

This study guide contains information that will help you prepare to judge the classes that will be included in our Cotton Boll and Consumer Judging Contest this year.

Important to note: Students competing at area contests will only be responsible for judging four items: headphones, jeans, chips/crunchy snacks, and streaming services. Teams who advance to compete at the State Cotton Boll and Consumer Judging Contest in December will judge a total of six classes: headphones, jeans, chips/crunchy snacks, streaming services, reuseable water bottles and gaming consoles.

The categories for 2025 contests are:

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This study guide was prepared for use by Georgia 4-H youth preparing for the 2025 Cotton Boll and Consumer Judging Contest. For a complete list of references, please contact Dr. Christina Garner at christina.garner25@uga.edu.

Headphones

Headphones are useful tools for enjoying music, communicating clearly, or focusing in a noisy environment. Whether you're listening while traveling or commuting to work, gaming, working, or relaxing at home, headphones can enhance the experience with immersive sound. With a wide range of designs, features, and prices, choosing the right pair can be challenging. That's why it's important to understand your needs first. Below, you will find some key things to consider when preparing to purchase a pair of headphones:

Type of Use

Different headphones suit different users. Consider when, where, and how you'll use them:

- **Casual Use:** Listening to music or podcasts at home or during commutes. Comfort and decent sound quality matter here.
- **Work & Productivity:** Great for remote work or studying—look for clear microphone quality, noise cancellation, and long battery life for calls.
- **Fitness & Outdoors:** Lightweight, secure-fitting, and sweat-resistant earbuds or headphones for workouts, running, or hiking.
- **Studio Use:** Premium sound quality, often feature a *flat frequency response*, meaning they reproduce all audio frequencies equally without boosting bass, mids, or treble. This allows for accurate, uncolored sound—ideal for critical listening, mixing, or music production. Many also offer wired connectivity for reliable and high-fidelity audio performance.
- **Gaming:** Look for immersive surround sound, comfortable over-ear designs, low latency (minimal delay between audio and action), and high-quality microphones for clear communication.

Comfort

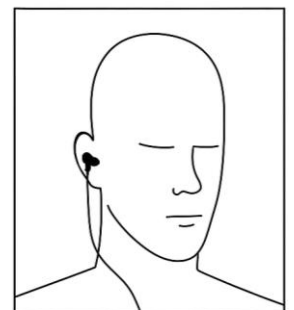
Comfort is key—especially if you'll be wearing headphones for hours at a time. For over-ear models, look for plush ear cushions and an adjustable headband. On-ear and in-ear types should feel secure but not tight. Foam or silicone tips on earbuds can improve fit and reduce ear fatigue. Try before you buy when possible, and remember, if they aren't comfortable, you probably won't wear them.

Headphone Styles

Over-ear headphones with thick padding offer comfort for long listening sessions. Earbuds should come with different tip sizes for the best fit. Poor fit = bad sound + sore ears. Don't underestimate how much these "small details" can affect your experience.

Choose the right style based on your needs:

- **In-Ear (Earbuds):** Compact, portable, and good for active lifestyles. Many offer great noise isolation and water resistance.
 - Pros: Lightweight, discreet, good for travel/workouts
 - Cons: Can be uncomfortable over long periods for some users. Poor fit may lead to falling out or getting lost.

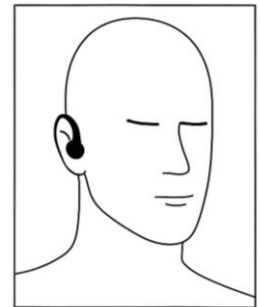


IN-EAR

- **On-Ear:** Rest on your ears. Usually more breathable than over-ear models and still fairly portable.
 - Pros: Lighter than over-ear, mid-range quality sound
 - Cons: Less noise isolation, can cause ear fatigue
- **Over-Ear:** Enclose the ears completely. Often deliver the best sound quality and comfort.
 - Pros: Excellent sound quality and noise isolation
 - Cons: Bulky and less portable because they take up more space for transportation

**ON-EAR****OVER-EAR**

- **Bone Conduction (sometimes called open-ear):** Rest on cheekbones and transmit sound via vibrations. Great for maintaining situational awareness (e.g., running outdoors).
 - Pros: Ears remain open to simple sounds
 - Cons: Weaker bass and not ideal for noisy environments

**BONE CONDUCTION**

Connectivity

- **Wired:** Ideal for studio use, and those who prioritize sound quality. Compatible with most audio gear.
 - Pros: No inactivity, no battery needed.
 - Cons: Less convenient for traveling or listening on the go, may have to deal with tangled wires.
- **Wireless (Bluetooth):** Perfect for general, active, or office use. Freedom from cables, but battery life matters. Pay attention to charging requirements in relation to the intended use.
 - Pros: Convenient for travelling and portability, increasingly good sound quality.
 - Cons: Requires charging, occasional inactivity.
- **Hi-Fi Wireless Codecs** (e.g., aptX, LDAC, AAC): Offer higher-quality Bluetooth audio, especially for high-resolution music streaming.

