

The way we were

In April 1968, when Which? tested colour TVs for the first time, only BBC2 broadcast in colour

For that test we installed eight 25-inch sets in private homes – a complicated affair that took up to two hours and required special equipment. We reassured people X-ray radiation was 'negligible', but most sets still broke down and one took nine weeks to repair. Our advice was to 'rent rather than buy', which cost from around 43 shillings a week.



Flat-panel

Prices of TVs continue to tumble but be prepared to pay out for a decent flat-panel set. We cut through jargon to reveal those worth buying and the packages of channels on offer

Improving quality may be good news but be prepared to pay

We've had serious reservations about the quality of pictures on flat-panel TVs, as it's rarely equalled that of the top conventional sets of yesteryear when showing standard rather than high-definition pictures. But this time we have the best LCD TV we've seen – our top Panasonic is the first of its kind to get five stars for its picture. There are also many more four-star picture ratings than

Jargon buster

With so many TV types and terms, you can refer to this guide to help you make the right choice for your home

■ ANALOGUE TUNER

This picks up the old-style analogue TV signals for terrestrial channels. These signals will be switched off from later this year until 2012 (see p44). Go to www.freeview.co.uk/ switchover to see when your area switches.

■ ASPECT RATIO

Shape of the screen (width:height).

■ CONTRAST RATIO

How dark and bright the picture on a flat-panel TV will go.

■ **CRT** Cathode ray tube – the technology behind traditional big-box TVs.

■ **EPG** Electronic programme guides display schedules of the week's digital programmes on screen.

■ FLAT-PANEL

■ **DISPLAY** The general term that is used for

LCD and plasma technologies.

■ **HDMI** High-capacity socket for high-definition digital video and audio signals. It's the best way to connect HD equipment to your TV.

■ **IDTV** Integrated digital TVs have Freeview tuners built in so you can receive digital TV and radio channels free.

■ **LCD TV** Type of flat panel where light shines on to liquid crystal cells on screen that let varying amounts of colour through to create a picture.

■ **NATIVE/SCREEN RESOLUTION** The number of pixels on screen (width x height).

■ **PIP** Picture-in-picture displays a small image of another channel or DVD in the corner of the screen while you

watch the main image.

■ **PLASMA TV** Type of flat panel where tiny gas cells emit ultraviolet light that strikes red, green and blue spots on screen to make a picture.

■ **REAR-PROJECTION TV** Reds, blues and greens of TV images are projected on to a mirror and then reflected on to the screen.

■ **RGB** This is a high-standard analogue video signal that splits the red, green and blue components to give the best picture. The best Scart sockets carry an RGB signal.

■ **SCART** All-purpose socket to connect equipment such as DVD players and VCRs to your TV.

■ **VGA** Socket connects to your PC, effectively turning your TV into a PC monitor.

73% Panasonic Viera TX-32LXD600 £1,115



This is the best 32-inch LCD TV we have ever seen. It's straightforward to use, HD-ready, laden with features and it delivers

stunning picture quality. Images are detailed and vibrant and viewing angles are wide. Digital Freeview pictures are free from graininess and the sparkling high definition has superior depth. The sound is slightly processed but its bright feel impressed our listening panel. Features include a light sensor (see 'Going green', p41) and a memory card slot, allowing you to view photos from a digital camera on the screen. It's available from Comet and John Lewis.

WORTH KNOWING The Panasonic range is being updated, so this set may not be available for much longer.



Cheapest store Comet **Resolution** 1366x768 **Supports** 1080p **No Primary sockets** Scart x 3, HDMI x 2, VGA **Side inputs for portable equipment** Yes **Scart link** Yes **Weight** 22.6kg

progress

usual, but there's the usual smattering of the mediocre and just plain awful.

Improving quality may be good news if you're going to take the plunge to buy a new TV and move into the digital age, but be prepared to pay. Despite a fall in prices over the past couple of years, a Best Buy still costs more than £1,000 and decent budget options are few.

