



Ask the experts

Buyers' rights

I bought a £130 Rio MP3 player online from Amazon but the volume control broke within the warranty period. Amazon has told me I have to contact the makers to have it repaired or replaced. Is this correct?

DAVID DAWSON, LEEDS

No. In addition to remedies under the manufacturer's warranty, the Sale of Goods Act makes a seller responsible if goods do not 'conform to contract'. When you buy online you have the same rights as when you buy from a shop or mail order: goods must be as described, fit for purpose and of satisfactory quality. Depending on when the fault shows up and the specific circumstances, you have various options, from rejecting the item and getting your money back or having it repaired or replaced, to a full or partial refund. Contact a citizens advice bureau (www.citizensadvice.org.uk) or Which? Legal Service (www.which.co.uk/legalservice) for more advice.

PHOTOGRAPHY JOHN TRENHOLM, JACEY, CAMERA CREW



David Dawson: unsure who to contact about his faulty MP3

Cross-charge for water

I've read in the press recently that households which do not pay their water charges cause £10 to £15 a year to be added to the bills of those that do. Assuming this is true, to what extent is it legal for water companies to do this?

'IT', NEWCASTLE

The regulator, Ofwat, does indeed allow water companies to do this – though it admits that it's not ideal. A recent report from the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee found that the total revenue outstanding from unpaid bills in 2004 to 2005 was £962 million – £38 million more than the previous year. Water companies are banned from disconnecting people who don't pay and, contrary to recent reports, the government is not considering plans for trickle disconnection, where non-paying households receive enough water for only basic health and safety requirements.

Medicine prices

While in France last month, I bought a 250ml bottle of Gaviscon Original heartburn/indigestion relief for £2.67 (£1.72). A 300ml bottle costs £5.49 in the UK. Who's ripping us off – the manufacturer or retailer?

BOB LOUDON, PERTH

The recommended over-the-counter retail prices for the 150ml bottle (available here and in France) are £3.29 and €5.25 (£3.38) respectively – so Gaviscon is actually dearer in France. The key difference is that in France you can get Gaviscon Original on prescription (in the UK it's more likely to be Gaviscon Advance). The price of prescription medicines in France is set by the government, often at



Which? focus on HDTV

HD basics

What is HDTV and what do I need to watch it?

HDTV stands for high-definition TV – a high-quality format some programmes are made in. Pictures broadcast in HD are clearer and sharper when viewed on a suitable TV. TVs with the HD-ready logo have the minimum spec needed. You must also be receiving an HD broadcast, most commonly via Sky (see p11) or Telewest (see *Which?*, July, p10).

HD signals

Is it true that there are different types of HD signal?

Yes. There are currently two: 720p and 1080i. The numbers relate to the horizontal lines that make up a picture (normal TV displays 576 visible lines). The letters relate to the way the lines are displayed: p (for progressive) means they're scanned one after another; i (for interlaced) means that odd-numbered lines are scanned first, then even-numbered. Your brain combines the scanned lines into a picture. There's very little difference in picture quality and both work with HD-ready TVs.

A third signal, 1080p (with even higher-resolution displays to match), promises even better pictures, but such broadcasts are still a way off.

Sharper and clearer HD pictures (far right) are made up of more lines (or pixels) than standard pictures (right)

HD and Freeview

Can I watch HD on Freeview?

There are no firm plans to launch terrestrial HD. The BBC is trialling the technology but nothing will happen nationwide till 2012, when analogue TV is switched off, thereby freeing up sufficient bandwidth.

IDTVs and HD

Will my IDTV become obsolete if terrestrial HD is launched?

No. Standard-definition (SD) content will still be broadcast in the same way. So your current IDTV (a TV with a Freeview tuner built in) or set-top box will be able to receive signals as normal. However, you'll need another set-top box to receive terrestrial HD signals.

Standard-definition TV

So does normal TV look as good on HD-ready TVs?