Noise Cancellation Options

- **Active Noise Cancellation (ANC):** Uses microphones to cancel out external noise electronically. Great for travel, work, and focus.
- **Passive Noise Isolation:** Achieved through snug ear cup or ear tip fit that blocks out noise. All headphone styles have some degree of this.
- **Transparency / Ambient Mode:** Lets in external sound so you can hear traffic, announcements, or conversations.

Price

Price matters, but you should think in terms of value—not just cost. Budget headphones may work fine for casual listening but might lack durability or sound quality. Mid-range models usually offer the best balance of performance and affordability. Premium headphones often deliver top-notch sound and comfort—but only if you'll use those features. Consider what matters most to you, and don't overpay for extras you won't use.

Other features

- **Water-resistant and Waterproof:** If you plan to wear headphones while working out or in wet conditions, look for models made with water-resistant materials. These are built to withstand sweat, rain, and splashes without needing constant wiping or worry. Check the product's IP rating—a standard that measures protection against water and dust. The second number in the IP code (ranging from 0 to 9) tells you how water-resistant the headphones are, with higher numbers offering greater protection. For workouts or rainy walks, aim for headphones with a higher IP rating to ensure durability.
- **Voice Assistants:** Voice assistant headphones make it easy to control music, check messages, or get information hands-free. Some have built-in assistants like Siri, Google Assistant, or Alexa, while others simply support them through a connected device. For a smoother, more responsive experience, choose headphones with built-in voice control—they usually offer quicker access and easier setup.
- **Microphone and Controls:** Headphones with built-in microphones and controls make it easy to take calls, use voice commands, and manage your audio without reaching for your device. Microphone placement and quality vary—gaming headsets often have boom mics for clear communication, while wired models usually feature inline mics with basic controls. Wireless headphones typically place controls on the earpiece, and some are optimized for specific operating systems. For frequent callers, look for models with features like automatic call switching and multi-mic systems that reduce background noise for clearer conversations.
- **Cases:** A quality case can extend the life of your headphones, especially if you travel frequently or toss them into bags regularly. Hard-shell cases offer the most protection against drops, pressure, and rough handling. Soft pouches or fabric sleeves are lighter and more compact but offer less impact protection. Sometimes cases even come with compartments for cables or accessories, which help keep everything organized and tangle-free.

Sources/Resources:

Best Buy Buying Guide: <https://www.bestbuy.com/site/buying-guides/headphone-buying-guide/pcmcat314600050000.c?id=pcmcat314600050000>

Jeans

A good pair of denim jeans is a great investment. They can be worn in a variety of different ways for different uses and occasions. From school or work, to an outing with friend, jeans can be perfect for many occasions. You must consider a number of factors in order to find a reliable, comfortable, and cost-effective pair. The following information will help you find the perfect pair for you. *For more detailed information about clothing, please review the Facts About Clothing manual on the Georgia 4-H Website.*

Price:

The price of jeans can depend on numerous factors including brand, quality, and style. A low-priced pair of jeans would be \$30 and lower. Mid-priced jeans can range anywhere from around \$31-\$100. A High-priced pair of jeans would be \$101+. Very high-priced jeans could be up to hundreds, or even thousands, of dollars.

Fabric:

Denim is a yarn-dyed cotton twill available in several weights, ranging from light weight as used in shirting, to heavy weight as used in construction work dungarees. Yarn-dyed means the denim was dyed before it was woven into cloth (some denim may be dyed after construction). Twill is a weave that has a diagonal to it. Denim can differ in fiber content from 100% cotton to blends of cotton, polyester, and spandex. Some notable differences are as follows:

- **100% cotton denim:** More breathable than cotton blends. Very high durability. Long lasting. Very little stretch/elasticity, jeans hold their shape. 100% cotton jeans become softer as they are worn and washed and are less likely to pill (form fuzzy balls which cling to the surface).
- **Cotton blends:** Adds stretch to jeans but decreases the durability of the jeans. Blend-jeans are usually a combination of cotton, polyester, and spandex. Jeans made of blends may remain relatively stiff after wearing and laundering. They may also pill more easily.

Color and Design:

Denim can be dyed or printed in a variety of colors or patterns, from the traditional indigo blue to any color under the sun including greens, yellows, and reds. In classic denim, the warp is dyed indigo blue and the filling is white. Denim may be napped, printed, ripped, or otherwise modified to meet fashion demands.

Distressing Modifications:

Denim has a variety of distressed finishes that can make the jeans more stylish. That being said, they may make the clothing item more casual and less versatile for professional or formal occasions.

- **Whiskering:** adding lines that look like crease lines
- **Ripped/Frayed:** small rips and tears purposely added
- **Destroyed:** excessive ragged edges and holes purposely added

Wash: Wash refers to the color and shade of the denim.

- **Light wash:** light blue colored denim
- **Medium wash:** classic “blue-jean” colored denim
- **Dark wash:** dark navy colored denim that can look almost black

- **Stonewashed/Acidwashed:** To give lighter, speckled, or aged looks.

