The Minnesota Department of Health (MDH) is reminding Minnesota residents to beware of false claims, deceptive sales pitches, and scare tactics being used by some water treatment companies to sell expensive and unnecessary water treatment systems. High profile investigations of groundwater contamination in Washington County and elsewhere in the state have resulted in a noticeable increase in the number of complaints regarding such deceptive sales activities.

Recently Richfield police issued an alert after residents reported getting green bottles left on their doorstep with a request for a water sample. After providing a sample, a homeowner received a visit from a salesman with an aggressive sales pitch for a treatment system costing more than $6,000 and had difficulty getting the salesman to leave. Officials in Falcon Heights also alerted residents after complaints of water testing kits and personal information requests being left at people's doors. The city directed residents to call 911 if they saw anyone dropping off testing kits. Several cities have complained about a website containing misleading information about municipal water suppliers and what tests are done on drinking water. The website has been used to try to sell treatment systems to homeowners.

While the pitch varies in these situations, the salesperson nearly always:

Recites a list of recent groundwater contamination problems across the state, regardless of whether the contamination actually affects the resident or not.

Conducts a series of water quality "tests" that the salesperson claims indicate the presence of contamination, when in fact they may simply indicate the presence of naturally occurring minerals in the water.

Misrepresents state and federal drinking water standards, claiming the resident's water exceeds those standards, and implying the water is unsafe to drink.

Offers a "one-time only" offer of a water treatment system at a "greatly reduced" price, when in fact the systems are being sold at grossly inflated prices.

In some of the worst instances, the salesperson has implied or said that he is working with the city's water utility or the state health department. In most cases, the systems are being sold for thousands of dollars more than they would cost if bought through a reputable water treatment company.

Even legitimate water treatment systems can be very expensive and if poorly operated or maintained may have limited effectiveness and, in some cases, make the water quality worse. Water treatment systems should be installed only if actually needed and selected to address the specific water problem.

If you use city water, it is safe to drink unless you are notified directly by the city that the water is not safe to drink. The United States Environmental Protection Agency sets standards for public water supplies and the water is tested regularly to ensure that these standards are met. You may find out the results of tests on a public water supply by contacting your water utility.

Water from a private well should also be free of unsafe levels of man-made contaminants if the well is properly constructed, is drawing from a safe aquifer, and has not been flooded or otherwise compromised. However, the only way to be certain about the quality of the water from a private well is to have it tested by a competent water testing laboratory. To find out where you can get your water tested, contact your community health service, local health department, or the Minnesota Department of Health, http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/wells/waterquality/test.html#labs

If you are considering the purchase of a home water treatment system, MDH recommends the following:

Make sure the treatment system or device you are considering is certified to achieve the results being claimed. Reliable certifiers include: NSF International, Underwriters Laboratories (UL), and the Water Quality Association (WQA). Links to these organizations can be found at http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/wells/links.html
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Work with a reputable water treatment company that has experience working in your area.

Verify that the installation is done by a licensed plumber or licensed water conditioning contractor (as required by state law). Such plumbers and contractors are licensed through the Minnesota Department of Labor and Industry (http://www.dli.mn.gov/CCLD/Plumbing.asp).

Compare water treatment systems and prices.

If you obtain your drinking water from a public water supply, such as a city system, contact your local water system for more information regarding your water quality.

If you use a private well, contact your county public health agency, the Minnesota Department of Health, or the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency regarding water quality in your area.

If you are contacted by a company to test your water and they say they are working with your city or the state, ask for the name and phone number of the company's contact person at that agency.

It is also important to remember that maintenance of any water treatment system or device is critical for long-term performance. Filters may need to be replaced, recharged or backwashed on a regular basis to ensure continued efficient removal of chemicals and to prevent the growth of bacteria or the formation of nitrite. Be wary of companies that claim their systems are maintenance free.

Those who believe they have been provided false or misleading information or that they have been subjected to unfair or high-pressure tactics in the course of a sales visit should contact the Minnesota Attorney General's office Consumer Complaints division at 651-296-3353 or 800-657-3787 or online at http://www.ag.state.mn.us/Consumer/Complaint.asp .

Additional information about drinking water and home water treatment systems is available on the MDH website at: http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/wells/index.html and http://www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/water/factsheet/com/pou.html