance for better sound suppression. While solid-surface sinks scratch easily, you can usually sand away the damage. The same doesn't hold for acrylic, which is easily damaged by heat. Also remember that D-shaped bowls tend to offer more space than rectangular bowls. And while deeper bowls reduce splashes, they can require lots of bending.

For faucets, it's toughness and ease: Faucets with PVD finishes resisted our best attempts at scratching them. But corrosives like drain cleaner can stain them slightly. Chrome is inexpensive and reasonably durable, but can be scratched if you rub it with a heavy-duty scouring pad. We also found single-handle faucets with a top handle easier to use than side-handle versions, which also provide less clearance between the handle and backsplash. Whichever faucet you choose, be sure its head swings far enough to reach the entire sink, especially if you're using a wide or double-bowl model.

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MICROWAVE OVENS

Speed is being joined by smarts as the big brands heat up their microwave lines. Many now have sensors that automate a number of cooking chores beyond popcorn.

Sales-hungry manufacturers are also adding convection cooking and other features