Rise: Rise refers to where the jeans fall on your hips. Sometimes men's jeans do not specify varying styles of rises. Rise is most commonly specified for women's jeans.

- **Low rise:** The waist of the jeans falls low or below the hips; Typically 8cm lower than the navel
- **Mid-rise:** The waist of the jeans falls between the hips and belly button; Typically 7-3cm lower than the navel
- **High rise:** The waist of the jeans sits high on, or above, the waist of the wearer; Typically on or above the navel

Legs: There are many different leg styles now available. These are some of the most common you may find:

- **Flare:** rear and thigh fit is usually slim for women, and the bottom leg opening 21 to 27 inches, flaring out wide from just below the knee.
- **Boot cut:** The leg bottom opening typically ranges from 18 to 20 inches. The fit through the rear and leg may be slim or relaxed
- **Straight:** Straight cut jeans are looser than skinny jeans, but not as wide as boot cut. Many people think of straight cut as the original or classic jean.
- **Boyfriend:** Some straight cut jeans for women are referred to as boyfriend or boy cut. Boyfriend cut jeans are much more relaxed than a skinny jean. They are known for a comfortable and loose fit.
- **Skinny:** Skinny jeans have a slim fit all the way to the ankle, hugging the thighs and calves. There's no tapering or flare in the leg area.
- **Wide Leg:** Wide-leg jeans are loose from the hips down, with a large, even leg opening. They offer a relaxed, flowy fit and are often seen as stylish and comfortable, making them great for all-day wear.

Sizing:

Many designer brands use UK and European sizing, which can be converted to US sizes with a sizing chart. In some cases, you can even find jeans based on the standard XS-XXL sizing system. Men's sizing is most often done by waist size and inseam length (length of the leg), for example, 33-34, which means a 33-inch waist and a 34-inch inseam. Women's sizing is often based only on waist size, such as size 8 or 28-inch waist, with petite, average, and tall options to indicate length. Sizing charts for each brand or store can vary, so knowing your measurements helps—especially when shopping online. Sizing charts for each brand or store can vary, so knowing your measurements helps, especially when shopping online.

Seams:

Flat fell seams have two rows of stitching and are enclosed on both the outside and inside of the jeans. Seams of this type leave no open seam allowances to unravel during wear and laundering. Make certain the seams are neatly constructed and firmly stitched. Where seams are not flat fell, they should be serged (overcast with thread) to cover the raw edge and reduce unraveling. Seams that join at the crotch and in the back should meet accurately for smooth contour, comfort, and durability of the garment.

Waistband:

A waistband made of two or more layers of fabric will reduce stretching in the waist area. If the jeans have no waistband, look for interfacing (an extra layer of firm fabric sewn into the waist

seam for stability). Some jeans may have a stretch waistband for comfort rather than a zipper and/or button. Most jeans also feature **belt loops**, which are fabric loops sewn into the waistband to hold a belt in place and provide additional fit adjustment and style.

Reinforcements:

Look for rivets or bar tacks (stitches used to reinforce) or at places of stress like corners of pockets, belt loops and the bottom of the zipper. These help reduce stress on seams and increase durability.

Zippers:

Metal zippers are more durable than plastic or nylon. Some pants also have button flies (multiple buttons instead of a zipper).

Other factors to consider:

- Dark color dye from jeans may rub off onto other fabrics, especially when they're new.
- Tumble dry and remove jeans from the dryer promptly. Drying in an overly hot dryer may cause shrinkage even on jeans which should not shrink more than one percent. Air dry to reduce shrinkage if that is a concern.
- All-cotton jeans in dark colors and heavy-weight fabrics do not show wrinkles easily. If you do iron jeans, use a steam iron.

Sources/Resources:

<https://georgia4h.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/FactsAboutClothing.pdf>

Chips/Crunchy Snacks

Crunchy snacks like chips, crackers, cheese puffs, pretzels, and veggie sticks are everywhere—from lunchboxes to vending machines to party platters. While they're popular for their flavor and convenience, it's important to look beyond the crunch to see what's really inside. Not all snacks are created equal—some bring more than just salt and satisfaction.

Sodium & Seasonings

Chips are often flavored with salt and other seasonings to boost flavor—but that tasty burst can come with a health cost. Sodium is an essential nutrient, but too much can increase your risk for high blood pressure. While a single serving of chips may not appear to be high in sodium, many people eat more than one serving at a time and the sodium adds up with multiple servings. Always check the label—and look for options labeled low-sodium or lightly salted if you're snacking often. A lot sodium food is one with 140mg or less per serving.

Added Sugars and Sweet Coatings

Although we usually think of chips as salty, some crunchy snacks (like flavored rice cakes, kettle corn chips, or cinnamon crisps) come with added sugars. Look at the ingredients for sweeteners like brown rice syrup, cane sugar, honey, or corn syrup. Even natural sugars offer calories with very little nutrition.

