

KNOWLEDGE ON TAP



Customer Care Center | 1339 Main Street
803.545.3300 | CustomerCare@ColumbiaSC.net

A GUIDE FROM COLUMBIA WATER
City of Columbia, SC



CONTACT INFORMATION

Please contact Columbia Water at 803.545.3300 if you have any concerns about your water service or water meter.

Who to contact if you need assistance:

Billing questions

You can contact Columbia Water's Customer Care Center several ways:

- 💧 **In person:** First floor of 1339 Main Street (1136 Washington Street) or 3905 Ensor Avenue
- 💧 **Phone:** 803.545.3300 (Answered 24/7)
- 💧 **Email:** CustomerCare@ColumbiaSC.net
- 💧 **Online:** www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/service-requests

Leak Repair Credit

If you discovered a leak and had it repaired, you may be eligible for a credit:
www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/utility-billing/plumbing-adjustments

Water and Sewer Rates

The latest water and sewer rates are published here:
www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/utility-billing/water-sewer-rates

Starting or Discontinuing Service

Contact Columbia Water Customer Care at 803.545.3300.

Trouble Paying Your Bill?

Columbia Water Customer Care (ask about the Change-Up Program) at 803.545.3300
Cooperative Ministry at 803.799.3853
Salvation Army at 803.462.4240 or 803.765.0260

CONTENTS

Understanding City Water Billing	1
General Billing Questions	1
Account Set-up	3
Estimated Bills	3
Understanding Your Water Meter	7
Meter & Service Line Maintenance	8
General Meter Questions	8
Meter Accuracy	9
Leaks and Plumbing Issues	13
Cost of Leaks	13
Looking for Leaks	13



Customer Care Center

1339 Main Street

803.545.3300

CustomerCare@ColumbiaSC.net



UNDERSTANDING CITY WATER BILLING

Example Inside-City Residential Bill Detail

CHARGE DESCRIPTION	SERVICE PERIOD	DAYS OF SERVICE	METER NUMBER	PREVIOUS READING	PRESENT READING	CONSUMPTION / UNITS	CONSUMPTION 1 YEAR AGO	CHARGE
Residential Water		31	12345678	221	229	8	8	
Residential Sewer		31						
Storm Water		31				0		
Total New Charges								

General Billing Questions

What are my payment options?

See www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/utility-billing/payment-options for specific payment options.

For bills that are **current**, you can make payments by:

- ✓ Mailing-in
- ✓ Walking-in
- ✓ Bank draft (must be set up)
- ✓ Drive-thru
- ✓ Online*
- ✓ Phone*
- ✓ Night deposit drop box

Bills that are **past due** can be paid by one of the following:

- ✓ Mailing-in
- ✓ Walking-in
- ✓ Online*
- ✓ Phone* (2 business days to update records)
- ✓ Night deposit drop box (will not post until the next business day)

* Service fees may apply

If you need to pay a bill and are concerned about having your service shut off, visit one of the City of Columbia's payment centers either on the first floor of 1339 Main Street (1136 Washington Street) or 3905 Ensor Avenue in Eau Claire.

Where do I find the latest water & sewer rates?

The latest water and sewer rates are published here:

www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/utility-billing/water-sewer-rates



How do I read my bill?

Columbia Water charges its customers **base fees** and **volumetric fees** for both water and sewer. Your bill adds the base and volumetric fees together to give you your water charges and sewer charges separately. Customers inside the City are also charged a storm water utility fee while customers outside the City are charged hydrant and fire fees in addition to their water and sewer charges.

Can you help me estimate my bill based on different levels of water usage?

Yes. Columbia Water provides an online residential bill estimator that will show you how a typical residential bill is calculated. You can find it here: www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/estimator.

Follow the on-screen instructions to indicate the type of residential bill you have and input the consumption units from your bill. In the example above, this amount is 8. The estimator will give a breakdown of the charges for a typical bill. You can also use it to determine what your bill might look like if your usage changes, for example if you incorporate water saving efforts.

If you have any questions, or if your bill is not the same as what the online bill estimator is reporting, you can contact 803.545.3300 and speak to a Customer Care Representative.

Please note, the estimator will not include credits, payment plans, donations, or other fees that are not part of a "typical" residential bill. It also does not estimate commercial bills or residential bills using more than 100 units (10,000 cubic feet).



Who do I contact if I need assistance with a billing question?

