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Community Water Center's Guide to buying a water filter

Home water filters may be one of the most cost-effective ways to improve the quality of your tap water. However, it is important to be informed about your filter choices, and take the necessary steps to understand what your water quality concerns are. CWC has outlined some important information about water filters, questions to consider before buying, and the steps to securing the right water filter for your home.

Common myths about water filters

Water Filter Myth	Water Filter Reality
Any water filter can take contaminants out of water.	Not all water filters are able to filter out all contaminants. In order to get the proper filter to address your water quality concerns, you must know what contaminants are in your water. Just because a water filter is expensive does not necessarily mean it will make your water safe.
All marketed water filters are proven to take out the contaminants they claim too.	Only filters that are certified by California Department of Public Health (DPH) have been tested to ensure that the filter actually does what it claims to do. DPH publishes a list of filters that have been tested in an independent laboratory to ensure the filter meets the health-related performance claims and ensure that the filter doesn't add any other contaminants to your water.
Water softeners filter my water.	Water softeners do not improve your water quality. Water softeners devices are only good if you are trying to soften your water.

A full list of approved treatment devices is available for each contaminant at <http://www.cdph.ca.gov/certlic/device/Pages/watertreatmentdevices.aspx> or by calling the California Department of Public Health (DPH) at (916) 449-5600.

This information was originally published in the Community Water Center's
Guide to Community Drinking Water Advocacy.
available at: www.communitywatercenter.org

Types of water filters and their differences

There are many different kinds of filters. Depending on the type of the filter you need, prices range from \$30 to \$400 for an under-the-sink, over-the-counter, or on-the-tap filter.

- **Countertop filters:** usually placed on the counter and manually filled. Since it is not connected to a tap, it will only filter water that is put into it.
- **On-the-tap filters:** usually connected to a sink faucet. Will not filter water from sources other than the faucet where the filter is installed.
- **Under-the-sink filters:** usually installed under the sink and requires a permanent connection to an existing water pipe. Filtered water is dispensed through the existing sink faucet. Will not filter water from sources other than the sink where the filter is installed.
- **Filters for the whole home:** Requires a permanent connection to an existing water pipe. Filters water throughout the entire home, including the bathroom. Whole-home filters are much more expensive and very few are certified by DPH.

Steps to follow before you buy a water treatment device

In order to buy the right filter, you must take a few steps to learn what, if anything, is in your water and what filters are certified to remove those contaminants.

Step 1: Figure out where your water comes from.

Houses either get their water from a public water system or a private well. **If you pay a monthly water bill** it is likely that you are served by a public water system. **If you do not pay a monthly water bill and you rent**, ask your landlord whether your water is from a private well or a public water system. If you do not pay a monthly water bill and own your own home, your water probably comes from a private well.

Step 2: Get water quality reports for your water.

In order to understand what you need your filter to remove, you must have information on what is in your water.

If you are served by a public water system, the system is required to publish an annual report on your water quality, called a Consumer Confidence Report (CCR). Call the number on your water bill and ask for the latest water quality information and the most recent water report.

If your water comes from a private well, you must do all your own testing. For a list of laboratories in your area, call DPH. Also see CWC's "Guide for private well owners," available at www.communitywatercenter.org.

Step 3: Understand your water quality results.

Once you obtain your water quality report, whether it is from a CCR or from private testing, you must identify if you have a contamination problem. Water quality reports can be hard to read, so we have provided a brief description of the most important things to look out for when reading water quality results.

- **Identify whether the levels detected of a contaminant exceed the state standard.** If a contaminant exceeds state standards, it is unsafe to drink. Compare the number listed as the “level detected” with the state standard, called the “Maximum Contaminant Level,” or MCL.

Level detected is the average level of each contaminant detected in your water. A *Maximum Contaminant Level* (usually listed by its acronym, “MCL”) is the legal limit of contaminant that is allowed in drinking water. Each contaminant has a different MCL. MCLs are listed on CCRs, but if you have a private well, you may need to look them up (see the Resources list).

- **Identify what contaminants occur at levels that may be unsafe for your health.** While MCLs are legal limits, they are not the limits that are most protective of public health. Instead, *Public Health Goals* (usually listed by its acronym “PHG”) are established to indicate what level of contaminant is safe to ingest over long periods of time. Compare the level detected of a contaminant with the PHG.

PHGs are based solely on protecting public health, in contrast to MCLs, which take into account the cost of treatment or the technology available to treat drinking water. Unfortunately, they are only goals and are not enforceable. PHGs are also listed on CCRs, but if you have a private well you may need to look them up (see the Resources list).

Step 4: Find out which certified filters remove the particular contaminants in your water.

Once you know exactly what contaminants occur in unsafe levels, find a treatment device that is certified to reduce or remove that specific contaminant. If you have high levels of more than one type of contaminant in your water, look for devices that are listed as certified under all those contaminants. See the Resources list for information on certified filters.

Getting the most out of your filter

Proper installation and maintenance

It is extremely important that the certified filter you purchase is properly installed and maintained. If you do not change the filters in the treatment device regularly, for example, contaminants may build up and release bursts of extremely high levels, causing much more serious exposure. Also, keep in mind that most water treatment devices only work on the sinks where they are installed, so they will not reduce exposure in the shower, for example. Some devices are available to filter water for the whole home, however these are much more expensive.

Monitor your water quality

Read your water quality reports each year to ensure you are filtering any contaminants that may be present at unsafe levels. If you are a private well owner, consider testing your water quality on an annual basis. Existing contaminant levels may vary throughout the year and new contaminants may appear in your drinking water, so it is important to continue to read your water quality reports and watch out for any health notices from your water provider.

Ensure the filter remains certified by Department of Public Health

DPH updates the list of certified water filters each spring. Check the DPH website each year to ensure your filter remains on the list of certified filters.

Water filters: a short-term solution

Ensuring you have clean water at home is extremely important. However, it is not a long-term solution that will create a permanent supply of safe drinking water. If you are part of a public water system, talk to your water provider about ways to resolve the contamination issue. If you are a private well owner, contact one of the organizations listed below to discuss your options.



Questions to think about before buying a filter, either in a store or from a vendor

What contaminant is the filter able to remove or reduce?

Is the filter certified by DPH?

Is the filter an under-the-sink, counter, on-the-tap or all home filter?

Where can you get replacement filters? How expensive are they?

Where to find more information

Organizations

- **Community Water Center** provides organizing, education, and advocacy assistance to communities seeking to secure safe, clean, and affordable water in the San Joaquin Valley.
www.communitywatercenter.org
(559) 733-0219
- **Clean Water Action / Clean Water Fund** provides advocacy and technical assistance to help secure safe and affordable drinking water.
<http://www.cleanwateraction.org>
<http://www.cleanwaterfund.org>
(415) 369-9160
- **Self Help Enterprises** provides assistance for communities developing water and wastewater systems in the San Joaquin Valley by helping them secure funding and technical assistance.
<http://www.selfhelpenterprises.org>
(559) 651-1000

Resources

- Where to find the full list of DPH-certified treatment devices:
<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/certlic/device/Pages/watertreatmentdevices.aspx>
- California Department of Public Health:
<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/programs/Pages/DWP.aspx>
(916) 449-5600
- Information on Maximum Contaminant Levels and Public Health Goals:
<http://www.cdph.ca.gov/CERTLIC/DRINKINGWATER/Pages/Chemicalcontaminants.aspx>



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