Calories and Carbs

Most chips are calorie-dense and high in refined carbohydrates. One serving (about 1 oz or a small handful) usually contains 120–160 calories and 15–20 grams of carbs. That adds up quickly if you're eating straight from a bag with multiple servings. Carbohydrates provide energy, but whole grain or veggie-based chips often offer more nutrients and fiber than standard potato or corn chips.

Whole Grains and Fiber

Many popular chips are made from refined grains (like white corn or potato starch) that have been stripped of their fiber and the nutrients that go along with it. Use the nutrition facts label to look for snacks made with whole grains like quinoa, brown rice, or whole corn. Chips made with beans, lentils, or chickpeas can also pack more fiber and protein, helping you feel full longer and supporting digestion.

Fats:

Chips are typically fried in oil, which adds calories and unhealthy fats—especially saturated or trans fats. Instead, opt for baked, air-popped, or oven-roasted options. Ingredients like sunflower, avocado, or olive oil offer heart-healthy fats. Watch out for greasy fingers—that's often a sign of excess fat in your snack!

Protein:

Most chips aren't high in protein unless they're made from beans or seeds. Snacks like roasted chickpeas, cheese crisps, or lentil chips can provide 4–7 grams of protein per serving, which can help keep you satisfied between meals. Pairing chips with a high-protein dip like hummus, nut butter, or Greek yogurt is another smart move to build a balanced snack with carbohydrate, protein, and fat.

Vitamins and Minerals

Chips and crunchy snacks don't usually offer many vitamins or minerals unless they're fortified or made from naturally nutrient rich ingredients like sweet potatoes or spinach. While the label may show photos of fresh vegetables, many veggie chips are mostly made from ingredients like potato starch or refined grains. Real veggie chips should list actual vegetables (like kale, beets, or carrots) at the top of the ingredients list—not just “vegetable powder.” Check the nutrition label for key nutrients like:

- **Iron**
- **Calcium**
- **Potassium**
- **Vitamin D**

Compare your options based on what's listed and try to choose snacks that offer a variety of nutrients—not just empty calories.

Reading the Label

The Nutrition Facts Label is your best tool to compare chip options.

Use it to evaluate:

- Serving size (Many packages contain multiple servings)
- Servings per container
- Calories per serving
- Total fat and saturated fat
- Sodium content
- Fiber and protein levels
- Added sugars
- Vitamins

Overall, it is best to make your decision based on the MyPlate food groups and nutrients that are listed on all choices (like calories, saturated fat, protein, fiber, sodium, and added sugars).

The food label, or the nutrition facts panel, tells you what your food is made of. This can help you make informed decisions about how to eat a balanced diet.

Nutrition Facts	
8 servings per container	
Serving size	2/3 cup (55g)
Amount per serving	
Calories	230
	% Daily Value*
Total Fat 8g	10%
Saturated Fat 1g	5%
Trans Fat 0g	
Cholesterol 0mg	0%
Sodium 160mg	7%
Total Carbohydrate 37g	13%
Dietary Fiber 4g	14%
Total Sugars 12g	
Includes 10g Added Sugars	20%
Protein 3g	
Vitamin D 2mcg	10%
Calcium 260mg	20%
Iron 8mg	45%
Potassium 235mg	6%

* The % Daily Value (DV) tells you how much a nutrient in a serving of food contributes to a daily diet. 2,000 calories a day is used for general nutrition advice.

Servings per container tells you how many servings are in the whole package

Serving size tells you how much of this food people normally eat. It is the basis of the nutrient and calorie amounts.

This column tells you what nutrients are in this food and how much.

The “Calories” line tells you how much energy (or Calories) you get from eating one serving of this food. (The amount in one serving is listed above.)

This column shows you what percent of your daily needs of each nutrient this food will fill. It is based on a 2000 Calorie diet.

The point of the food label is to let you know what is in your food and to list the ingredients it is made from. The Daily Values % are a guide for people to follow to build a healthy diet. You want to get 100% of your Daily Value in nutrients like vitamins, minerals, and fiber. You also want to stay under 100% in other nutrients like sodium, saturated fat, trans fats, and cholesterol.

5% is low – aim low for sodium, saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol

20% is high – aim high in vitamins, minerals and fiber.

The Daily Value % are based on a 2000 calorie diet. Not everyone needs exactly 2000 calories in a day. Some people need more and some people need less. That doesn't mean the Daily Value % can't be useful to you. They are still a good guide to know what foods are good sources of nutrients, and which foods to enjoy in smaller amounts. You can also use the %DV to compare foods.

Additional Information:

Calories: Consider the calories in the portion size you plan to eat. While calories are not the only piece of nutrition information you should consider when choosing a meal, they can help guide you in making the most nutritious choice.

Carbohydrates: Under normal, healthy conditions, carbohydrates are our bodies' primary source of energy. It's important to get carbohydrates from your food, but some sources of carbohydrates (like whole grains, low fat dairy or dairy alternatives, vegetables, and fruits) provide more nutrients than others. Look on the nutrition label to see how much total carbohydrate, sugar, and fiber a snack contains.