You can contact Columbia Water's Customer Care Center several ways:

- ✓ **In person:** First floor of 1339 Main Street (1136 Washington Street) or 3905 Ensor Avenue
- ✓ **Phone:** 803.545.3300 (Answered 24/7)
- ✓ **Email:** CustomerCare@Columbiasc.net
- ✓ **Online:** www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/service-requests

Please note that Customer Care staff can only discuss billing issues with the account holder or someone that the account holder has authorized to discuss the account. If you are not the account holder, the account holder will need to provide a signed statement to Customer Care authorizing staff to discuss the account with you.

What if I have trouble paying my bill?

If you have trouble paying your bill, you may be eligible to participate in the City's Change-Up Program. For more information, contact a Columbia Water Customer Care Representative at 803.545.3300. For other bill-paying assistance, you can contact the Cooperative Ministry at 799.3853 or the Salvation Army at 462.4240 or 765.0260. They may be able to help.

Account Set-up

I think I have service, but I did not receive a bill. What should I do?

All customers receive a water bill each month. If you do not receive a monthly bill, you must contact Customer Care immediately at 803.545.3300. Failure to receive a bill does not relieve the customer of the obligation for payment nor from the consequences of non-payment.

How do I set up new service?

You will need to submit a signed **Water Service Contract Form** then speak with a Customer Care representative. There is also a \$30 New Account Fee and a \$15 Connection Fee that will be added to your first bill. Visit www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/utility-billing/new-service for details.

How do I transfer service?

All past due balances must be zero dollars (\$0.00) before you can request to transfer service. Contact Customer Care to request a transfer of service. There is also a \$30 New Account Fee and a \$15 Connection Fee that will be added to your first bill. Visit www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/utility-billing/transfer-service for details.

How do I discontinue service?

To arrange to discontinue water service, call Customer Care at 803.545.3300. Only the account holder will be allowed to terminate service. The last four digits of the social security number must match the account information or the request will not be processed.

The account holder will need to fill out a **Disconnect Form**. All final readings will be taken within five business days of the termination effective date, and the account holder will be responsible for the final bill.

Visit www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/utility-billing/discontinue-service for details.

Estimated Bills

I received a bill this month, but it says "Estimated." What does that mean?

When a meter reader cannot access your meter or cannot see the numbers on your meter, the bill for that month will be based on an estimated use. Estimated use is based off of your average past usage. Columbia Water will continue using an estimated reading until the meter reader is able to take a reading.

Why couldn't the meter reader get to my meter?

Common reasons a meter reader cannot access meters are when it is:

- × Behind a locked gate
- × In a yard with a dog or animal of concern
- × Covered by debris, trash, vegetation, a vehicle, or something else

Do meter readers ever skip meters that they can access?

Our meter routes are designed so that every meter should be read for each monthly bill. Meter readers only skip meters if something is blocking them from safely accessing a meter. If you believe your meter is accessible but you received an estimated bill, call 803.545.3300.

The Customer Care representative will arrange to have someone from Water Distribution explain why your meter was not read for that month. If you still have concerns, we can arrange to have someone from Water Distribution meet you at the meter to explain the issue.

What can I do to help the meter reader access my meter?

First, know where your water meter is. Then, make sure you do not cover it with yard waste, trash, vehicles, or anything else. Finally, make sure you have not locked it behind a gate or left an animal that might cause the meter reader concern in the yard with the meter. Meter readers need to be able to access your meter to take a reading. If you believe your meter is accessible but you received an estimated bill, call 803.545.3300.

The meter is my property. I have put a lock on it to keep the meter readers from accessing it.



Your meter and meter box are the property of Columbia Water. Staff must be able to access the meter box and the meter at all times.

How are estimated bills calculated?

If the customer has at least 3 months of use on record, the average of this use, up to a year, will be the estimated use. Past use is based on the customer, not the property. Therefore, if a customer has recently moved and transferred service, the average use may include use from their previous residence.



Meter readers need to be able to access your meter to take a reading.



Meter & Service Line Maintenance

Who owns and maintains the meter? What about the lines attached to the meter?

Columbia Water owns and maintains:

- 🔥 The water main
- 🔥 The water service line running to the meter
- 🔥 The meter box
- 🔥 The meter
- 🔥 The sewer service line from the property line to the sewer main
- 🔥 The sewer main

If there is a problem with any of these, contact Columbia Water at 803.545.3300.

