



Countertop Ratings

Materials	Price/sq. ft.	Overall Score	Test Results				
			Resists				
			Stains	Heat	Cutting	Abrasion	Impact
Quartz (engineered stone)	\$40-\$100	84					
Granite	40-100	81					
Recycled glass (penetrating sealer)	60-120	69					
Laminate	10-40	68					
Tile (ceramic and porcelain)	5-30	67					
Solid surfacing	35-100	53					
Soapstone (mineral oil finish)	50-100	46					
Concrete (penetrating sealer)	60-120	40					
Concrete (topical sealer)	60-120	39					
Stainless steel	50-150	39					
Butcher block (varnished)	40-100	37					
Paper composite	30-100	34					
Limestone	50-100	27					
Butcher block (oil finish)	40-100	24					
Marble	50-150	14					
Bamboo (beeswax/mineral oil finish)	40-100	10					

Ratings



- 1) Unlike other brands, Cosentino's Ecoline of recycled-glass counters developed a thin crack during our heat tests and was excluded from the Ratings.
- 2) Only Richlite's product was tested. Results for other brands might vary.

<http://www.consumerreports.org/cro/home-garden/home>

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Getting started - Countertop guide

Replacing a kitchen or bathroom countertop can be a relatively inexpensive part of a total remodeling job, costing as little as \$550 for 55 square feet (about 18 linear feet) of laminate counter. Then again, you can spend 10 times that on costlier materials. Whichever one you choose, buy enough the first time out. Delivery is expensive, color and veining vary from sample to sample, and materials bought separately may not match.

Traditionally, the more exotic countertop materials have been used in the kitchen. But more and more materials such as concrete, granite, limestone, marble--and yes, even stainless steel--are migrating to the bathroom. Each material offers distinct advantages and disadvantages. We tested 11 popular types to see how well they resisted stains, heat damage, cuts, abrasion, and impact. Tiny samples make it hard to visualize how the finished counter will look. Check manufacturers' Web sites for brochures, smart phone apps and iPad apps that can help you to match your counter to your cabinets, and look for online guides that let you try various materials and colors in virtual settings. If you're set on stone, go to a stone yard. You'll find significant variations not only from one slab to another, but even within the same slab. When you find a slab you like, put a deposit on it.

Start with the sink

A waterproof material such as concrete, solid surfacing, stainless steel, stone, or quartz is essential if the sink is undermounted--in other words, if it's raised into place from below the counter, rather than lowered from above so that its edges overlap the countertop. Incidentally, each of these materials except quartz and stone can be matched to the sink.

Tricks of the trade

You can shave the cost by mixing materials. Complement a large, modestly priced run of

laminate on a kitchen island with a small but exquisite piece of stone. Or use small, less expensive remnants rather than a single expensive slab on a small bathroom counter. Although color and pattern will vary, a visit to the stone yard may turn up pieces that work together. You can also save by using 3/4-inch-thick stone rather than the typical 1 1/4 inch. Although beveled and bull-nosed edges add style, they may add \$10 to \$50 per linear foot. Rounded edges are safer than squared edges, and they may not cost extra.

Types of countertops

We found significant strengths and weaknesses among materials, but few differences among brands. Here are the types of countertops to consider.

QUARTZ: Also known as engineered stone, quartz is a blend of stone chips, resins, and pigments. It's an ideal material for high-traffic applications. It comes in many vibrant colors and styles that mimic granite and marble.
 Pros: It survived a gauntlet of spills, hot pots, knives, and more with top scores, and it doesn't have to be sealed for stain protection. Because it's waterproof, it's a sound choice to be paired with undermounted sinks.
 Cons: Quartz won't resist impacts as well as granite, and its edges can chip. Some patterns can appear unnaturally uniform, although manufacturers are trying for a more random look closer to natural stone.



GRANITE: It's still what you'll see in magazines and real-estate ads, but fancy faux materials are giving granite serious competition. Granite is a good choice for areas that get a lot of use. It comes in many colors and variations and provides a natural stone look.



Pros: Like quartz, it survived our gauntlet of spills, hot pots, knives, and more with top scores.
Cons: Unlike quartz, it needs periodic sealing for stain protection. Color and grain may differ from store samples.

TILE: Ceramic tile comes in an almost limitless selection of colors and patterns. It mixes nicely with other materials, and it works well on a backsplash or island top.



Pros: Tile is inexpensive and relatively easy to install. It offers good heat resistance, so it's a good choice around stoves. Buying a few extra tiles will allow you to repair localized damage easily, one tile at a time.
Cons: Poor impact resistance is a sore point. The grout is likely to stain even when it's sealed. Darker grout can help.

LAMINATE: This material generally consists of layers of paper or fabric impregnated with resin over composition wood. Laminates are inexpensive and relatively easy to install. Use them in areas of heavy use but



minimal abuse. This material is available in hundreds of fun patterns (try boomerang), interesting colors (hollyberry, anyone?), and detailed edges. Laminates typically show seams on the front edge and between the backsplash and counter. Post-forming is a process that melds adjoining sections, making them look continuous, but it offers fewer color choices.