- **Fiber:** Carbohydrates from fiber are beneficial to your health by causing you to feel full for longer and helping with digestion. Eating enough fiber can also reduce your risk for heart disease and some cancers. Look for meals and snacks with more fiber. Fiber is found in foods of plant origin, including grains, fruits, vegetables, nuts, and seeds.
- **Sugars:** Sugar is a carbohydrate that is present in naturally sweet foods, like fruits and dairy products, but can be added to foods as well to make them taste sweeter. Natural sugar found in foods like fresh fruit and low-fat dairy are a good choice because they provide energy from the natural sugar and bring vitamins, minerals, water, and/or fiber along with it. However, sugar that is added to a food to sweeten it provides energy with few or no nutrients and no fiber. This is called "added sugar." Even healthier foods can have sugar added to them, like sweetened sauces, yogurts, breakfast cereals, or flavored milk.
 - On the nutrition facts label, sugars are listed under carbohydrates. Sugars include all naturally occurring as well as added sugars. You will also see "added sugar" listed underneath sugar. You can also find out if a product has added sugar by looking at the ingredient list for sugar or other names such as dextrose, fructose, brown rice syrup, cane syrup, corn syrup, and cane juice. Although some of these might sound healthier or more natural, like honey or brown rice syrup, they are all basically the same to your body—sources of added sugar that we want to limit in the foods we eat.
 - **Low and no calorie sweeteners:** There are several low and no calorie sweeteners that can be used to sweeten foods with fewer calories than sugar. Some common examples are aspartame, saccharin, sucralose, stevia, and acesulfame potassium. While research tells us these are generally safe, we do not know much about the long-term health consequences for children and teens. So, when considering foods you might eat often, it's probably best to choose meals without low and no calorie sweeteners. These low and no calorie sweeteners add a highly sweet taste to foods and beverages, but do not contribute essential nutrients to fuel our bodies.

Fat: Our bodies need fat to provide energy and absorb nutrients. Some types of fat are better for our health than others. Monosaturated fats and polyunsaturated fats are beneficial for our heart and brain health. Nuts and seeds (like almonds, peanuts, pecans, and hazelnuts) are good sources of unsaturated, healthy fats. So are oils from plant ingredients, like avocado, olive, canola, sunflower, corn, soybean, and flaxseed oils.

Saturated and trans fat are bad for your heart health. The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) recommends that you limit saturated fat to less than 10% of daily calories and avoid trans fat.

Protein: Protein does so many things in your body, but it is best known for helping you build muscle. Protein is also important for hormone production, maintaining a healthy immune system, and building/repairing all the cells in the body. At mealtimes, protein is satisfying and helps you feel full for longer. It is important to get protein in each of your meals because it keeps you full and helps ensure you get enough protein throughout the day. In general, choose meals with more protein. Protein can be found in foods of animal origin, like meats, poultry, seafood, dairy, and eggs. It is also found in plant foods including nuts, seeds, beans, legumes, and soy foods. Other plant foods, like grains, contain small amounts of protein.

Vitamins and Minerals: Vitamins and minerals are listed on nutrition labels as a percent Daily Value (“percent daily value,” or %DV). The goal is to get 100% of the Daily Value of each vitamin and mineral from foods each day. The nutrition facts label will tell you how much iron, calcium, potassium, and vitamin D are in one serving of the food. These four nutrients are listed because most Americans do not consume enough of them.

Sodium: Our bodies need sodium (salt) to function, but getting too much salt can lead to high blood pressure and is harmful to your long-term health. The 2020 Dietary Guidelines for Americans and MyPlate recommend that you consume no more than 2,300 milligrams (mg) of sodium per day. Some people may benefit from consuming even less sodium. Be sure to check the nutrition facts label and choose meals that are lower in sodium.

Additional Information: MyPlate Food Groups

One place to start is to look at your MyPlate food groups. The best meals and snacks will have ingredients from multiple food groups. This provides a wider range of vitamins and minerals while helping to keep you full and satisfied for longer.

- **Grains:** Provide carbohydrates (which give us energy), fiber, B vitamins, and the essential mineral iron. Whole grains—such as oats, popcorn, brown rice, and whole wheat—are healthier choices than refined grains like enriched white flour, cornmeal, and white rice, because they contain more fiber, vitamins, and minerals. Many chips and crunchy snacks are made from refined grains, but some options use whole grains like whole wheat pita chips or popcorn.
- **Fruits:** Provide fiber, vitamins, minerals, and naturally occurring sugars. Since fruits tend to have a lot of water content, they’re hydrating too. Choose whole fruits and 100% fruit juice rather than processed snacks like fruit-flavored chips or fruit snacks, which may be lower in fiber and contain added sugars. For a crunchy fruit-based snack, consider dried fruit with no added sugar, freeze-dried fruit, or apple chips.
- **Vegetables:** Provide fiber, vitamins A and C, potassium, and other important nutrients. Veggie-based chips—such as kale chips, beet chips, or sweet potato chips—can contribute to your vegetable intake if they are minimally processed and not overly salted or fried. Raw vegetables like carrot sticks, celery, or bell pepper strips also offer crunch without the added fat and salt.

