Look for the NSF label

Many water filters feature a certification by NSF International, a not-for-profit, independent organization that tests home treatment devices. While not a guarantee, the "NSF" label is a good indicator the product can live up to its advertising claims. As a consumer, you may want to exercise caution if the product isn't NSF-certified.

For more information

American Water Works Association
www.drinktap.org

USEPA Safe Drinking Water Hotline–
800-426-4791

epa.gov/safewater

NSF International–
800-673-6275, nsf.org

Facts and Filters

Making Smart Choices
About Home
Treatment Devices

American Water Works Association

American Water Works Association

For water consumers, there are a lot of questions out there:

- Should I drink bottled water or tap water?
- Should I use a filter?
- What kind of filter should I use?

Before making a decision, it's important to make sure you're informed.

This brochure contains information about tap water quality and home water treatment systems. If you have additional questions about water quality or home treatment systems, contact your local water supplier.

Why is tap water safe to drink?

In 1974, the federal government established the Safe Drinking Water Act to protect the public from water-related illnesses. This law requires community water systems to regularly test their water supplies and meet strict federal water quality standards. Water providers conduct thousands of analyses each year to verify that the public water supply meets Safe Drinking Water Act standards.

The federal government also requires that water providers produce an annual water quality report for their customers. Contact your local water supplier if you have not received a copy of your report.

Does my water need additional treatment?

There are a multitude of stores and companies that sell various home treatment devices ranging from small faucet-mounted filters to "whole-house" systems and water softeners. Do you need to buy one? Safe Drinking Water Act standards are set to ensure that your tap water is safe. For most people, the use of a water filter is not necessary to ensure water safety. People who have medical conditions that might put them at special risk should discuss the need for a water filter with their doctors.

There are many reasons you may choose to use a home treatment device. The most popular concerns are related to taste and odor, as well as hardness. In many cases, the key to better-tasting water is reducing the taste of chlorine, which is added to protect public health but can impart a flavor some people find unpleasant. Other concerns can include lead, copper, color, manganese, and sediments. Certain home treatment devices can be very effective in resolving these problems. The important thing for consumers is to make an informed decision and not to be taken in by misleading marketing tactics.

Home Treatment Devices

As an informed consumer, you should learn what's in the local tap water and only buy a system to meet your specific needs or taste preferences. While we cannot recommend specific brands or products, this information should prove helpful. For specific product information, contact NSF International or the device manufacturer.

Carafe-style filters—Designed to work like a coffeemaker, these filters are simple to use. Just pour water in the top, and it trickles down into a pitcher that generally holds half a gallon of water.

Faucet-mounted filters—These small filters screw directly onto the faucet nozzle. Most units feature a bypass valve so you only filter water used for drinking.

Under-sink filters—These work like the faucet-mounted models, except they process far more water. Since most lack a bypass, you filter a lot of water not used for drinking.

Aside from taste issues, many customers purchase home treatment devices to address issues related to "hard" water, which is caused by high concentrations of dissolved minerals. While these naturally occurring minerals don't pose a health risk, many people prefer the aesthetic qualities of "soft" water.

Reverse-osmosis filters—These multistage systems use both traditional (usually carbon) filter and cellophane-like membrane filters to remove most organic and inorganic compounds. This is the only type of filter that will remove calcium and magnesium, the minerals that cause "hard" water. However, residential-scale reverse osmosis systems do not have sufficient capacity to treat the entire household water supply.

Water softeners—Unlike filters, water softeners are specifically designed to exchange calcium and magnesium for "softer" minerals, usually sodium or potassium. While hardness minerals are removed, they are replaced by salt. People on sodium-restricted diets should use caution when consuming water softened with sodium.

Water conditioners—These devices are marketed as a "salt-free" alternative to water softeners, purportedly producing the same benefits as softeners without actually removing the calcium and magnesium. However, the scientific community continues to debate the effectiveness of these systems.