



Preparing for Digital TV

Q: Will I be forced to buy a digital TV soon?

A: No. But changes are coming that every consumer with a TV will want to understand. Congress has passed a law which requires that as of midnight, February 17, 2009, all full-power television stations have to stop broadcasting in analog format, and broadcast only in digital. All-digital broadcasting means a better picture and sound quality, and will free up frequencies for more wireless services for consumers. But if you currently own an analog TV, you are going to have to purchase a digital tuner box that converts your TV from analog to digital. If you have an analog TV, but you are hooked up to a cable TV or satellite TV service, you don't need to do anything further. Because of the new digital TV changes, you have three options:

1. Keep your existing analog TV and purchase a TV converter box, or
2. Use your analog TV, but buy cable, satellite or other pay service, or
3. Buy a new TV with a digital tuner.

The first step is to figure out if your TV is analog. If you receive TV broadcasts using an antenna, such as "rabbit ears" or a rooftop antenna, you are probably analog. If your TV says on it "Digital Tuner," or "DTV," "ATSC" or "HDTV," then you are digital and don't need a converter box. If you see "analog" or "NTSC" anywhere, you will need a converter. If you can't tell what kind of TV you've got, write down the manufacturer's name and model number found on the TV, and call a retail electronics store in your area, and ask them if your model has a digital tuner.

If your TV is analog, and you need a converter, the federal government (taxpayers) will provide you with two coupons, worth \$40 each, to be used to buy a digital-to-analog converter box. Remember: if you have cable or satellite service, you don't need a converter. You can order these coupons regardless of your household income, but you have to ask for coupons no later than March 31, 2009. It is expected that TV converter boxes will cost between \$50 and \$70. After using your two coupons, you will be charged by converter box sellers the remaining balance of between \$10 and \$30. Converter boxes must meet the standards set by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) in order to qualify for the Coupon Program. There are currently 18 models of converters, be sure to ask if it meets NTIA standards.

One way to get your converter coupons is to call free the 24-hour hotline 1-888-388-2009 and press "1", (TTY1-877-530-2634.) Or on the internet, go to <http://www.dtv2009.gov>. You can apply now, while supplies last. If you feel you can't apply by yourself, another person can apply for you, but they will need to use your home address.

All this may seem like one more hassle for TV viewers, but the federal government assures us that digital TV will give us all "an enhanced viewing experience." It will certainly enhance the bottom line of converter box makers.