- **Protein:** Helps build and repair muscles and tissues and provides essential nutrients like iron, zinc, and B vitamins. Protein-rich crunchy snacks include roasted chickpeas, edamame, nuts, seeds, or trail mix with a mix of nuts and whole grain cereal. Just watch portion sizes, as some protein snacks can be high in calories.
- **Dairy:** Provides calcium, vitamin D, and protein, which are important for strong bones and teeth. While dairy isn't commonly found in chips, crunchy snacks like cheese crisps or pairings like whole grain crackers with a slice of cheese can incorporate dairy. Yogurt dips for veggie chips or vegetables are another way to add dairy to a snack.

Sources/Resources

MyPlate. United States Department of Agriculture.

<https://www.myplate.gov/eat-healthy/what-is-myplate>

How to Understand and Use the Nutrition Facts Label. Food and Drug Administration.

<https://www.fda.gov/food/new-nutrition-facts-label/how-understand-and-use-nutrition-facts-label>

Streaming Services

With the rise of on-demand entertainment, streaming services have become a staple in homes across the country. Originally limited to just a few platforms, the industry has exploded with options catering to every taste—from binge-worthy original series to live sports, movies, and kid-friendly content. Whether you're a casual viewer or a dedicated TV junkie, there are dozens of streaming services now available to meet your needs.

What is a streaming service subscription?

A streaming subscription is a digital entertainment service that allows you to watch TV shows, movies, documentaries, or live broadcasts through an internet connection. Content is delivered directly to your device, eliminating the need for traditional cable or satellite packages. Most services operate on a monthly or annual subscription model, and some even offer free tiers with ads.

When deciding on a streaming platform, it's important to consider several factors to ensure you're getting the right fit for your household and viewing habits. Here are a few questions you should ask about each consideration:

- **Ease of Sign-Up:** Is the enrollment process fast and simple? Does the platform's website or app provide clear navigation and intuitive features for account setup, browsing, and streaming? A good platform has a fast and simple enrollment process with easy navigation for account setup, browsing, and streaming.
- **Subscription Requirements:** Are there multiple pricing levels? Does the platform require a minimum subscription period? Is there a free trial so you can test the service before committing? Most platforms offer multiple pricing levels, free trials, and flexible options without long-term commitments.
- **Content Library:** What kind of programming does it offer? Are you looking for blockbuster movies, popular TV shows, original content, or live sports? Make sure the service aligns with your viewing interests. Many customers choose to cancel cable and use streaming services to save money, but if you have to have several different subscriptions to get all of your preferred content, you may not be saving money. Streaming services vary in what they offer—some focus on blockbuster movies, others on popular TV shows, original series, or live sports. It's important to choose one that fits your viewing preferences and budget.
- **Delivery Features:** Can you stream on multiple devices at once? Are there download options for offline viewing if you will be using it without an internet connection? Is the video quality adjustable for homes with slower internet speeds? Many services allow streaming on multiple devices, offer downloads for offline viewing, and provide adjustable video quality for slower internet connections.
- **Flexibility:** Can you cancel or pause your subscription anytime without penalties? Are there options to bundle with other platforms to save money? The best platforms let you cancel or pause your subscription at any time and may include bundling options to save money.
- **Parental Controls and Accessibility:** Does the platform offer features like content restrictions, subtitles, or audio descriptions for accessibility? Some platforms include features like content filters, subtitles, and audio descriptions to support families and viewers with different needs.
- **Customer Support:** Is help available through live chat, phone, or a comprehensive FAQ section? Are there clear instructions for troubleshooting or managing your account when

you have technical issues? Quality services provide helpful support through live chat, phone, or FAQs, along with clear instructions for account management and troubleshooting.

Key Considerations

- **User Reviews and Ratings:** Check app store reviews or trusted tech sites for insights on content quality, user experience, and reliability.
- **Exclusive Content & Partnerships:** Some platforms offer exclusive partnerships with major studios or production houses. These deals can give you access to highly anticipated movies and shows unavailable elsewhere.
- **Pricing and Fees:** Be sure to compare base plans, ad-free options, and premium tiers. Some platforms also charge extra for add-ons or bundled channels. Consider promotions, student discounts, or annual plans that could save money over time.
- **User Interface and Experience:** A good streaming service should be easy to navigate with personalized recommendations, watch history, individual profiles and search functions that help you find what you want quickly.
- **Device Compatibility and Mobile Payments:** Most platforms work on smart TVs, laptops, tablets, and mobile devices. Convenient payment systems like PayPal, Apple Pay, or Google Pay can make signing up and renewing your subscription fast and easy.

With a little research and reflection on your viewing habits and budget, you can find the ideal streaming service (or combination of services) to meet your entertainment needs.

