



Hidden Telephone Charges

Do you think about extra charges and hidden fees before using the telephone in a hotel room, dialing from a pay phone or making a collect call? If you don't, you're not alone. The Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel (OCC), the residential utility consumer advocate, has produced this fact sheet to bring to your attention some of the hidden charges as well as tips to help you avoid unexpectedly high telephone bills.

Hotel room telephones

Telephone calls made from your room can result in costly charges being added to your hotel bill. Charges vary according to the hotel. While calls from room-to-room and to the hotel's front desk are usually free, many hotels charge a fee for local, toll-free "800" number and long-distance calls.

Local calls may cost as much as \$1.50 per call and there could be additional per-minute fees.

Toll-free calls also may involve charges from the hotel, even if you're accessing a calling card's "800" number. Many hotels that charge for toll-free calls bill you at a rate similar to that of a local call.

Long-distance calls may include several charges, including a per-minute rate, a connection charge and taxes. A minimum fee and other surcharges from the hotel or telephone company may also apply.

If you decide to make a 10 minute long-distance call from a hotel room, here is an example of how the charges can quickly add up:

What you can do to help save money...

- **Consult the hotel directory or talk to someone**

Connection charge	\$2.25
First minute billed at the direct-dial, operator-assisted rate	\$0.40
Additional nine minutes @ \$.58 per minute rate	\$5.22
Hotel surcharge	\$0.16
Tax	\$0.08
Total	\$8.11
Average cost per minute	\$0.81

at the front desk. At the beginning of your stay, be sure to find out how much a typical call will cost based on your planned use of the hotel room telephone. Be sure to ask about any taxes or surcharges.

- **Prepaid calling cards** may be an attractive alternative. Cards with rates of 10 cents per minute or less are available. A prepaid card may carry hidden charges of its own, so be sure to read the "fine print" before purchasing a card.
- **Calling cards** from your long-distance telephone company may be available at a lower per-minute rate than the hotel. Charges made by using this card will be added to your home telephone bill. These cards may carry hidden charges so be sure to read the "fine print" before using.
- **Courtesy telephones** in the hotel lobby may be available and eliminate any hotel room charges for calling a toll-free number.
- **Cellular phones** may help you avoid many of the charges associated with hotel room calls. Remember that depending on your service plan, roaming and long-distance charges may apply.

Prepaid calling cards

Advertisements promote prepaid calling cards as low as three cents per minute, however those attractive rates often do not include hidden fees and surcharges. Charges and rates vary among calling card companies.

Connection fees of as much as \$3 per call may apply. These fees are subtracted from the available minutes or units remaining on the card and apply whenever a call is connected, including those answered by voice mail.

A maintenance fee may be imposed. This fee is subtracted from the available minutes or units remaining on the card. The amount of the fee and how often it is applied may vary based on the calling card provider and the individual card's terms and conditions.

International calls are usually priced at a higher rate than domestic calls which will deplete a prepaid

continued on other side >

> **continued from other side**

call card's available minutes/units more quickly. Remember to check the fine print.

Pay phone surcharges, which can add as much as 75 cents to each call.

Billing in two or three minute increments. For example, if your calling card company bills you in three-minute increments, a call lasting one minute and ten seconds would be billed as a three-minute call.

Minutes may expire after a certain period of time.

What you can do to help save money...

- **Read the "fine print."** Expiration dates, billing practices and extra fees should be disclosed in the details found on the company's cards, packaging, advertisements or website. If you have questions, be sure to contact the company for details before purchasing the card.
- **Do the math.** Using the per-minute rate and any fees that apply, find out how much you would pay for your typical call. Also find out how much a one-minute call would cost in case you get an answering machine or dial the wrong telephone number.
- **Find out customer service details.** Know when customer service is available in case you need assistance with a billing problem or credit for a misdialled telephone number.

Collect calls

Collect calls are billed to the consumer who receives and accepts the call. Many telephone companies advertise collect call services as a way to save money, but a closer look reveals that these types of calls can be costly.

Collect call rates can be 65 cents per minute or higher.

Surcharges of \$3.99 or more may be applied to each

call.

Operator assistance charges of up to \$6.50 could apply if you make the collect call using a telephone company representative's assistance.

Universal Service Fees are charged to help fund federal government programs that make local telephone service more affordable for low-income consumers, schools and libraries.

What you can do to help save money ...

- **Ask questions before accepting the call** to find out the per minute rate and whether any surcharges will be applied. This information must be provided upon request.
- **Read the "fine print"** of collect call advertisements and ask questions to the company providing the service. Companies may not advertise the total cost of their service.
- **Pre-paid calling cards** are one way to avoid paying certain surcharges and many offer low per-minute rates. As with collect calling services, you should ask about any additional fees and taxes that may apply.
- **Personal 1-800 numbers** are an option you can provide your friends and family. Ask your long-distance company about its rates and compare those to other options.
- **Cellular phones** have become a popular alternative with many plans offering competitive monthly rates and no long-distance charges.

Where to go for help

If you have a question about hidden telephone charges or other telephone issues, you may call the OCC toll free at 1-877-PICKOCC (1-877-742-5622) or visit its website at www.pickocc.org. The OCC also has fact sheets available on other important issues like telephone rights, disconnection and reconnection and understanding monthly charges.

For additional information from the Office of the Ohio Consumers' Counsel:

Call: 1-877-PICKOCC (1-877-742-5622) toll free or (614) 466-8574
Write: 10 West Broad Street, 18th Floor, Columbus, Ohio 43215-3485
E-mail: occ@occ.state.oh.us • Internet Address: www.pickocc.org