

Beware of “free” trials

We’ve all seen offers for “free trials” of products or services. It seems like a good idea because if you don’t like it, you can just end the trial and pay nothing, right?

Not necessarily. Here are some of the ways dishonest companies may use these trial offers:

- They make it hard for the consumer (you) to cancel. Perhaps you need to call a phone number, but you can’t get anyone to answer or they put you on hold for long periods.
- They hide the terms and conditions in tiny type that’s hard to read.
- They use pre-checked boxes as the “default” setting online.
- They have extremely strict rules about returning and canceling something.
- They charge you for shipping and handling. This means they now have your credit card number, making it easy for them to charge you for something later.
- They automatically enroll you in a club or subscription that sends you things each month. Or, the subscription automatically renews without your consent.

Even with honest and good business practices, you’ll still need to cancel or take some other action before the trial ends. If you don’t, the company may take this as a go-ahead to charge you for something you may not want.



Not all free trials are scams. But, before you sign up for one, take these steps:



Research the company online.

Look for customer complaints about their service or trial offers.



Read the terms and conditions.

If you can’t find them, don’t sign up.



Beware of pop-ups.

A pop-up on a website may be from a different company. Be sure you deal with the company you really want.



Watch out for pre-checked boxes.

A little checkmark may give your consent to continue the offer past the free trial or to sign up for more products.



Mark your calendar.

Be sure you are ready to cancel your trial before it expires. Plan to do this at least a couple of days in advance so you are well within the time limit.



Check your credit and debit card statements.

If you see unknown charges, contact the company. If that doesn't work, contact your credit card company to dispute the charge.

If you've been wrongly charged for a free trial offer, report it to the Federal Trade Commission. You also can contact your local consumer protection agency, and file a complaint with the Better Business Bureau.

Source: Federal Trade Commission