

THE ALERT

Volume 18, No. 3

MAY - JUNE 2002

Checks Turn into Electronic Withdrawals

Have you paid with a check lately and had the clerk scan it and give it back to you to keep?

If not, it may happen to you soon. More and more stores here are going to a system called “electronic check conversion.”

The days when you could write a check and count on having a few days before the money was taken out of your checking account have become a thing of the past.

With the new system, the money is taken out of your checking account almost immediately.

Here’s how that “conversion” happens: Information from your check, along with the amount, is sent electronically to your bank. The bank takes the money from your account and it electronically transfers that amount to the store.

You may not realize what is happening until your voided check is handed to you by the clerk with your receipt.



You should understand that electronic check conversion can also happen when you mail a check to pay a bill. The difference with a mailed check is that you won’t have your check returned to you by the bank and you won’t get a receipt.

Electronic payment means that your check is used as a source of information—for the check number, your account number and the number that identifies your financial institution. The information is then used to make a one-time

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electronic payment from your account. The check itself is not the method of payment.

The check you use can be completely filled out, not filled out at all or can be only partially filled out.

Because your electronic transaction may be processed faster than a check, **you must be sure you have enough money in your account at the time you make the purchase.**

You have different consumer rights with an electronic check conversion transaction than when you use your check as payment. For example, **with electronic check conversion, you have the right to an investigation by your financial institution when an error occurs.**

You have the right to receive notice when you provide your check. That notice must tell you that information from the check will be used to make an electronic payment from your account. The notice is required by the federal law.

Notice may be provided in different ways. For example, a merchant may post a sign at the cash register or may give you a written notice that you will be asked to sign.

When you provide your check, you have the right to a notice telling you of any fee that the merchant will collect from your account electronically if you do not have enough money in your account to cover the transaction. This fee is similar to a “bounced check” fee.

You have the right to receive a receipt when you make a purchase at a store. The receipt will include the date, amount, location and name of merchant.

You have the right to have this same information included as part of the regular account statement from your financial institution.

You have the right to ask your financial institution to investigate any electronic fund transfers from your account that you believe are unauthorized or incorrect.

You should always review your regular account statement from your financial institution to make sure that you were not charged the wrong amount or charged twice for the same transaction. **You have only 60 days (from the date your statement was sent) to tell the financial institution about the problem. You should immediately contact your financial institution if you see a problem.**

With electronic check conversion, you may not use the same check more than once. If you used the same check for more than one transaction and you had a problem with one of the transactions, your financial institution might have difficulty investigating the problem because the same check number would appear more than once.

If you don't want your check to be used for electronic check conversion, you may have to provide another form of payment (for example, cash, debit card or credit card).

Remember when involved with an electronic check conversion, you should ask yourself:

- * Do I have enough money in my account to cover the payment?
- * Did I receive a receipt?
- * Does the amount on the receipt match the amount of my purchase?
- * Was my check returned to me and voided?

When you receive your statement from your financial institution, you should make sure that the charges on your statement match your records.

To file a complaint, contact the Federal Trade Commission, Consumer Response Center, 600 Pennsylvania Ave., NW Washington, DC 20580; or call toll free 877-FTC-HELP (877-382-4357); or access its website at <http://www.ftc.gov/>.

Also send a copy of your complaint to the Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, Division of Consumer and Community Affairs, Washington, DC 20551; 202-452-3693; www.federalreserve.gov.

Make Sure Repair Contract Spells out Details

If you are thinking about fixing up your home this Spring, you need to be careful about whom you hire to do the work.

Choose a contractor who has a reputation for honesty and good workmanship.

Stay away from repairmen who come knocking at your door and offer you a too-good-to-be-true deal "because we are working in your neighborhood."

A far better way to start is to get recommendations from family members or friends who have had good experiences with particular contractors.

Try to get the names of three contractors. Meet with all three and get bids from them.

Make sure that all are bidding on exactly the same work and the same materials to be used.

Find out if the contractor is licensed and bonded in your city.

Ask how long the company has been in business and find out where its place of business is located.

Ask if the contractor guarantees its work, how long the guarantee lasts and whether it will take care of any needed corrections.

Check also on whether any equipment to be installed has a warranty.

Get everything spelled out in a writing.

The contract should spell out in detail such things as the work to be done, the materials to be used, the cost for each item and for labor, the payment schedule, guarantees and warranties, when the work will be finished, the contractor's name, address and phone number.

Make sure the contract is signed by the contractor and that it gives you a reasonable time to cancel if you can't get financing. In any case, it should say you have three business days (excluding Sundays and major holidays) to cancel if you sign the contract at your home, instead of its office.

Avoid having the contractor or his mortgage broker get your financing. Get your own financing.

Avoid getting a new mortgage on your house to do repairs because you could risk losing your home.

On financing, check first with the City Hall in your community to see if you qualify for any free or low-cost repairs or for a low-cost or no-cost loan.

