



CUBFacts

Analog-to-Digital TV

The Transition to Digital TV: What You Need To Know

What is the transition to digital TV?

The federal government has mandated that by June 12, 2009 most TV stations stop broadcasting analog signals and switch to digital signals. This transition, which will force consumers to buy “converter boxes” for their older televisions, will affect 35 million households across the country. Analog signals translate audio or video signals into electronic pulses while digital signals are supposed to be more efficient, breaking up the signals into binary code—a series of 1s and 0s.

Wasn't the deadline Feb. 17?

The original deadline was Feb. 17, but Congress moved to delay the transition to June 12 out of fear that televisions in millions of households would go black because of confusion over the switch. The federal government also has pumped \$650 million in Stimulus Package money into the transition program to better ensure that things go smoothly come June 12. That money is helping to get consumers the necessary coupons to buy “converter boxes” that will keep their TVs operating properly.

Why has the government mandated this?

The transition has been pushed by the broadcast and cable industry. Digital signals will make more channels available to broadcasters, who say the transition will lead to higher-quality pictures and sound than an analog signal could provide. Digital signals also take up less space than analog signals, which will free up the airwaves for other purposes, such as a wireless network devoted solely to police and fire emergencies.

What does this mean for the consumer?

This transition does NOT mean you need to buy a new television. If your television does not have a built-in digital tuner and you use “bunny ears” or

antennas to pick up your local TV channels, you will need to buy a converter box. The general rule of thumb is that if you own a TV manufactured after 2004 you will NOT need a converter box. Most TVs made in the last five years have digital tuners.

Will cable customers need a converter box?

Some will, but not by the June 12 deadline. The lone exception is the satellite dish customer who still uses “bunny ears” to get his or her local channels. In the short term, cable companies will continue to send both analog and digital signals over their cable lines. However, they will begin to phase out analog signals. The pace and timing in which this transition is done depends upon individual cable companies, but by 2012 all cable companies have to stop sending analog signals. Once that happens, TVs in your home that are hooked up to cable boxes will be fine, but those TVs that are attached directly to the cable connection in the wall will need converter boxes—unless your TV has a built-in digital tuner.

How will I pay for the converter box?

The federal government is allowing up to two \$40 coupons per household to be used for the purchase of converter boxes (one coupon per converter box). Consumers can either call **1-888-DTV-2009 (1-888-388-2009)** or apply online at **www.dtv2009.gov**. The \$40 coupons expire 90 days after a consumer gets them. It may cost consumers at a minimum \$10 to pay for a converter box, since the current ones on the market are \$50 or more.

I bought my converter box. Now what?

Don't throw away your antenna. While analog signals can travel through walls and trees, digital signals are considerably weaker. You will need your “bunny ears” to help you get the appropriate

channels. While those with digital cable tuners shouldn't be affected, in worse-case scenarios, people will have to invest in an outdoor antenna.

What problems may arise?

Beware that cable companies and retailers may try to take advantage of confusion in the analog-to-digital transfer in order to sell consumers expensive viewing packages or TVs they don't need.

There also is the potential that large numbers of televisions will be thrown away, even though they need not be. This so called "e-waste" is problematic because TVs contain large amounts of lead, which could pile up in landfills, adding to pollution.

Finally, the fact that digital signals are not as strong as analog signals may create an additional cost for consumers who are forced to invest in an outdoor antenna.

Where can I get more information?

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has set up a hotline for digital TV issues: **1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322)**. Also, this government website contains helpful information: **www.dtv2009.gov**. Another site that contains a wealth of information and some reviews of converter-box performance is run by Consumer Reports and can be found at **www.consumerreports.org/dtv/**.