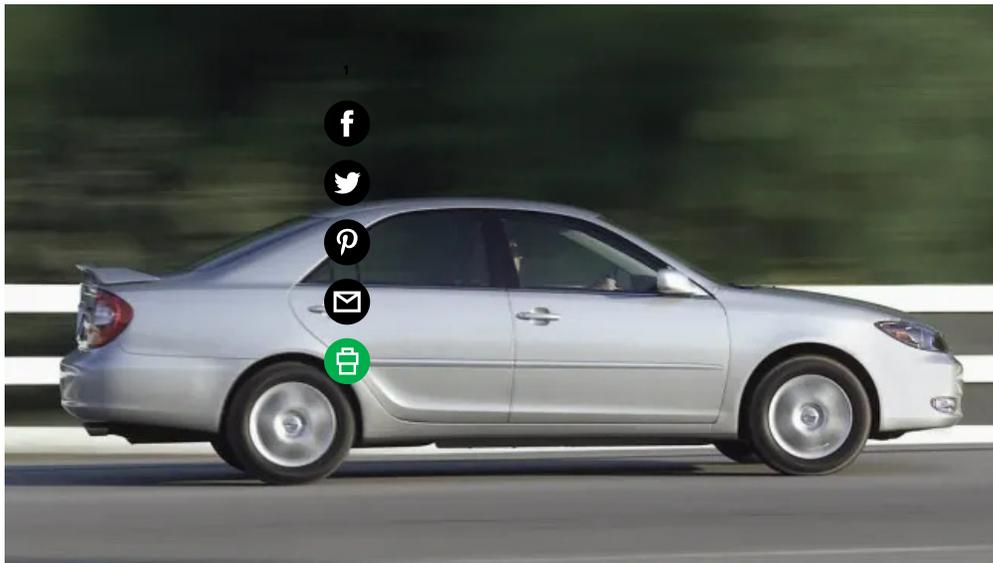


Best Used Cars and SUVs for Less Than \$5,000

These models have strong reliability and performed well in CR's tests

By Jon Linkov

Updated December 17, 2021



The Toyota Camry.
Toyota

Even though it can be challenging to find a used car right now, there's no reason buyers have to settle for an unreliable or a dangerous one just because their budget is tight. Many models that were smart choices when they were new still have those same good qualities years later as older, much less-expensive used cars.

And yes, even used cars under \$5,000 can offer high quality and reliable transportation. They were good when we recommended them as new and now years later—more than decade in most cases—they've held up.

To be recommended, cars, SUVs, and trucks must perform well in more than 50 evaluations. Recommended models also need to have average or better reliability according to the results of our Annual Auto Surveys of CR members.

All the sedans, hatchbacks, and SUVs listed below can be found for \$5,000 or less and are available with electronic stability control (ESC), a safety system that saves lives and is now required on all new cars. We note in the description for each model when ESC was introduced as an optional or standard feature.

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If you're a CR member, this article and the list below are already available to you. If you haven't signed up, click below and become a member to access the list and all our exclusive ratings and reviews for each vehicle we buy and test. Joining also gives you full access to exclusive ratings for the other products our experts evaluate in several categories, including electronics and home appliances.

CR members can search our [Used Car Marketplace](#) for vehicles for sale in their area, sorting by the factors that matter most.

The listings include CR reliability and owner satisfaction ratings, and most vehicles include a free Carfax report. Members can also access [ratings and information](#) on used vehicles going as far back

as 20 years.

Small Cars



The Toyota Prius.
Photo: Toyota

Toyota Corolla 2003 to 2005

The practical Corolla delivers decent performance and admirable fuel economy. Expect 29 mpg overall. While ride quality is absorbent and unobtrusive, handling is uninspiring. The cabin offers good access and a decent rear seat, but the driving position is a bit compromised because of a steering wheel that's too far away. Although ESC was first offered in 2005, it and curtain airbags were rare options before 2009.

Toyota Prius 2004 to 2005

The Prius is ideal for anyone purely interested in low running costs and practicality. It gets 44 mpg overall and can drive at low speeds on electric power alone. The ride is firm but compliant enough, although road noise and engine drone are noticeable. Handling is secure. Some controls are complicated, and the interior feels basic. ESC was available starting in 2005.

Hatchbacks



The Pontiac Vibe.
Photo: Getty Images

Pontiac Vibe 2003, 2005

Overall, the Vibe is a sensible alternative to a small SUV. Its 1.8-liter four-cylinder drones loudly and performs modestly. GT models use a stronger version of this engine and come only with a six-speed manual. Handling is fairly nimble, and the ride is compliant if a little jittery. Access is very easy and the rear seat is quite roomy, but the driving position is only so-so. The optional all-wheel-drive system works well but hurts acceleration and fuel economy. Folding the rear seats creates a large, flat load floor. While ESC was first available in 2005, it may be difficult to find a Vibe that was built with it.