To find an FHA-approved lender and to get information about loan programs, call the consumer service center of the Federal Housing and Urban Development Department at 1-800-767-7468.

MAY IS OLDER AMERICANS MONTH: CALL YOUR LOCAL OFFICE ON AGING FOR ACTIVITIES IN YOUR COMMUNITY. SENIOR DAY WILL BE MARKED MAY 16 FROM 10 TO 2 AT THE CLEVELAND CONVENTION CENTER. ALL ACTIVITIES ARE FREE . CALL 216-664-2833 FOR INFORMATION

Doctor Can't Bill Senior Patients for More than Medicare Allows

If your doctor is billing you for more than Medicare allows, he could be breaking the law.

Under Ohio law you cannot be billed by your health care provider for more than the amount Medicare approves.

That does not mean that you are not responsible for the Medicare deductible and 20% of the approved amount that Medicare does not pay. **It does mean that your doctor cannot charge you anything above the approved amount.**

Any charge above the Medicare approved amount is called balance billing. Balance billing is illegal in Ohio.

You can find the Medicare approved amount for any particular medical service by looking at the Explanation of Medicare Part B Benefits statement that you get in the mail.

The balance billing law which bans charges beyond the Medicare approved amount covers all kinds of health care practitioners, including doctors, surgeons, nurses, dieticians, therapists and emergency medical technicians practicing in Ohio. It covers all Medicare-covered services and supplies.

Originally the law benefited persons on limited incomes, but it now applies to all persons covered by Medicare.

Although the law bans billing patients for amounts over the Medicare approved amount, it does not mean that patients should not buy Medicare supplemental insurance to cover their 20% co-payment amounts, their Medicare deductibles, expenses not covered by Medicare or for health care delivered in states outside Ohio which do not prohibit balance billing

However, in shopping for Medicare supplement insurance, it is not necessary to buy "excess charges" coverage unless you anticipate needing medical care outside of Ohio.

If you have been over billed for a Medicare approved supply or service, phone the Ohio Department of Health at 1-800-899-7127.

If the state determines you have been balance billed, it will notify the health provider and give it an opportunity to reimburse you.

If the provider fails to do so, it will be subject to a public reprimand, repayment of the over charge and a \$500 fine for a first offense and a \$2,000 fine for additional offenses.

Check the Web for Senior Services...

The National Council on Aging has a quick, confidential and free web service that can help seniors and their families connect to the federal and state programs available to help them.

The BenefitsCheckUp service is free and confidential and contains from 40 to 60 different programs that are available to seniors in each state .

Access the web service at www.benefitscheckup.org. If you don't have a computer, your local library can help you get the information.

SENIOR CITIZEN CENTERS AND LEGAL AID OFFICES**CUYAHOGA COUNTY**

For information or to make an appointment in Cuyahoga County
phone the Senior Helpline
at 216-861-5479
on Tuesday, Wednesday or Thursday between 1 p.m. and 4:30 p.m.

EAST SIDE

Buckeye Senior Center
11802 Buckeye Road
216-491-8450

Emeritus House Senior Center
(at Indian Hills)
1554 East 193 Street
216-289-8586

Fairhill Institute
12200 Fairhill Road
216-421-1350

Goodrich-Gannett Center
1368 East 55 Street
216-432-1717

Helen S. Brown Senior Center
16100 Euclid Avenue
216-761-8410

Hough Opportunity Center
8555 Hough Avenue
216-421-5400

Maple Heights Senior Center
15901 Libby Road
216-587-5481

Martin DePorres Center
1264 East 123 Street
216-268-3909

Murtis H. Taylor Center
13422 Kinsman Avenue
216-283-4400

Stella Walsh Recreational Center
7345 Broadway Avenue
216-441-0111

Woodland Branch
Cleveland Public Library
5806 Woodland Avenue
216-623-7109

WEST SIDE

Lakewood Office on Aging
16024 Madison Avenue
216-521-1515

Metro Health Hospital
2500 Metro Health Drive
216-778-5551

Parma Senior Resource Center
7001 West Ridgewood
440-885-8155

West Side Legal Aid Office
3408 Lorain Avenue
216-961-6630

DOWNTOWN

Downtown Legal Aid Office
1223 West Sixth Street
216-687-1900
Extension 5336
TTY: 216-696-3081

For information or to make appointments outside Cuyahoga County
phone the offices listed below

LAKE COUNTY

Lake-Geauga Legal Aid, 8 North State Street, Painesville
440-352-6200 or TOLL FREE 888-808-2800

LORAIN COUNTY

The Legal Aid Society of Lorain County, 538 West Broad Street, Elyria
440-323-8240 or TOLL FREE 800-444-7348

ASHTABULA COUNTY

Ashtabula County Legal Aid, 121 East Walnut, Jefferson
440-576-8120 or TOLL FREE 866-873-9665