

Home-Buyers Should Investigate Water and Septic Systems

Identifying certain potential environmental risks or concerns before purchasing a home can alleviate future stress and expense. Two related concerns have to do with a home's water supply and septic system.

Q: Why should I worry about a home's water supply, especially if I plan to buy a home in the city?

A: Most water supplies are safe. However, whether a house is supplied by a public water supply or a well, water contamination can be a problem. Contamination can come from a variety of sources including: accidental leakage of industrial materials or agricultural fertilizers; or the house's own water piping system, which may leach materials into the water.

Q: How can I find out if there is a problem with the water supply for the home I intend to buy?

A: The quickest way to find out if there are water is to ask the seller about any past water quality problems or for results of any water sampling that may have already been conducted. If the home is served by a public water system, you may be able to go online and find drinking water quality reports for the system as a whole. Alternatively, you could have the water tested by a local laboratory and ask a water quality specialist to review these results. The cost of such a test is usually under \$100. A competent home inspector may identify lead pipes or lead solder as possible sources of contamination. If the home is supplied by a well, testing should be conducted, since minor contaminants can travel long distances, and even natural materials can pose problems. Private water wells are not regulated by EPA or subject to drinking water standards, so it is commonly recommended that private water wells be tested annually for nitrate and coliform bacteria to detect contamination problems.

Q: What can I do if I discover that my home's drinking water contains contaminants?

A: A variety of filters are available, which may be attached to the tap or installed under the sink. Prices for these filters vary from about \$50 to almost \$1,000 and will typically require periodic maintenance and replacement.

Q: What questions should I ask when considering the purchase of a home with a septic system?

A: Septic system designs vary in effectiveness. Because an inadequate or poorly designed and maintained septic system can cause major pollution problems for you as a homeowner, you should find out about local regulations for septic systems, ask how often the system has been cleaned, learn the name of the contractor who has maintained the system and ask for the latest inspection certificate. If the system has not been maintained recently, include system maintenance and service as part of your purchase offer. Also, insist that the system be properly located and identified by the seller. Removing, replacing or upgrading a system can be a costly and inconvenient undertaking.

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This "Law You Can Use" consumer legal information column was provided by the Ohio State Bar Association. It was originally prepared by Cincinnati attorney Bill Hayes, and updated by Cincinnati attorney Chris Kahn of Frost Brown Todd LLC.

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