The property owner owns and is responsible for maintaining:

- 💧 The water service line running between the meter and the building
- 💧 All plumbing attached to the water service line
- 💧 And the sewer service line up to the property line

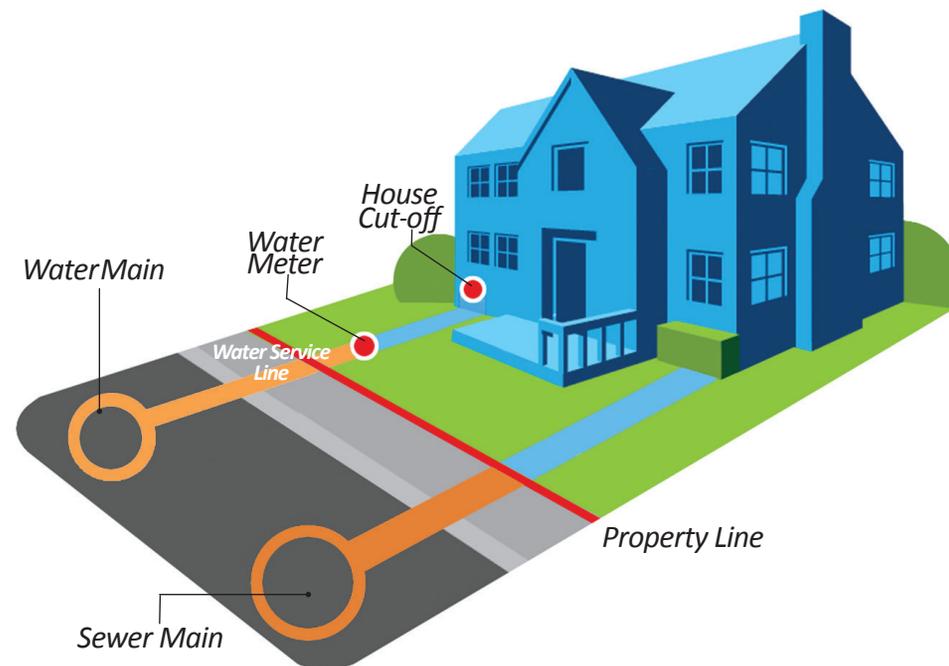
General Meter Questions

Where do I find my meter?

Most meters are located along the right of way in your front yard. For most residential customers, a box will look like:



- 🟠 Columbia Water
- 🟡 Property Owner



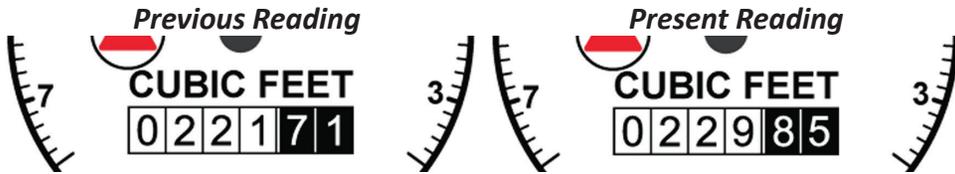
The image above shows which portions of a customers' water and sewer service are the responsibility of Columbia Water and which are the responsibility of the property owner. Columbia Water cannot repair private lines.

How do you read a meter?

Your water meter is designed to read cubic feet. You are charged for your water use in units of 100 cubic feet. When Columbia Water staff read your meter, they do not round up. Instead, they drop the two black boxes on your meter from the reading. This means you are only billed for complete units of 100 cubic feet.

Over time, these partial uses will add up to a complete 100 cubic feet unit that will be added to that month's bill. For example, if you use on average 750 cubic feet per month, during one month you may only be charged for 700 cubic feet while the next you would be charged for 800 cubic feet (50 from the previous month + 750 from the current month).

The Meter Might Read:



The Bill Reads:

CHARGE DESCRIPTION	SERVICE PERIOD	DAYS OF SERVICE	METER NUMBER	PREVIOUS READING	PRESENT READING	CONSUMPTION / UNITS	CONSUMPTION 1 YEAR AGO	CHARGE
Residential Water		31	12345678	221	229	8	8	
Residential Sewer		31						
Storm Water		31				0		
Total New Charges								

In the example above, the meter reader would record 221 units for the previous month and 229 for the current reading. this would show up on the bill as consumption of eight (8) units (229-221=8).

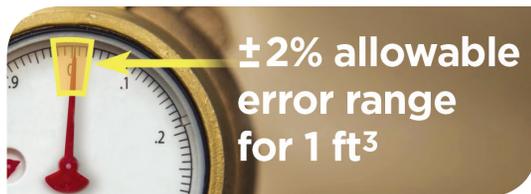
How does a water meter work?