An advantage of all the latest flat-panel TVs we've tested is that they're HD ready, so can display high-definition pictures that are sharper and more detailed than those on regular TV. However, to get HDTV broadcasts you must subscribe to expensive packages from Sky or Virgin (previously NTL/Telewest) and it's unlikely they're going to be available through the free digital service Freeview soon, if at all.

And watch out for labels like 'Full HD' or 'HD 1080' (see 'Insider information', p42) as fancy names don't necessarily result in better pictures.

The picture quality of non-HD programmes can be awful. But all our Best Buys boast decent picture quality with all types of broadcast.

If you simply want to try out digital TV and take advantage of the many channels on offer without paying extra, all but one of the TVs in this report are integrated digital TVs (IDTVs), so they have Freeview digital tuners to get you started



as well as analogue tuners. You'll need to check that you live in a Freeview reception area – most of us do; go to www.freeview.co.uk.

And finally, see p76 for expert answers to some of your TV questions.

68% Sony Bravia KDL-40X2000U £2,300



WHICH?
BEST BUY

This 40-inch, HD ready LCD TV is a fantastic all-rounder. It has great Freeview pictures and the high definition is good. Juddery motion and sharp edges are evident but don't detract. Our experts liked its energetic 'big sound', though it may be unrefined for some. It's the only Best Buy with three Scart RGB sockets, for the best pictures from DVD players or VCRs. Its illogical menu system can irritate – but don't be put off. It's available at Currys and Comet.

WORTH KNOWING The light sensor can halve power consumption at night.

Cheapest store Currys **Resolution** 1920x1080 **Supports** 1080p **Yes** **Primary sockets** Scart x 3, HDMI x 2, VGA **Side inputs for portable equipment** Yes **Scart link** Yes **Weight** 34kg

66% JVC LT-46DZ7 £2,150

WHICH?
BEST BUY



Audiophiles will love the sound of this massive 46-inch LCD TV. It is clear and detailed and boasts energy and depth, especially during drama sequences. Picture quality is good but the Freeview picture is a little grainy and can lack sharpness. With high-definition viewing, detail is lost in dark sequences, but some of our experts felt the vibrant colours and good picture depth made up for it. However, the JVC can be difficult to use, with a cramped remote, unhelpful instruction manual and a basic EPG. It's not widely available on the high street but can be found online.

WATCH OUT Sockets for camcorders and games consoles are hard to access.

Available Online **Resolution** 1920x1080 **Supports** 1080p **Yes** **Primary sockets** Scart x 2, HDMI x 2, VGA **Side inputs for portable equipment** No **Scart link** Yes **Weight** 36.4kg

Audiophiles will love the JVC, but it's not the easiest TV to use

63% Sony Bravia KDL-40W2000U £1,500



This high-resolution, HD-ready Best Buy is cheaper than the other Sony 40-inch model (2), but it still

delivers great standard and HD picture quality. Colours are good, although there is judder on fast-moving images. High-definition pictures are realistic in detail and the digital Freeview picture is pretty good. The sound quality is OK but not up to the standard of the other Sony Best Buy – our listeners noticed a hum from the speakers. This Sony is easy to find at Comet, John Lewis and Richer Sounds.

WE LIKE Like other Best Buys it has a Scart link, allowing you to control compatible recording equipment via your EPG.

WHICH?
BEST BUY

Cheapest store Richer Sounds **Resolution** 1920x1080 **Supports** 1080p **Yes** **Primary sockets** Scart x 2, HDMI x 2, VGA **Side inputs for portable equipment** Yes **Scart link** Yes **Weight** 26.7kg

Worth tracking down

We're often impressed with Panasonic and Sony models and these usual suspects, which were Best Buys in previous reports, are still available on the high street



PANASONIC VIERA TX-42LXD600, £1,400 (WITHOUT STAND) Pick your superlative to describe this stunning 42-inch Panasonic plasma. The high definition is as good as it gets, making this IDTV a cut above the big-screen competition. You will pay at least £500 more for the model with a stand. Find it at John Lewis. **SCORE 71%**



