

CONSUMER'S EDGE

CONSUMER PROTECTION DIVISION, MARYLAND OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL

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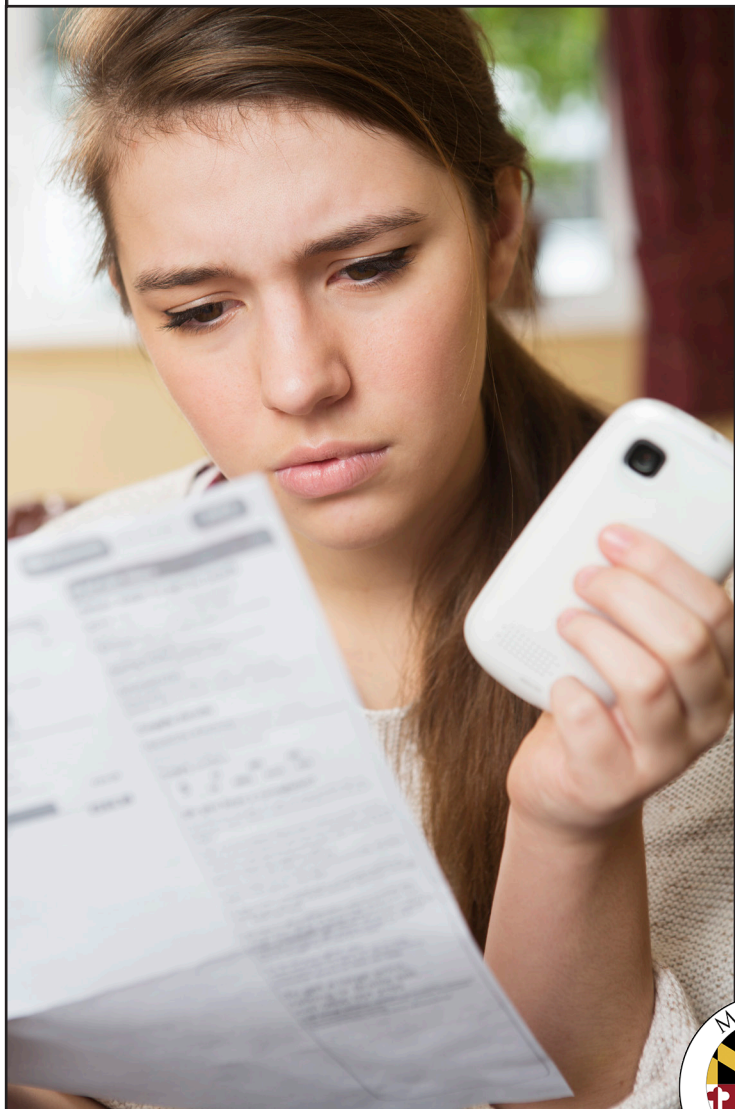
YOUR PHONE BILL MAY BE 'CRAMMED' WITH UNEXPECTED CHARGES

It is becoming more and more common for consumers to use their phone, especially their mobile phone, as a way of paying for things other than their phone service. For example, many smartphone apps allow you to make purchases by having the charge placed directly on your mobile phone bill, instead of having to provide your credit card number. With land lines, these charges are often for things like “enhanced” long distance or voicemail services that are provided by companies other than your phone company.

“Cramming” occurs when charges appear on your phone bill for goods and services that you did not authorize, or that you were tricked into authorizing. If you do not read your phone bills carefully, you may never notice the charges. Often, cramming occurs after a consumer enters a phone number in a sweepstakes or on a website.

Before you can be charged on your phone bill for a service provided by someone other than your phone company, you should be required to provide two levels of authorization. This is called “double opt-in.” Often, the first “opt-in” is made by providing your phone number. The second “opt in” often happens when you respond to a text message, or when a company sends you a text message with a code that you can enter to authorize a purchase online. Sometimes the opt-in process occurs on a phone call, either with a live operator or with a computerized system. Cramming often happens when a consumer is tricked into completing the “double opt-in” process without being informed that they will be charged.

For example, some consumers were crammed when they took a free online “IQ quiz.” At the end of the quiz, the consumers were prompted to enter their cell phone number on the website if they wanted to get the results. After entering their phone numbers, consumers received a text message with a code to type on the website that would unlock the results. The consumers typed the code into the website and clicked on a checkbox agreeing to the “terms and conditions.” However, at the very bottom of the page in extremely fine print there was a disclosure that said that by entering the code, the consumers were agreeing to enroll in a membership that would charge them \$10 a month for access to ringtones—a service totally unrelated to the IQ quiz. The charge for the membership was then placed on the consumers’ phone bills. In some cases, consumers were charged for over a year before they noticed the additional charges.



Here are some tips to help you avoid and correct cramming charges:

- **Always read your phone bill carefully.** While vigilance is best, some cramming occurs when a virus or malware infects your smartphone. In that case, your best defense is to catch the charges early. If you identify any charges you don't understand, call your local phone company for an explanation and refund.
- **Check the details.** Read the fine print whenever you're asked to provide your phone number, and be particularly cautious when responding to text messages that you get after entering your phone number on a website or in a contest.
- **Be careful when responding to text messages from unknown numbers.** Some consumers are crammed when they respond to confusing text messages. The consumers' responses have been used by unscrupulous companies to claim that the consumers authorized charges.
- **Contests and Sweepstakes.** Be cautious when providing information to enter a sweepstakes or contest. Avoid entering contests that require you to sign the entry form. Or, prior to entering, read the entry form carefully to make certain the fine print does not relate to an unwanted goods or services.

If you are being billed for a service you did not order, ask the phone company to remove the charge. You may also file a complaint with the Consumer Protection Division by calling 410-528-8662 or 1-888-743-0023, or online at www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov, and with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) at <http://www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov>.

Helpful Websites

For more information about telephone service scams, you may want to visit:

Federal Communications Commission: Understanding Your Telephone Bill

<https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/understanding-your-telephone-bill>

National Consumers League <http://www.nclnet.org/>



HOW TO CONTACT US

Consumer Protection Division

200 St. Paul Place, 16th Fl., Baltimore, MD 21202

- **General Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-8662
Toll-free: 1-888-743-0023 TDD: 410-576-6372
9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday-Friday
www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/CPD/
- **Health Consumer Complaints:** 410-528-1840
Toll-free: 1-877-261-8807 TDD: 410-576-6372
9 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday
www.marylandcares.org
- **For information on branch offices** in Largo, Salisbury, Hagerstown, and a full list of offices across Maryland, visit: www.marylandattorneygeneral.gov/Pages/contactus.aspx

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