Sources/Resources

<https://www.consumerreports.org/electronics-computers/streaming-media/guide-to-streaming-video-services-a4517732799/>

Reusable Bottles/Cups

Reusable drinkware is more than just a trend—it's a sustainable, cost-effective way to stay hydrated (or caffeinated) on the go. Whether you're commuting, working at a desk, hitting the gym, or heading outdoors, the right cup or bottle can make a big difference in convenience, comfort, and environmental impact. With so many sizes, materials, lids, and features to choose from, selecting the best one depends on your lifestyle and needs.

Type of Use

Different bottles and cups work better in different settings. Consider how and where you'll use yours most:

- **Everyday Use:** Great for staying hydrated at work, school, or home. Look for moderate-capacity bottles (16–24 oz), spill-proof lids, and easy portability.
- **Fitness & Outdoors:** Go for lightweight, durable bottles with fast-flow lids or straws for quick sips during workouts, hikes, or sports.
- **Travel & Commuting:** Insulated travel mugs or bottles that fit in cupholders are essential for keeping coffee hot or water cold during your commute.
- **Kids & School:** Choose smaller, easy-to-hold bottles with simple spouts or flip lids for kids. Durable and leak-proof designs are a must.
- **Camping & All-Day Adventures:** Opt for high-capacity bottles (32 oz or more), with insulation and rugged build for longer hydration needs.

Comfort & Ease of Use

A bottle or cup should be comfortable to hold and easy to drink from. Pay attention to shape, grip, and lid mechanism. Consider:

- Grip or handle for carrying
- One-handed open/close operation
- Mouth opening (wide mouth vs. straw vs. spout)
- Weight (especially when filled)

If your bottle is awkward to carry or clean, you'll end up leaving it at home.

Bottle Styles & Materials

Reusable drinkware comes in many shapes, materials, and functionalities. Each has its pros and cons:

- **Stainless Steel**
 - *Pros:* Durable, often insulated, retains temperature
 - *Cons:* Heavier, can dent if dropped
- **Plastic (BPA-Free)**
 - *Pros:* Lightweight, affordable, many color options
 - *Cons:* Less insulation, may retain odors over time, crack when dropped or have condensation build up
- **Glass**
 - *Pros:* No plastic taste, eco-friendly, often dishwasher-safe
 - *Cons:* Heavier, fragile without a protective sleeve
- **Silicone/Collapsible**
 - *Pros:* Ultra-portable, great for travel
 - *Cons:* Limited insulation, can feel flimsy

Lid Types

- **Screw Top:** Reliable seal, good for all liquids and outdoor settings
- **Flip Top:** Quick access, great for sipping or pouring
- **Straw Lid:** Easy drinking during activities with little effort (also consider the type of straw such as metal, plastic, silicone, etc.)
- **Push-Button:** Ideal for one-handed use, often seen on travel mugs
- **Twist or Chug Lid:** Popular for sports bottles and fast hydration

Insulation

- **Non-Insulated:** Fine for short-term use or room-temp liquids
- **Double-Wall Insulated:** Maintains hot/cold temps for hours—great for coffee or all-day hydration and eliminates condensation
- **Vacuum Insulated:** Premium thermal retention, perfect for extreme temps or long durations

Portability & Fit

- Does it fit in your car's cup holder?
- Does it slide into your backpack's side pocket?
- Does it have a handle or loop for easy carrying?
- Some bottles even have built-in filters or infusers—great for outdoor use or flavor lovers.

Price & Value

Reusable bottles and cups range from \$10 to \$50+. Price depends on size, brand, insulation, material, and features.

- **Budget-Friendly:** Great for casual users or kids. Expect basic plastic or single-wall metal. That will get the job done but may not have an extended life.
- **Mid-Range:** Typically offers great insulation, strong build, and better lid designs. Best balance of price and function.
- **Premium:** Brands like Hydro Flask, YETI, or Stanley deliver top-tier temperature control and durability—but only worth it if you'll actually use those features daily because of the premium price.

Choosing the right reusable bottle or cup means matching it to your lifestyle. Think about where you'll use it, what you'll drink, and how often you'll carry it. A good one can save you money, reduce waste, and keep your drinks just the way you like them.

Sources/Resources:

<https://www.consumerreports.org/home-garden/water-bottles/best-water-bottles-from-our-tests-a2589924778/>

Gaming Consoles

Game consoles have evolved far beyond simple entertainment systems—they're now powerful hubs for gaming, streaming, social interaction, and even fitness. Whether you're a competitive gamer, a casual player, or shopping for your family, the right console can offer hours of enjoyment. Each console offers different options in power, features, and game libraries, so choosing the right system depends on your interests, lifestyle, and budget.

It's also helpful to understand the types of games available. AAA (Triple-A) games are high-budget titles produced by major game studios, known for their advanced graphics, immersive worlds, and wide marketing reach. These games often define a console's capabilities. On the other hand, indie games—created by smaller, independent developers—often focus on creativity, unique storytelling, or experimental gameplay. While they may have simpler graphics, many indie titles offer deeply engaging experiences and have become increasingly popular across all platforms.