SONY BRAVIA KDL-40S2010, £1,200 This 40-inch LCD model, from the ever-popular Bravia range, is similar to the latest models. It's an HD-ready IDTV, with great picture and OK sound and it's cheaper than today's range. Available from Woolworths. **SCORE 60%**



SONY BRAVIA KDL-26S2010, £730 If you're after something compact and bijou, consider this energy-efficient 26-inch HD-ready IDTV from the Sony Bravia range. High-definition pictures are simply superb, while realistic colours and nice detail make for a great standard picture, too. Sound is OK – a little nasal but clear. It's also available at Woolworths. **SCORE 64%**



PANASONIC VIERA TX-26LXD60, £649 This 26-inch IDTV, which is HD ready, doesn't quite match the Sony for picture quality but our expert panel praised its good colour reproduction and resolution. The sound quality is OK, if a little muffled. This TV features two HDMI sockets so you can plug in an HDTV set-top box and compatible DVD player. Find it at Currys. **SCORE 62%**

The 32-inch Sony Bravia is the best LCD TV we've seen for less than £1,000

Budget Buy

SONY BRAVIA KDL-32U2000, £700

A £700 price-tag may be an indulgent interpretation of 'budget', but this smart HD-ready model (6) is the best LCD TV we've seen for less than £1,000. It's also one of the most energy-efficient models on test. It doesn't match the picture quality of the Panasonic 32 inch (1) and we spotted some green and yellow tinting, but the picture softness makes for good digital Freeview pictures by disguising background graininess. The sound is OK and the EPG is quick. You'll find it at Argos, Comet and Woolworths, but it's cheapest at Richer Sounds.



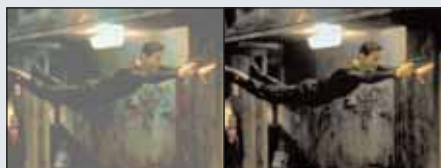
FREE WEB ACCESS TO MORE REVIEWS

Get full results online

Find further information on more than 80 TVs we've tested, including those in this report, online. And extra investment means from June we'll add new test results each month – on the latest releases from the biggest brands. Look out for our pick of results in 'Product news' as well as our regular TV articles. For details of current tests and TV packages, go to www.which.co.uk/tvs. If you haven't logged in before and need help, go to www.which.co.uk/loginhelp for a step-by-step guide.

Spot problem pictures

Flat-panel TVs use digital-processing software to put the picture on the screen. Unless the process is spot on, this can lead to frustrating problems. When looking at TVs in store, ask to watch them with your own DVDs and look for the tell-tale signs



WASHED OUT

LCD pictures can often look washed out. Check out a dark movie, like *The Matrix*, and see how much detail you can pick out

COLOUR FADE

Colour on some flat panels fades when viewed side-on. LCD and rear-projection sets are most prone



COLOUR BANDING

When looking at the skin tones of a face, say, colours appear in distinct bands rather than subtly blending shades of colour



JAGGED EDGES

Look for jagged edges on images such as buildings or text, as high-resolution TVs can tend to over-sharpen pictures



SMEARING

This ghost-like effect will be easier to spot on real-life moving images like sport, rather than cartoons



PICTURE JUDDER

Like smearing, juddering is more obvious on real-life and fast-moving action as well as on panning shots



How we test

Is the instruction manual as clear as the picture? Our ergonomics experts assess each TV as if they were watching in your own home. We rarely find TVs that are easy to use by all our measures – this time Pioneer and Panasonic models are best



you don't have to fiddle around looking for the best reception. But watch out for sockets underneath and to the rear – these can be tricky to access unless the TV is wall mounted. Poorly written and confusing instruction manuals are another problem.

Everyday use

You shouldn't have to rely on the instruction manual to switch the TV on or off, change channel or use the electronic programme guide (EPG) – we check whether everything is straightforward. We find EPGs are sometimes confusing and slow to scroll.

Setting up

This involves taking TVs out of their boxes, trying to connect all the cables and tuning the TVs in. All models tested tune themselves, so

Advanced use

Assessments include adjusting picture settings, making recordings via the EPG and setting the child lock. The design of on-screen menu systems is crucial – advanced options can be difficult to find.

