



Television is a key source of safety and emergency information, entertainment, and education for U.S. households. With hundreds of channels to choose from and many service providers vying for business, TV is not as simple as it once was. This fact sheet will explain your options and help you make the right choices for you and your family.

Ways to receive TV

- You can receive a broadcast television signal over-the-air (free). The nation's broadcast stations transitioned to digital in 2009, so the type of television you have makes a difference in how you receive over-the-air signals.
 - *Since 2007, new TVs larger than 13" are required to have a built-in digital tuner, which enable them to free broadcast digital signals. Sometimes an antenna is also needed.*
 - *If you have an older analog TV set, you need a digital-to-analog converter box (\$40 to \$70) to watch free over-the-air signals.*
 - *Digital television (DTV) offers enhanced services such as on-demand viewing, electronic program guides and additional languages.*
- For a subscription fee, you can watch TV on cable, satellite and in some areas, through video services offered by the telephone company.
 - *The cost of subscription TV can range from as little as \$15 to more than \$100 per month, depending on the provider and the channels and services you choose. (Depending on your credit history, you might be asked to provide a deposit.)*
- If you have a high-definition TV set, you can view "hi-def" programming where available.
- If you have a high-speed Internet connection, you can get some free and subscription programming via the Web (streaming).

Streaming TV from your computer

- "Streaming" means you can watch video as it is being transferred from the Internet to your computer.
- Streaming requires a high-speed Internet connection and software such as an Internet browser and/or "player" to decompress and stream the data. You can buy devices such as certain game consoles and some new DVD players to stream video right to your TV. Some new TVs may have this capability.
- Your streaming picture quality will depend on your download speed (bandwidth) and computer processor speed. Generally you need a relatively new computer and operating system to stream video.
- Some programs can be streamed free from sites such as Hulu.com, or from TV broadcasters' own websites. Or, you can sign up for premium services from providers such as Hulu.com or Netflix for around \$10 per month.

Managing your family's TV viewing

- A V-chip makes it possible to block certain programming. Newer TVs and digital converter boxes must contain a V-chip. If you have an older TV and pay for cable or satellite, your provider can supply a set-top box with a V-chip or other parental controls (there may be a fee).

- In most cases, you can program the V-chip in your television by using the remote control. (Visit ManualsOnline.com if you've lost your manual.)
- A lockbox enables you to lock specific channels so that the programming cannot be viewed. Subscribers may lease or purchase one from their service provider or buy from a retailer. A digital set-top box may also enable blocking.
- Most programs today are coded with a rating: TV-PG (parental guidance suggested), TV-14 (may be unsuitable for children under 14), and TV-MA (may be unsuitable for children under 17). V-chips allow parents to block movies shown on TV as well, though not all movies are rated. For information on movie ratings, visit www.mpa.org.
- If you have a complaint about a television program's rating, contact the monitoring board (www.tvguidelines.org; 202-879-9364).

Cutting your household's TV costs

- It pays to shop around—prices can vary widely.
- Bundling services—buying phone, Internet and cable TV, or at least two of these services, from the same provider—might save money. (Be sure you will use all the services in the bundle so you don't waste money.)
- Ask for the best price available. (Understand exactly when any promotion will end, how much the price will jump, and if you are locked in to a contract.)
- After your introductory offer expires, you can try to get a continued price reduction by calling your provider and asking about current promotions. Canceling premium channels and returning all but one digital converter box are other ways to save.
- Many families do without subscription TV service entirely. They watch free broadcast and online programs and borrow tapes/DVDs from the library. Others buy only the most basic service, which in most cases offers plenty of channels.

Handling billing disputes

- Make sure you understand the “fine print” of your service plan. For example, if you are locked into a contract, early cancellation fees can be expensive. Mark your calendar to remind you when to cancel free premium channels before they go full-price. Read all of the change of terms notices you receive.
- Try to resolve billing issues directly with your service provider within 30 days of receiving the bill. Pay the undisputed portion of your bill by the due date. Your service provider must respond to your complaint in a reasonable period.
- If you are not satisfied with your service provider's resolution, you can contact your local Better Business Bureau (www.bbb.org) and your local and state consumer protection agencies (<http://consumeraction.gov/state.shtml>). If you have cable service (not satellite), you may file a complaint with the local franchising authority—check for the contact information on your statement or ask the cable company.
- To file a complaint with the FCC, visit <http://esupport.fcc.gov/complaints.htm>, email fccinfo@fcc.gov, or call 888-225-5322 (888-835-5322/TTY)

Consumer Action created the Empower U project under a grant from the California Consumer Protection Foundation. Consumer Action empowers low to moderate income and limited-English-speaking consumers nationwide to financially prosper through education and advocacy. To learn more, visit www.consumer-action.org.

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