Your water meter is a positive displacement water meter with a nutating disk. The meter is designed so that the pressure of moving water rotates a disk. As the disk revolves, it turns a magnet which causes gears to move. The moving gears advance the numbers on the meter dial.

Meter Accuracy

How accurate are Columbia Water's water meters?

Columbia Water's water meters are designed to accurately measure the water being consumed by its customers. The accuracy tolerance is currently +2%; this standard is established for the water industry by the American Water Works Association (www.AWWA.org). These standards are designed to assure rate payers that all of the water used will be accurately and fairly measured. The image to the right show a +2% error range (yellow box) for a 1 cubic foot (ft³) reading on a standard residential meter.



Who guarantees the accuracy of Columbia Water's meters?

The accuracy of the meter is guaranteed by its manufacturer when it is purchased by the City of Columbia.

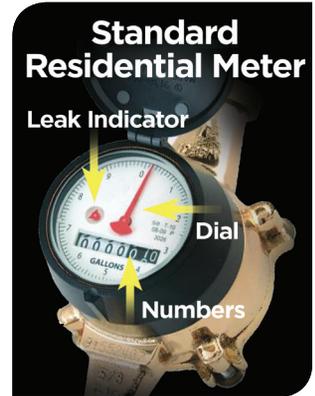
Can my meter register inaccurately one month then go back to normal?

No. If your meter is registering inaccurately, there is something wrong with the meter. A broken meter cannot repair itself.

Can meter accuracy change over time?

Under-Register (Register less than actual use):

Yes. The meter is designed so that the pressure of moving water rotates a disk. As the disk revolves, it turns a magnet which causes gears to move. The moving gears advance the numbers on the meter dial. The disk and gears are mechanical parts that can wear down and cause the meter to start to under register the amount of water being used. This under-registering can happen primarily by:



⇒ **Slippage:** Either the disk that rotates in the measuring chamber or some part of the gear train starts to slip. If something is slipping in your meter, it is similar to when a belt slips in your car – the engine may be turning, but a slipping belt won't grip whatever mechanism is on the other end so that mechanism won't turn. In the meter, this means that the disk or gear might still be moving with the water flow, but it can't properly grip the next mechanism in the meter to make it turn and make the numbers advance as quickly as they should.

⇒ **Sticking:** Either the disk that rotates in the measuring chamber or some part of the gear train sticks. If the disk sticks, water can still flow into the chamber, over the disk, and out of the chamber, but without a moving disk, nothing is driving the gears and the numbers do not advance. If the gears stick, even if the disk is still rotating, the numbers do not advance. In each of these cases, extra water gets through without advancing the numbers on the meter, and the end result for a customer is a bill that is lower than the actual use.

Over-Register (Register more than actual use):

No. Meters do not start to over register as they start to wear. The only time a meter might over-register is if there is a manufacturer defect. If the meter is defective and over-registering, we can tell with a meter test.

*If you had an old meter that was recently replaced, you will likely see your registered consumption **GO UP** since the new meter is more accurately reading all of the water that passes through it.*



I think there's a problem with my meter. Will Columbia Water test it for me?

Absolutely. Contact Columbia Water Customer Care at 803.545.3300 if you have any concerns about your water service or meter.

I think there's a problem with my meter. Will Columbia Water replace it?

Contact Columbia Water Customer Care at 803.545.3300 if you have any concerns about your meter. We will send someone to test it. If testing reveals something wrong with your meter, we will replace it at no cost to you.

How does Columbia Water test a meter for accuracy?

When staff test a homeowner's meter for accuracy, they use a calibrated meter. To do the test, they first confirm that the system is not leaking. They will ask the homeowner to confirm that all the faucets are turned off and that any machines that use water, like the dishwasher or ice maker, are also not running. To test the meter, they:

1. Hook the calibrated meter to one of the house's spigots.
2. Note the reading on both the property's meter and the calibration meter.
3. Run a set amount of water through the spigot with the calibrated meter.
4. If the system is not leaking, the same amount of water should have passed through both meters. Staff then notes the reading on both meters and confirms whether or not they are showing the same change in reading.

If the test confirms a problem with the meter on the property, Columbia Water will replace it at no cost to the homeowner.



FYI

The industry standard allows for a +2% margin of error in a meter. For 1 cubic foot of use, this is equivalent to two smaller hash marks on either side of the small numbers on the dial face.

Can I test my meter for accuracy?

Yes, you can test your own meter for accuracy. While Columbia Water cannot accept your results as proof of a faulty meter, it could indicate a problem that staff can further investigate. If we confirm that there is something wrong with your meter, we will replace it free of charge.