Lost the remote?

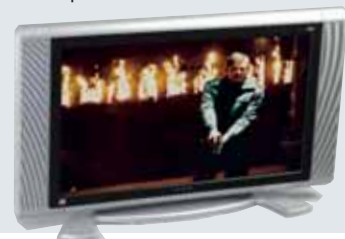
You've checked behind the sofa but still no luck – there's nothing for it, you're going to have to use your TV without the remote control. While remotes can be cluttered, poorly laid-out and have unresponsive buttons, this all-too-frequent nightmare means our experts must check out the front-panel controls.

Don't Buy

We like to include cheaper models to ensure you don't miss out on bargains, but then we test this sorry offering from Wharfedale (24) and wonder why we bother.

This 32-inch, HD-ready model is remarkably consistent – in coming last in both our viewing and listening tests. Expert comments read like a checklist of everything that can go wrong with LCD TVs: juddery movement – check; motion smearing – check; pale and washed-out colours – check. But that's positively glowing next to the sound quality, which was compared to a telephone call by one of our expert listeners.

WHICH?
DON'T BUY



Going green

Big-screen TVs and environmental concerns may not seem like easy bedfellows, but you can reduce your carbon footprint by trying the following



■ **BUY GREEN** The Sony (6) is your best bet if you want a green buy but don't want to compromise too much on quality. It's comparatively energy efficient when both on and in standby. Also worth a mention is the Philips (8). It's fairly energy efficient and has an ambient light sensor, which can halve energy

consumption when viewing TV in a dark room. However, it does have a poor on-screen menu.

■ OPT FOR A SMALLER SCREEN

The bigger the TV screen, the more energy it uses. For instance, a 32-inch LCD typically uses just over 100 watts, while a 40-inch LCD will gulp up around 175 watts.

■ **AVOID PLASMA** A plasma screen usually uses around a third more energy than a similar-sized LCD. The worst offender on test was the voracious Samsung (14), which consumes a massive 316 watts

■ **SWITCH OFF** Even when on standby, your TV uses energy. Many TVs don't have an off

button so you may need to unplug the set from the mains. But switching off an IDTV may mean missing over-the-air software updates, which improve the speed of your EPG, for example. To avoid having to keep your TV on standby, check www.dtg.org.uk/retailer for scheduled updates.

■ **ADJUST THE PICTURE** We provide ideal picture-setting guidelines for every TV we test at www.which.co.uk/tvs. Not only will you get a better-looking picture but you'll typically use 10 per cent less energy.

■ **USE LIGHT SENSORS** Many TVs also have a light sensor (see table, p42). If selected this will automatically adjust the brightness of the picture

according to how light or dark the room is and can dramatically reduce power consumption.

■ DISPOSE OF PROPERLY

From 1 July, consumers should be given specific details of schemes in which manufacturers and distributors are required to fund or provide facilities for you to take back old TVs free, so they can be recycled or disposed of in an environmentally friendly way, under the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment Regulations. This will probably mean they fund facilities at your local tip rather than in store, but information should be given. When buying a new TV, check the box has a crossed-out wheellie bin logo, proving the manufacturer complies with the regulations.

Insider information

Are you still not sure what HDTV means? Our TV expert Mike Briggs explains the basics and latest types

Pictures on high-definition TV look much better than on standard TV. An HD-ready logo guarantees that the TV has the minimum spec needed to watch it, but many of the latest models claim to be full HD or HD1080. So what do you really need?

The types

HDTV pictures come in three main formats – 720p, 1080i and 1080p – depending on the number of horizontal lines that make up the picture and the way they're broadcast.

All HD-ready TVs can display 720p or 1080i – and in effect there's little

difference between the two.

1080i versus 1080p

HD broadcasters mainly use 1080i. The 'i' means that the 1,080 lines are not scanned one after another but 'interlaced' – so all even-numbered lines are scanned first and then odd ones, to make a picture. A 1080p image is made by lines scanned one after another – making pictures even sharper and more detailed.

