

FACTS *for consumers*

from the Federal Trade Commission

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Water Testing Scams

Worried about the safety of your drinking water? You are not alone. Fears about the purity of our water have increased dramatically in recent years, along with news reports of leaking landfills, corroding lead pipes, and crumbling gasoline storage tanks tainting water supplies. These reports paint a gloomy picture of toxic wastes, pesticides, and other chemicals seeping into both well and ground water. Although most households using water from public sources should have few concerns, *potentially harmful contaminants have been found in some water supplies.* If you have serious questions about the safety of your drinking water, you can take the suggestions described in this fact sheet to have your water tested and, if necessary, buy a water treatment unit. This fact sheet also warns you about some home water testing scams, where unscrupulous salespeople use scare tactics and fraudulent methods to sell their water treatment devices.

Some Fraudulent Promotions

Not all companies offering water tests are legitimate. For example, fraudulent sellers that advertise "free home water testing" may only be interested in selling you a water treatment device, whether you need it or not. *Because there is no charge for the "testing," you may be willing to allow a company representative into your home to check your water for impurities.* In doing the test, the representative may add tablets or drops of chemicals to your tap water, telling you the water will change color or particles will form if it is contaminated. *When your water changes before your*

eyes, the representative may warn you that the water is polluted and may cause cancer. The best solution, you are told, is to buy the company's water treatment device. You should understand, however, that even spring mineral water would "fail" the company's test.

Others will try to sell you a water treatment device without testing your drinking water or without even suggesting it be tested. They may offer water purifiers as part of a prize promotion—notifying you, either by mail or telephone, that you have been selected to win an expensive prize. To qualify for the prize, you are required to buy a water treatment device, costing hundreds of dollars. Unfortunately, you may discover later that both the prize and the water purifier are of very little value. And you probably cannot cancel your order or return the prize and water purifier for a refund.

If you are invited to participate in such a prize promotion, do not be pressured into making a decision on the spot. Ask for a copy of the offer in writing and read it carefully. Sometimes sellers will tell you that they need your credit-card number for identification or verification, while in reality they want your number to make unauthorized charges to your account. Remember, never give your credit-card number over the telephone to someone you do not know.

Some FTC Cautions

The Federal Trade Commission suggests that you take the following steps before you have your water tested or you purchase any type of water treatment system.

Avoid "Free" Home Water Tests

Offers to test the tap water in your home for free are almost always part of a sales promotion. More important, in-home testing does not provide the specific, in-depth analysis that is required to determine if your water needs treatment and what kind of system is suited to your needs. For example, in-home water tests may only check for acidity/alkalinity, water hardness, iron, manganese, and color, but none of these is harmful. Avoid dealing with salespersons who tell you *strictly* on the basis of their in-home testing that your drinking water is polluted, contaminated, or bad for your family's health.

Be Wary of Claims of Government Approval

Fraudulent sellers use many different sales techniques. Some fraudulent sellers claim that certain government agencies require or recommend widespread use of purification systems. Others claim that the government has approved a particular method for in-home water testing. Still others claim that the government has approved or licensed a particular water treatment unit or purification system. All of those claims are false. The government does not endorse water tests or water treatment products. If you see an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) registration number on a water treatment product label, it merely means that the manufacturer has registered its product with the EPA. A registration number does not mean the EPA has tested or approved the product.

Determine the Quality of Your Water Independently

To learn about the quality of your water, ask your local water superintendent for the latest test results of the public water supply and then compare them to state and federal standards available from your state government and the EPA. If you use well water, ask your local or state health department if it offers free water testing. Most will for bacterial contaminants.

Arrange for An Independent Test

If you are concerned about the results you got from your local water superintendent or are worried about possible contaminants in your water supply, have your water tested by a private laboratory that is certified by your state health department or environmental agency. To find out where you can get a list of state-certified laboratories, call the EPA's Safe Drinking Hotline at 1-

800-426-4791. (In the Washington, DC area, call 202-382-5533.) When having your water tested, be sure to deal with the laboratory directly. Some fraudulent sellers ask for a sample of your water to send to an independent laboratory for testing, and then alter or misrepresent the laboratory's test results. You should understand that the costs of different water tests vary widely. Tests for bacteria range from \$15 to \$45, while tests for chemical contamination can cost hundreds, even thousands of dollars, depending on the depth of the analysis.

Decide What You Need

If tests on your water indicate problems, the next step is to determine what type of system you need to treat the water. This can be a difficult decision because there is a wide variety of water treatment devices on the market today. Water purifiers range from relatively low-cost, simple filter devices for a kitchen faucet to more expensive, sophisticated systems that treat water from its point of entry into a home. Keep in mind, no one water treatment device can solve every problem. Some systems only soften water by removing calcium and magnesium, while others eliminate virtually all minerals and other foreign matter present in the water. Ask the testing firm or local government officials what kind of water treatment or purification system will suit your needs.

Comparison Shop

Remember, first you need to identify the water problem, and then you need to shop for the right device or filter to correct the problem. Once you decide to purchase a particular type of water treatment system, you will have to make choices in terms of price, installation, maintenance, and warranties. To become familiar with the most commonly available treatment methods and devices, write to the Federal Trade Commission for a copy of "Buying a Home Water Treatment Unit," a brochure developed in cooperation with the EPA.

If You Have a Complaint

To report problems about fraudulent sales practices, write: Federal Trade Commission, Division of Marketing Practices, Washington, D.C. 20580. Although the FTC cannot intervene in individual disputes, it needs to learn about home water treatment sales practices you believe to be deceptive.

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