Pros: Laminates excelled at resisting stains, impact, and heat; they also withstood our abrasive pads nicely. They're easy to clean and relatively easy to install. Though laminates are no longer trendy, they still appeal to remodelers on a tight budget.

Cons: Most versions have a colored top layer over a dark core, which shows at the edges. Water can seep through seams or between the countertop and backsplash, weakening the material beneath or causing lifting. Laminate is easily scratched and nicked and can't be repaired. Textured finishes are better than flat finishes at hiding imperfections.

SOLID SURFACE:

Made of polyester or acrylic resins combined with mineral fillers, this material imitates concrete, marble, and other types of stone, as well as quartz (essentially an imitation of an



imitation). Solid surfacing comes in various thicknesses and can be joined almost invisibly into one apparently seamless expanse. It can also be sculpted to integrate the sink and backsplash, and routed to accept contrasting inlays.

Pros: Resistance to heat and impact are pluses, and scratches and small nicks can be buffed out and repaired. Because the surfacing is waterproof, it's a sound choice for an undermounted sink.
Cons: Solid surfacing scratches easily, and prolonged heat can cause discoloration. Cost can rival that of quartz and granite, which are much tougher and more authentic looking.

PAPER COMPOSITE: We tested a version from Richlite, which says that its paper-and-resin countertops are green, in part because the paper comes from renewable resources.

Pros: The product did well at resisting stains and heat.

Cons: It was only fair when it came to cuts and abrasions. What's more, it doesn't use recycled paper, and its resin is petroleum-based and nonrenewable.

CONCRETE:

Concrete countertops can provide a unique look. This exclusive material is typically custom-formed by local fabricators, so quality may vary.

Pros: Concrete can be tinted and textured and can include stone chips.

Cons: It chips and scratches easily and can develop hairline cracks. Topical sealers can protect against stains but not heat; penetrating sealers can handle heat, but not stains.



STAINLESS STEEL:

It lets you integrate countertops with stainless appliances for a sleek, professional kitchen look. It can be welded, ground, and buffed away to get rid of seams.

Pros: Resistance to heat and stains is a plus. Because stainless steel is waterproof, it's a sound choice for an undermounted sink.

Cons: Steel dents and scratches easily and shows fingerprints. (If fingerprints are an issue, consider faux stainless laminate instead.) Drain cleaners and hard-water-deposit removers can discolor steel.



LIMESTONE:

Limestone provides a stone look without heavy veining. It's attractive but impractical. Use it only in low-traffic areas.

Pros: Limestone resists heat well.

Cons: Scratches and dings from our dropped 5-pound weight marred the surface of this soft, porous stone. And even a high-quality sealer didn't protect against stains. Twelve of the 19 substances we applied left permanent marks after they were left on the surface for just 24 hours.



BUTCHER BLOCK:

These hardwood countertops provide a country kitchen look. Maple is most common, but you'll also find red oak and teak.

Pros: This material is useful for food preparation such as chopping and slicing. It's relatively easy to install and repair.

Cons: Damage from heat, cuts, scrapes, and impacts make for high maintenance. Butcher block countertops must be treated regularly with mineral oil or beeswax. Varnished butcher block was extremely stain-resistant, but terrible at everything else. Butcher block with an oil finish was better at resisting heat, but stains spread and were impossible to remove. Fluctuations in humidity affect wood, making butcher block a poor choice for over a dishwasher or around a sink.



MARBLE: This material provides a traditional look. Consider it for areas with medium traffic. Pros: Small nicks and scratches can be polished out. Cons: Marble chips and scratches easily.



And you'll need to seal marble periodically to protect it from staining. Most stains that marred unsealed marble wiped away with water on sealed samples. But hard-water-deposit removers left a permanent mark, even on sealed stone.

RECYCLED

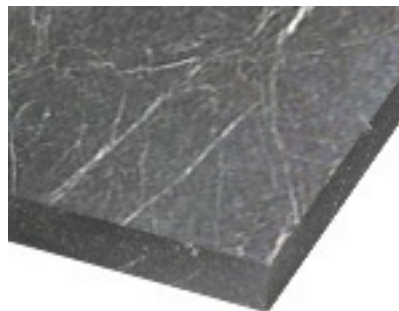
GLASS: Take shards of recycled glass, turn them into a countertop and the result is an infusion of color and style.



Pros: Best for a contemporary look when it's made with large shards, or it can resemble solid surfacing when it's finely ground. Resistant to heat, cuts, and scratches.

Cons: But chips and stains can be a problem. Unlike other recycled-glass counters we tested, Cosentino's Eco line developed a thin crack during our heat tests.

SOAPSTONE: You'll have to rub the soapstone with mineral oil to reveal and maintain its beauty.



Pros: Best for adding the beauty of stone to a low-traffic kitchen. It withstands heat very well, and small scratches can be

repaired. Slabs vary, so go to a stone yard. Cons: But it's easily sliced, scratched, and nicked. Stain resistance is so-so, and it needs to be periodically rubbed with mineral oil.

BAMBOO: While bamboo may be eco-friendly, it isn't user-friendly.



Pros: Best for show rather than daily use. It's available in several styles, including a parquet pattern.

Cons: But it's easily stained, scorched, sliced, and nicked. The maker might warn against using it around a sink, because moisture can warp the material. It may darken over time.