

How to Avoid Filter Lock-In Before You Buy

Three questions that reveal whether a water filter owns you.

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The 3-question checklist + red/green flags. Take it filter shopping.

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Filter lock-in works like this: the system is cheap (or "free with subscription"), the replacement cartridges only come from one company, and three years later you're paying triple per filter with no exit. It's the printer-ink business model, under your sink.

The fix takes about five minutes, *before* you buy. Ask these three questions about any system you're considering:

1. Can anyone sell me replacement filters, or only you?

If the answer is "only us" — or a hedged "we recommend genuine cartridges" — you're looking at lock-in.

2. What are the exact dimensions and media specs of each cartridge?

A company confident in its hardware publishes this. "10-inch × 2.5-inch, spun PP, 5 micron" is an answer. "It's our advanced proprietary filtration" is a dodge.

3. What happens if you discontinue this model?

With universal housings: nothing — the cartridges are a commodity. With proprietary cartridges: you own a very expensive paperweight.

Red flags

● **No dimensions published anywhere.** If you can't find cartridge sizes on the product page, manual, or support docs, that's deliberate.

● **"Smart" cartridges with chips.** Some systems electronically reject third-party cartridges. Convenience feature or handcuffs? You decide — but know which one it is.

● **Subscription required to keep the warranty.** Maintenance plans are fine. Warranty hostages are not.

● **Replacement cost hidden until checkout.** If filter prices take detective work to find, the number is embarrassing.

Green flags

● **Standard 10" × 2.5" housings.** The universal cartridge standard. Any brand's filters fit.

● **Full specs published.** Dimensions, micron ratings, media type — all on the product page.

● **NSF/ANSI marks.** Independent certification, not just marketing claims.

● **Filter prices listed openly.** A company proud of its filter prices puts them next to the system price.

The honest case FOR lock-in

We'll say it: lock-in isn't evil. If you never want to think about filters — auto-shipments arrive, one app handles everything, zero decisions — a proprietary subscription system is genuinely

convenient, and convenience has real value. Plenty of smart people happily pay the premium. That's rational.

Lock-in is only a problem when **you didn't know you were signing up for it**. Now you know the three questions. Use them, pick your side deliberately, and you'll never be surprised by a filter bill again.

Frequently asked questions

What is filter lock-in?

When a filtration system only accepts the manufacturer's own proprietary cartridges — so you can't shop around, and the manufacturer can raise prices or discontinue the model without you having alternatives.

How can I tell if a water filter uses proprietary cartridges?

Ask: can anyone sell me replacements, what are the exact dimensions and media specs, and what happens if the model is discontinued. Twist-lock or snap-in cartridges with no published standard dimensions are usually proprietary.

Is filter lock-in always bad?

No. If you want zero decisions — auto-shipments, one app, matched cartridges — a proprietary system is genuinely convenient and the premium is rational. Lock-in is only bad when you didn't know you were signing up for it.

What's the alternative to proprietary filter systems?

Systems built on the universal 10" × 2.5" cartridge standard. Any manufacturer's cartridge fits, so you can compare prices and switch suppliers freely — typically cutting annual filter costs to about a third of what a proprietary cartridge system charges.

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→ [What Fits a 10-Inch Filter Housing?](#)

→ [Universal vs Brand-Name Filters](#)

For general information only. We're biased — we sell universal-standard systems — but the three questions work on our products too. Try them. We don't cure disease; we filter water.

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