In many cases, no. HD-ready TVs are almost exclusively flat-panel



Your consumer questions answered by our experts, plus your chance to share your experiences with fellow Which? members



James Tallack
Services research assistant
Answers this month's questions



Mike Briggs
Senior researcher
Answers common queries about high-definition TV

LCD or plasmas and SD picture quality tends to be better on conventional cathode-ray TVs.

The right time for HD

Why is HD taking off now?

There are three reasons. New ways to compress HD signals, such as MPeg4, have been developed; it's now cheaper to broadcast and produce HD; and the price of flat-panel HD-ready TVs has plummeted.

HD hype vs reality

HDTV is all hype, surely?

Well, it's expensive, quality can vary, and true HD content is currently a bit thin on the ground. But it can look amazing, with almost 3D-like effects. And the really good news is that, as more programmes are recorded in HD, everyone will see a rise in picture quality: HD content looks better than normal TV, even when broadcast and viewed in the usual way.



You can change gear on a semi-automatic car. On this Honda Jazz CVT-7 you use the buttons on the steering wheel to do so

levels below the recommended retail price, and French pharmacies can also sell some prescription medicines over the counter. This could account for the lower price in this instance. We'll be looking at how UK prices compare with prices in other countries next month.

No car tax reminder

I always tax my car as soon as I receive a reminder. This year, the first I heard from the DVLA was a £40 fine notice for not paying and a warning that this would double if I didn't pay.

How many others are affected?

ANNE BLACKWELL, MARLBOROUGH

The DVLA told us it does its best to send reminders but is under no legal obligation to do so. It is the owner's responsibility to make sure their car is always licensed. You can apply for a new disc up to two calendar months before the existing one expires. Advance applications must be made on a vehicle licence application form (V10 for cars, V85 for trucks), from post offices and local DVLA offices. You can take or post your application to selected post offices or a DVLA local office. You can also renew online. Go to www.direct.gov.uk/Motoring for more information.

Semi-automatic cars

What is a semi-automatic car, and could my wife, who is licensed only for automatics, drive one?

CYRIL SKIPWORTH, BIRMINGHAM

A semi-automatic car is an automatic car which allows you to change gear – by means of buttons on the steering wheel or by moving the gear lever into 'manual' mode. All semi-automatic cars also operate in D (drive) mode, which means you don't have to press any buttons or move the gear lever – you just use the brake and the accelerator pedals to stop and go as you would with a fully automatic car. Trade names include CVT-7 (as in the photo, above), DSG, Easytronic, MMT, Multitronic, Tiptronic and SMG. Although semi-automatic cars operate in various different ways, anyone with an automatic-only licence can drive them.

SHARE YOUR QUESTIONS AND EXPERIENCES

You can contact us by email or post

■ letters@which.co.uk

■ Letters, PO Box 44, Hertford X, SG14 1SH

Your say

Share your stories with fellow members

Airline food

Our request for your views on airline food produced hot and cold responses

What you told us

'Last October we travelled with Malaysia Airlines. The food was very nice, a fair choice, and served regularly. This March we made the same journey with Emirates. Staff couldn't have been more helpful in tending to the needs of our 15-month-old granddaughter. The food again was excellent international cuisine, even in economy.'
BRIAN AND STELLA, BARNSELY

'I recently travelled Air France Birmingham to Paris on two consecutive weeks. Although only a short, early morning flight, I was given a muffin and any drink on the way out and a bag of cheese biscuit nibbles and any drink on the early evening return. My verdict: all right but could do better – particularly early morning.'
RAY, BROMSGROVE

'My main problem is there is never any distinction between various types of vegetarian. I am a lacto-vegetarian (I eat all dairy products); airlines always give me vegan meals, though I always describe what I can/ do eat.'
JANE, NEWBURY

'Airlines should concentrate on serving cold meals, which can be kept chilled, and cut out the need of staff to heat them up.'
ARTHUR, WALLASEY

Next month

Broadband or dial up? Share your stories of switching or getting connected

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