Type of Use

Your gaming habits will heavily influence your choice of console. Think about who will be playing and how:

- **Casual Play:** Ideal for those who enjoy occasional games, family-friendly titles, or retro gaming. Look for systems with simple controls, built-in games, or access to indie libraries.
- **Hardcore Gaming:** If performance matters (such as fast frame rates, 4K graphics, and online multiplayer games) look for high-end consoles with strong processors and exclusive AAA titles. AAA (Triple-A) games are high-budget, high-quality video games produced by major studios. These titles often feature cutting-edge graphics, expansive storylines, and advanced gameplay mechanics, offering a premium gaming experience.
- **Family-Friendly:** Prioritizes easy setup, multiple controller support, and a wide range of age-appropriate games. Parental controls are a bonus.
- **On-the-Go Gaming:** Portability matters. Handheld or hybrid consoles like the Nintendo Switch allow you to game from the couch or on the road.
- **Streaming & Media:** Many consoles double as home entertainment systems. If you want to stream Netflix, Disney+, or YouTube, choose one with strong media integration.

Comfort

Comfort matters for longer gaming sessions, especially with controller design and interface. Some gamers prefer specific controller layouts or want to use headsets, steering wheels, or streaming cameras. Check what's supported for your chosen console. Newer systems often allow Bluetooth or USB accessories, while older ones might be more limited. No matter what your gaming style is, remember to limit your screentime and include physical activity in your daily routine. While there are many positive social aspects to gaming, too much screentime or playtime can have negative health outcomes!

Console Styles & Brands

Each brand and model offers distinct features, exclusives, and ecosystems. There are many different types of each console such as Xbox Series X, PlayStation 5, etc. Here are the most common types: *Please note: not all pros/cons are listed for each console. These are intended to be examples but not an all inclusive list.*

- **PlayStation (Sony)**
 - *Pros:* Popular AAA exclusives, strong graphics, robust online store
 - *Cons:* No built in backward compatibility for older-gen games (PS3 and earlier)
- **Xbox (Microsoft)**
 - *Pros:* Option for Game Pass subscription, backward compatibility, cloud gaming, great for online multiplayer
 - *Cons:* Fewer exclusive games than PlayStation
- **Nintendo Switch (Nintendo)**
 - *Pros:* Portability, family-friendly games, local co-op, motion controls
 - *Cons:* Lower graphical performance compared to Xbox/PlayStation
- **PC-Based Consoles / Steam Deck**
 - *Pros:* Access to PC game library, customizable hardware, handheld or docked options
 - *Cons:* Expensive, can be complex for beginners

Performance & Graphics

Modern consoles support features like 4K, HDR, and 120fps gameplay. Key considerations may be:

- **Resolution:** 1080p is fine for casual play, but 4K is ideal for high-end gaming and modern TVs
- **Frame Rate:** Higher FPS (frames per second) = smoother gameplay
- **Storage:** Look for consoles with at least 500GB to 1TB. Games are large, and storage fills quickly.
- **Load Times:** Solid State Drive (SSD) - equipped consoles load games and levels much faster than older hard drives

Features & Subscriptions

Most consoles offer online services that unlock multiplayer, cloud saves, free games, and digital discounts:

- **Performance & Graphics:** Look for 4K support, high frame rates, and fast load times (especially in the PS5 and Xbox Series X).
- **Game Library:** Some consoles offer exclusive titles (like God of War on PlayStation or Halo on Xbox). Nintendo is home to kid-friendly classics.
- **Backward Compatibility:** Want to play older games? Some consoles offer strong support for previous-gen titles.
- **Online Services:** Xbox Live, PlayStation Plus, and Nintendo Switch Online offer access to online multiplayer and free monthly games.
- **Storage:** Game files are large—look for systems with at least 500GB of space or expandable options (like external SSDs)

- **Internet Connectivity:** Many consoles require an internet connection to install games (even game disks) and process updates. Make sure you choose a console that fits your internet connection.

Price & Value

Game consoles vary widely in price—ranging from \$200 handhelds to \$500+ powerhouse systems. Consider total value:

- **Budget-Friendly:** Nintendo Switch Lite or previous-generation consoles offer plenty of fun without breaking the bank
- **Mid-Range:** Digital-only versions of modern consoles (e.g., Xbox Series S, PS5 Digital) offer next-gen features at a lower cost but require internet connection
- **Premium:** High-end models like the PS5 and Xbox Series X offer cutting-edge performance and futureproofing—but at a higher price

Tip: Factor in the cost of extras like additional controllers, online subscriptions, and game libraries when budgeting.

Choosing a game console is a balance of performance, portability, and purpose. Think about how you'll use it, who it's for, and what games matter most to you. Whether you're looking for a competitive edge, family fun, or a portable option, the right console can transform your playtime—and your living room.

Sources/Resources: