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Home Water Treatment Units:

Filtering Fact from Fiction

Controversy has arisen over the sale and use of home water treatment units. Consumers, the media, government officials, and the water treatment industry are all confronted with a variety of sales pitches, public health concerns, misleading or misunderstood "advice," uncertainty, doubt, and confusion.

At the root of this controversy and confusion is the quality and safety of our drinking water. Is it safe to drink? Do we need to install home treatment units to protect ourselves and our families from harmful contaminants? If home treatment can make the water better, then how does one select what is best for his or her situation?

PURPOSE

This pamphlet has been prepared to help answer these questions and to set the record straight. Its contents are intended to:

- provide information and advice on the proper use of home water treatment units;
- clarify misconceptions about endorsement or "approval" of these units;
- warn consumers about false or misleading promotions of these units;
- prevent consumers from purchasing equipment they may not need; and
- provide references for more information to help consumers make the right decision.

Please Note: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) does not directly regulate the manufacture, distribution, or use of home water treatment units. (EPA develops and oversees the implementation and enforcement of regulations for drinking water provided by public water systems). However, EPA has received numerous inquiries about home water treatment units and feels it is appropriate to respond to the public's requests for information with this brochure.

IS HOME TREATMENT NECESSARY?

Many home water treatment units have beneficial uses and in some instances they are necessary. However, before you consider the purchase of a home treatment unit, it is important to distinguish between home treatment for health protection and home treatment for aesthetic, cosmetic, or economic reasons.

Health Protection

Most Americans (85%) receive their drinking water from public water systems. Provided these systems are in compliance with federal and state standards, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency believes that home treatment for health protection is rarely necessary. If for some reason your local system has failed to comply with the health-based standards, they will notify you and advise you about protective measures—if any. Consumers may, of course, individually prefer to further modify or enhance the quality of their drinking water to meet their own specific needs or desires.

If you obtain drinking water from a private household well, you are subject only to state and local laws, and you are primarily responsible for the quality of the water drawn from your well. The local health department will usually test your well for bacterial contamination (and sometimes nitrates) and advise you on the proper placement of your well relative to your septic system. Otherwise, you must determine if your water is safe and what type of treatment—if any—is needed to adequately protect those who drink from your well. (See **What You Can Do**)

AESTHETIC CONCERNS

Water treatment units are used most often for the removal of substances that affect the physical or aesthetic quality of water—that is, its taste, color, and odor. For example, water softeners have been used for many years to remove calcium, magnesium, iron, and other minerals that cause household problems such as damaged water heaters and discolored laundry. In other cases, water may be free of harmful contaminants, but have a disagreeable taste or odor.

Whether your water quality concern is truly health-related or simply for aesthetic reasons, the installation and use of a home treatment unit may be an alternative for you to consider.

WHICH KIND WORKS BEST?

No one treatment unit is able to remove all of the substances that may be present in your water. The first step toward deciding which unit is best for your situation is to identify which substance(s) you want to remove, based on both health-related and/or aesthetic concerns (see *Have Your Water Tested*).

Second, find a unit that is designed to remove the substance(s). Be advised, there are many brands and manufacturers, all trying to convince you that their product is best. In any event, gather as much information as possible about your water supply and possible treatment units before you decide.

Two reliable sources of information on treatment units are the National Sanitation Foundation (NSF) and the Water Quality Association (WQA). NSF is an independent, not-for-profit organization that develops and adopts voluntary, consensus standards and testing programs for a wide variety of consumer and industrial products, including home water treatment units. NSF offers objective, third-party evaluation of products against NSF standards, other voluntary, consensus standards, and government regulations. WQA is an independent, not-for-profit organization that represents firms and individuals engaged in the design, manufacture, production, distribution and sale of equipment, products, supplies and services for providing quality water. WQA's water quality specialists can provide advice on treatment units for specific uses at residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional establishments.

Neither NSF nor WQA recommends particular brands of home treatment units. Both organizations have literature for consumers, both on water treatment units and the water treatment industry.

In addition to selecting the proper unit, you must also be careful to use and maintain the unit properly. Follow carefully any manufacturer's instructions and consider testing your water periodically to confirm that the unit is working.

WHICH UNITS ARE "APPROVED"?

EPA neither approves nor endorses home water treatment units. Any claim by a manufacturer, distributor, or salesperson to this end is false. Further, EPA does not conduct laboratory tests to determine whether a unit functions as designed and/or claimed.

EPA is involved in the registration of certain filters used in home treatment units. If a manufacturer impregnates a filter with silver—which is intended to inhibit the growth of bacteria that accumulate within the filter—then the silver is considered a pesticide under the Federal Insecticide Fungicide and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA).

As a result, the filter must be registered with EPA. This registration *does not* indicate that EPA has tested and scrutinized the filter for its ability to treat water. It *does not* indicate that EPA approves or endorses this product. Rather, the registration indicates that the manufacturer has shown that the pesticide will not cause adverse health effects when used as directed.

Further, the manufacturer must explain clearly that such a silver impregnated "bacteriostatic" filtering unit is only intended for use on potable water which has already been treated by a public water system and is already microbiologically safe for drinking. Such devices should not be used on polluted well water or raw, untreated waters.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Learn About Your Water

- If you receive your drinking water from a public water system, check on the supply's quality with State or local health officials or the local water utility itself. Most water suppliers will send you a printout that shows what they have monitored in the drinking water supply and either the supplier, State or local health officials, or EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline (see below) will help you understand the various numbers and levels indicated on the printout.
- If you have a household well, contact the local health department to assist you with testing for bacteria and nitrates. To identify other potential sources of contaminants, consider past and present land uses in your area—such as the application of lawn care or agricultural chemicals, improper disposal of household chemicals (including used motor oil), and nearby gas stations or other businesses. For more advice on possible contaminants, contact the local health department, your State drinking water program (usually part of the State health department or environmental agency), the nearest public water utility, or EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline.

Have Your Water Tested

If you suspect you have a problem with your water, have it tested to confirm the nature and extent of the problem. For aesthetic problems like hardness, your water can be analyzed in your home by a professional such as a Water Quality Association Certified Water Specialist. For health concerns, locate and contact a laboratory that is certified by the State for drinking water testing. Try to identify which contaminants you want to test for, because unnecessary testing may be quite expensive. Information about certified labs—including privately owned labs—can be obtained from your State laboratory certification officer. To locate this officer, contact either the State drinking water program or EPA's Safe Drinking Water Hotline.

Select the Proper Treatment Unit

No one home treatment unit can solve all water quality problems. To help you identify the best unit for the task, follow these simple guidelines:

- Research the treatment units that are available before you buy. Check performance capabilities, warranty, maintenance provisions, and general operation.
- Consider capacity, special features, and company services—as well as price—when you make your choice.
- You may need more than one device to solve your problem, i.e., you may need to combine several treatment units in one system.

Beware False Advertisers

- Avoid being misled by false claims and scare tactics. Research the reputation and legitimacy of the company or sales representative that has called on you.
- Avoid signing contracts or binding agreements for "one-time offers" or for those that place a lien on your home.
- Be very careful about giving credit card information over the phone.
- Check into any offers that involve prizes or sweepstakes winnings.
- Be wary of "free" water testing that is provided by the salesperson to determine your water quality; many tests are inaccurate and misleading.
- If you are concerned about a company and its sales practices, contact your local Better Business Bureau.
- If you feel you have been subjected to misrepresentation, contact the Federal Trade Commission.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To get a copy or more information on the federal drinking water standards, contact:

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency
Office of Drinking Water (WH-550A)
401 M Street, SW
Washington, DC 20460

Or call: The Safe Drinking Water Hotline
(800) 426-4791 or (202) 382-5533

The Hotline operates from 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM, EST

For more information on home water treatment units, contact:

The Water Quality Association
Consumer Affairs Department
P.O. Box 606
Lisle, IL 60532
(312) 369-1600

The National Sanitation Foundation
3475 Plymouth Road
P.O. Box 1468
Ann Arbor, MI 48106
(313) 769-8010

To locate the nearest office of the Better Business Bureau, check the phone book or write:

The Council of Better Business Bureaus
4200 Wilson Boulevard, Suite 800
Arlington, VA 22203

To report a complaint about improper sales practices, write to:

The Federal Trade Commission
Division of Marketing Practices
Washington, DC 20580