Toyota Matrix 2005

Practical and reliable, the Matrix is a small wagon available with front-wheel drive or AWD. Cabin access is easy, the rear seat is roomy, and the cargo floor is big. Performance is modest from the 1.8-liter four-cylinder, which drones loudly under acceleration. Handling is fairly nimble, and the ride is compliant but a little jittery. Limited left footroom and a long reach to the steering wheel combine to hurt the

driving position. ESC became optional in 2005, so try to look for one that was built with this important safety feature.

Midsized and Large Sedans



The Lexus ES.
Photo: Lexus

Honda Accord 2004 to 2005

The Accord is a roomy and reliable car. Most will have a four-cylinder engine that together with the automatic make for a smooth, unobtrusive powertrain. High-end versions have a V6 engine that's quiet, slick, and powerful. Handling is quite nimble, the ride is steady and controlled, and switches and gauges are intuitive. If you can, focus on a 2005 model, because those came with standard curtain airbags that provide more protection.

Lexus ES 2003

Solidly embodying the traditional Lexus values, the ES 300 is a comfortable cruiser. It's a well-rounded package with a nicely furnished, quiet, and accommodating cabin and very few flaws. The V6 provides powerful acceleration, the transmission shifts flawlessly, and the ride is isolated and composed. While handling is far from sporty, it's ultimately secure. The front seats are supportive and the rear seat is comfortable for two passengers; three adults will find it snug. Fit and finish are well executed and luxuries abound.

Toyota Avalon 2002 to 2004

The Avalon is essentially a stretched Camry with more upscale features. High points include a silky-smooth powertrain, Lexus-like road isolation, and impressive fit and finish. Rear-seat room is generous, it's easy to get in and out of the cabin, and visibility is aided by huge windows. Ride quality is smooth, though handling is considerably less than athletic. Touring models handle better. ESC became optional in 2005, so try to buy an Avalon that was built with the system.

Toyota Camry 2002 to 2004

The Camry is a roomy, easy-to-drive car with a smooth powertrain, comfortable ride, and quiet interior. Most versions have a four-cylinder engine, which is quite sufficient and returned 24 mpg overall in our tests. High-end models have a V6 engine, which is slick and powerful but sacrifices some fuel economy. Look for models with the optional curtain airbags. Without them, this generation of the Camry received a Poor rating in the IIHS side-crash test.

SUVs



Photo: Honda

Honda Pilot 2004 to 2005

The Pilot combines the best virtues of a wagon, an SUV, and a minivan. Its slick V6 delivers punchy performance and respectable fuel economy of 17 mpg. We found the ride to be comfortable and handling secure, with little body roll. Road noise is pronounced, however. The standard split third-row seat folds neatly into the floor to create more cargo room, but there's little cargo room with the third row up. The

interior is simple but well put together and offers lots of cubbies and bins. ESC was optional in 2005.

Toyota RAV4 2001 to 2004

If you can, buy a 2004 RAV4 because that's the year it first got ESC. Otherwise, the RAV4s of this vintage have nimble handling and compact dimensions that make them fun to drive and very maneuverable. Ride comfort and noise isolation were okay for the time but aren't a match for newer versions. The side swinging door makes loading and unloading rather cumbersome and doesn't provide shelter from rain. Rear-seat room and cargo volume are modest.



Jon Linkov

I owe my career to two fateful events: my father buying a 1965 Corvette and my purchase of an Audi A4 rather than a Chevy Tahoe. The Corvette jump-started my love of cars, and the Audi led me to automotive journalism, track days, and amateur car repair. In my free time I cycle as much as possible, no matter the season.

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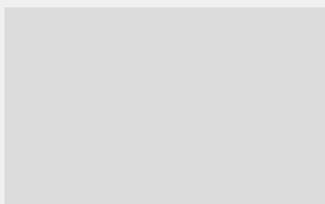
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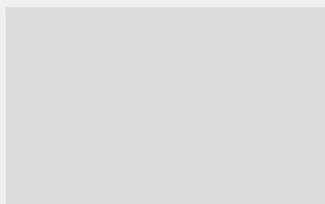
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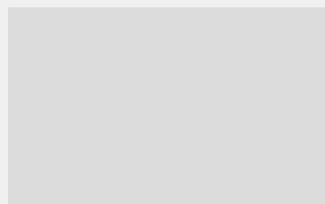
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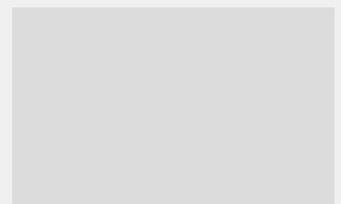
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