Confusion over labels

Labels like full HD or HD 1080 mean the TV has a high

screen resolution of 1080 lines. In theory this should be best for watching 1080i pictures, such as those from Sky HD, but in practice there's more to a good picture than just screen resolution. A lot depends on the TV's digital processing software.

Such logos can also mean that the TV can process a 1080p signal. However, unlike HD ready, there is no official labelling scheme and the meanings of the new logos differ between manufacturers.

But don't rush out to buy a 1080p TV. Programmes are not yet broadcast in 1080p and are very unlikely to be soon.

To watch 1080p footage, you'll have to invest in the latest generation of high-definition DVD players – Blu-ray or HD-DVD – but we wouldn't recommend trying either at the moment. Due to a mismatch between disc and player technology, movies suffer from jerky movement, especially on panning shots (see 'Product news', February 2007, p11).

The packages

As we said on p39, it's unlikely that HDTV is going to be available through Freeview in the near future, if ever. And there is no news about it being offered through Freesat, Sky's free digital service that was launched in 2004. Instead you must pay for pricey HDTV packages from Virgin Media or Sky Digital (see p44 for the latest on the Virgin and Sky row over use of Sky channels and the basics on all digital TV packages).

Full HD
1080

HD
ready

HD ready is understood but full HD can mean varying standards

Contacts

Evesham
0870 729 9785
www.evesham.com

Freeview
www.freeview.co.uk

Grundig
0870 920 1101
www.grundig.co.uk

Hitachi
0870 415 4405
www.hitachi.co.uk

JVC
0870 330 5000
www.jvc.co.uk

LG 0870 873 5454
www.lge.co.uk

Panasonic
0870 535 7357
www.panasonic.co.uk

Philips
0906 101 0016
www.philips.co.uk

Pioneer
0870 600 1539
www.pioneer.co.uk

Samsung
0870 242 0303
www.samsung.com/uk

Sharp
0800 262958
www.sharp.co.uk

Sky
0870 240 4040
www.sky.com

Sony
0870 511 1999
www.sony.co.uk

Toshiba
0870 442 4424
www.toshiba.co.uk

Virgin Media
0845 840 7777
www.virginmedia.com

Wharfedale
0870 600 3030
www.wharfedale.co.uk/
argos_support.html

Facts & scores

These details may help when choosing your next TV

Better technology

Rear-projection TVs are a big-screen alternative to LCD and plasma – though we've never been fans. But this Sony is the best we've seen and manages to overcome the usual problems of picture quality and viewing angle.

No headphones

These two LG models are the only TVs in the table that don't feature a socket for plugging in headphones.

Analogue only

All models tested have analogue and Freeview digital tuners built in, except for this Samsung, which has only an analogue tuner. If you want to watch digital TV you'll have to buy a separate set-top box or PVR.

MODEL

- 1 **PANASONIC** Viera TX-32LXD600
- 2 **SONY** Bravia KDL-40X2000U
- 3 **JVC** LT-46DZ7
- 4 **SONY** Bravia KDL-40W2000U
- 5 **PIONEER** PDP-4270XD
- 6 **SONY** Bravia KDL-32U2000
- 7 **HITACHI** 32LD9700
- 8 **PHILIPS** Cineos 32PF9641D
- 9 **SONY** Bravia KDS-55A2000
- 10 **PHILIPS** 42PF7621D
- 11 **PHILIPS** Cineos 37PF9731D
- 12 **SAMSUNG** LE32N73BD
- 13 **SAMSUNG** LE37S73BD
- 14 **SAMSUNG** PS-42P7HD
- 15 **LG** 42LB1D
- 16 **TOSHIBA** Regza 32WLT68
- 17 **LG** 32LB1D
- 18 **HITACHI** 37LD8700
- 19 **SAMSUNG** LE40F71B
- 20 **SAMSUNG** LE32M73BD
- 21 **EVESHAM** Alqemi 32SX
- 22 **GRUNDIG** GULCD32HDIT
- 23 **SHARP** Aquos LC-37XD1E
- 24 **WHARFEDALE** LCD3210HDAF

a The TV also supports a 1080p picture format
b Has a lower screen resolution but can process a 1080p

USING THE TABLE

We tested best selling and new models from leading manufacturers. The more stars the better.

Specification

Price For Best Buys we give the cheapest widely available high-street price as we went to press. Prices for other models are a guide to what to expect.

If models are available only online, prices are in *italics*.

Size Dimensions without stand.

Screen Diagonal measurement of the TV screen in inches.

Features

Scarts The number of sockets available to connect extra audio-video equipment.

Scarts (RGB) The number of Scarts that carry the superior RGB video signal.

HDMI The number of high-definition media inputs available to connect HD equipment.

HD 1080 A ✓ means the TV has a high screen resolution of 1920 x 1080 (see 'Insider information', opposite)

Light sensor ✓ means the

TV features an automatic sensor that adjusts the picture according to the ambient light of the room.

Test performance**Picture/HD picture/Sound**

Based on a combination of technical measurements and expert user assessments.

Ease of use Ratings based on expert assessment.

Features Ratings based on the presence and versatility of features such as sockets.

Score

Ignores price and is based on:

Picture quality	40%
Sound quality	20%
Ease of use	20%
Features	10%
Power use	5%
IDTV functions/Teletext	5%

SPECIFICATION			FEATURES						WHICH? TEST PERFORMANCE					SCORE %
PRICE (£)	TYPE	SIZE (cm) (wxhxd)	SCREEN (in)	SCARTS	SCARTS (RGB)	HDMI	HD 1080	LIGHT SENSOR	PICTURE	HD PICTURE	SOUND	EASE OF USE	FEATURES	
1,115	LCD	86x56x14	32	3	2	2		✓	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	73
2,300	LCD	112x66x14	40	3	3	2	✓ ^a	✓	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	68
2,150	LCD	113x73x13	46	2	2	2	✓ ^a	✓	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★	★★★★★	66
1,500	LCD	99x66x11	40	2	2	2	✓ ^a	✓	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	63
1,400	Plasma	105x69x12	42	3	2	1			★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★★	61
700	LCD	81x55x13	32	2	2	1			★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	60
1,200	LCD	82x58x12	32	3	2	2			★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★★	57
1,000	LCD	88x51x12	32	2	2	2		✓	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	57
2,000	Rear projection	130x91x48	55	3	3	2	✓ ^a		★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	57
1,000	LCD	124x69x18	42	2	2	2		✓	★★★★★	★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	56
1,900	LCD	99x71x13	37	2	2	2	✓	✓	★★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	54
950	LCD	83x55x11	32	2	1	2			★★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★	52
900	LCD	103x62x22	37	2	1	1			★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	51
1,300	Plasma	106x72x12	42	2	1	2			★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	51
1,500	LCD	118x68x15	42	2	1	2		✓	★★★★	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	50
1,000	LCD	80x55x12	32	2	1	3	see ^b		★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★★★	50
700	LCD	92x51x12	32	2	1	2		✓	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	49
1,000	LCD	113x75x13	37	2	2	1			★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★	★★★★★	47
1,600	LCD	100x65x11	40	2	1	2	✓ ^a		★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★	47
950	LCD	81x54x11	32	2	1	2			★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★	47
650	LCD	93x53x12	32	2	1	1			★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★	★★★★	46
600	LCD	89x53x11	32	2	1	1			★★★★	★★	★★★★	★★	★★	44
1,100	LCD	92x60x11	37	2	1	2	✓ ^a	✓	★★★★	★★★★	★★	★★	★★	42
500	LCD	92x52x11	32	2	2	1			★★★★	★★	★	★★	★★★★★	39



Pick your digital package



People are increasingly switching to digital TV. But should you opt for a subscription or pay once only for compatible equipment?

Digital TV offers many more channels than analogue TV and can provide electronic on-screen programme guides, interactive services via your remote control's red button, and on-demand which allows you to set your own schedule.

You can get better-quality pictures with digital TV, although this varies with Freeview due to the strength of signal where you live and the service you choose. You can get even better picture quality with high-definition packages, but these are expensive and limited (see 'Insider information', p42).

Most analogue signals will be switched off between 2008 and 2012, but Whitehaven residents in Cumbria will see them go from October 2007. So check when yours disappears at www.freeview.co.uk/switchover and consider the digital options.

There are four ways to get digital TV: Freeview is available through your rooftop aerial; Tiscali and BT offer broadband services; Sky has several services through satellite TV; and Virgin offers services via cable.

It's been hard to miss the row between Virgin Media and Sky Digital that's resulted in Virgin customers losing access to Sky's basic channels. Virgin claimed BSkyB doubled its fees as the contract came up for renewal in March, while BSkyB said its offer was reasonable. The standoff led to channels including Sky One disappearing from Virgin Media's screens and customers losing favourite programmes such as *Lost* and *24*.

As a result, and as we went to press, Ofcom said it was to investigate competition issues in the pay-TV industry. Just before, Virgin Media had threatened court action against Sky if the issue was not resolved and the National Consumer Council said it was considering launching a supercomplaint against both parties for failing to meet the needs of consumers. Virgin Media confirmed that unhappy customers who were tied into a contract could leave without penalty before the end of March.

MORE DIGITAL TV DETAIL ONLINE

For full details of each TV package available, including the equipment you'll need, costs, what channels are offered and contacts go to www.which.co.uk/digitaltvoptions

Which one is best for you?

■ FREEVIEW AND TOP-UP TV

This is the cheapest way to digital TV. A one-off fee for a set-top box (if you don't have an integrated TV or PVR) will give you the five basic channels plus more than 30 others, but the range is smaller than with subscriptions. Freeview is available to 73 per cent of homes, but coverage will increase after digital switchover.



Top-up TV is an add-on subscription service, offering channels such as Discovery. You'll need a Top-Up TV Anytime Box.

■ **SKY** Sky's subscription services are good for enthusiasts, offering many entertainment channels and specialist packages. Sky also has the best HDTV programming currently on offer. Sky's available to 98 per cent of UK homes and allows you

to bundle in broadband and home-phone options. For an extra fee there are premium movie and sports channels. However, you must subscribe for a year,



packages can be costly, and some channels are very specialist.

Freesat, is Sky's non-subscription rival to Freeview. A one-off fee gets you 200 channels – but not all the popular ones. Freesat should work out cheaper than paying a subscription.

■ **VIRGIN** Cable TV, offered by Virgin Media (was NTL/Telewest), is available to 55 per cent of homes. It offers TV, phone and broadband bundles – the cheapest costs £11 a month (without broadband), and includes more than



40 TV channels. You can access Sky's premium sports and movie channels through more expensive packages. Virgin V+, at £10 or £15 a month, allows you to record and replay later and watch HD content.

■ BROADBAND TV

Tiscali TV (formerly Homechoice) offers the standard as well as entertainment channels. You can pay extra for premium sports and movie options. It's available only in London and Stevenage but is to be extended. You can get Tiscali TV only if you subscribe to its phone and broadband services.

BT offers limited TV services to broadband customers. BT Vision is a hybrid of Freeview channels via an aerial and some pay-per-view on-demand channels over broadband. It's not cheap but it isn't bad value if you want BT services. You can opt out of the TV service any time, but must agree to broadband for a year.

CHEAPEST DIGITAL PACKAGES AVAILABLE

	START-UP COST (£)	MONTHLY COST (£)	NUMBER OF CHANNELS
BT VISION	140 ^a	18 ^b	40
FREEVIEW	25 ^c	n/a	40
SKYDIGITAL	n/a	15	230
SKYFREESAT	150	n/a	200
TISCALI	30	15 ^d	30
TOP UP ANYTIME	210	10	60
VIRGIN MEDIA	25 ^e	11 ^f	40

USING THE TABLE

Start-up cost

Includes equipment and installation for new customers.

Number of channels

May vary.

^a £120 if purchased online

^b Includes BT Broadband option 1

^c For set-top box, but price varies by model

^d Includes broadband

^e £5 if purchased online

^f Includes phone line rental

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