You will need the following supplies:

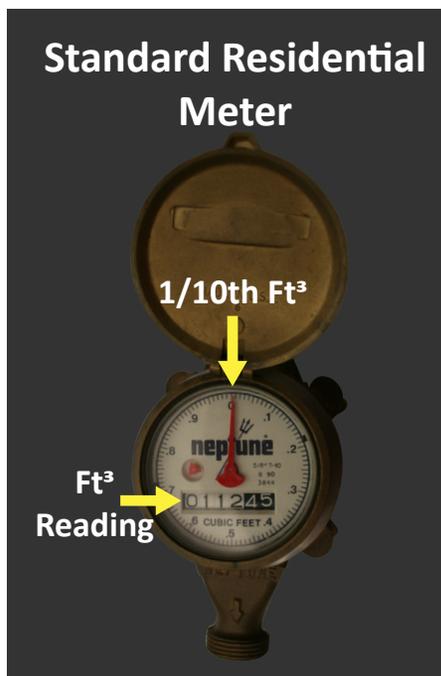
- ✓ A bucket that holds at least 1 gallon and clearly marked 1/2 gallon (2 quart) and 1 gallon (4 quart) lines. (see note A)
- ✓ A piece of paper and a pen or pencil

To test the meter, we recommend using a kitchen faucet. Do NOT use a hose. It may leak and ruin the test. Once the test starts, make sure you measure ALL the water that comes from the faucet.

1. Go outside and note the location of the dial and the numbers. In the example to the right, the Dial measures portions of a cubic foot (ft³) in 1/10 (numbers on the dial face) and 1/100 (little hash marks) increments. The Reading shows the total ft³ that have passed through the meter. The Dial reads 0.00 ft³; the Reading is 11,245 ft³. The total for the meter is the Dial + Numbers or 11,245.00 ft³.

2. Go inside and fill your bucket or jug one (1) time up to the 1/2 gallon mark and seven (7) times up to the gallon mark until you have measured out 7.5 gallons. (see note B)

3. Go back outside and note the value of the Dial and the Reading. If you accurately measured 7.5 gallons, the Reading should have advanced one (1) space, and the Dial should be in approximately the same place (it would have made one complete revolution to end up in approximately the same location). (see note C)



If you spill any, you will need to start the test over. Before you start the test, confirm that your system is not leaking. (See Testing For Leaks With A Meter on page 14)

NOTES:

A. You can also use a 1 gallon jug like a cleaned, empty milk jug. You will need to make a 1/2 gallon mark on the jug. Do this by carefully filling the jug with 8 cups of water. Place the jug on a level surface and mark a line. This is your 1/2 gallon mark. The 1 gallon mark should be at the neck of the jug, but you can also add 8 more cups and make another mark.

B. This test uses approximately \$0.06 worth of water for an in-city residential customer and \$0.10 worth of water for an out-of-city residential customer. In addition, you can save the water for plants.

C. The industry standard allows for a 2% margin of error in a meter. This is equivalent to two smaller hash marks on either side of the 1/10th ft² dial. In the example picture on page 11, if the 1/10th ft² dial fell anywhere in the yellow region, the meter would be registering correctly.



LEAKS AND PLUMBING ISSUES

Cost of Leaks

How much water am I really losing if I do have a leak?

You may think that a leak is no big deal, but it certainly can be. Fixing small leaks could save you significantly on your water bill. Below is a chart of leaks and how long it would take to see an increase in \$100 on an in-city or out-of-city residential water bill.

Example Water Loss	Gallons Per Day	In-City Days to spend at least \$100	Out-Of-City Days to spend at least \$100
Dripping faucet - slow (1 drip/second)	5.71	2,260 or about 6 years and 2 months	1,329 or about 3 years and 8 months
Dripping faucet - steady (5 drips/second)	28.53	452 or about 1 year and 3 months	266 or about 9 months
Toilet Leak	200	65 or about 9 weeks	38 or about 5 weeks
1/32 inch leak at 60 psi	197.38	65 or about 9 weeks	38 or about 5 weeks
1/16 inch leak at 60 psi	789.52	16 or about 2 weeks	10
1/8 inch leak at 60 psi	3,158.06	4	2
1/4 inch leak at 60 psi	12,632.26	1	1
Standard garden hose left on at 60 psi	20,160	1	1

Looking for Leaks

What are some common leaks?

Some of the most common – and costly – leaks come from:

- Leaking toilets. A leaking toilet can lose up to 200 gallons per day, or up to 6,000 gallons a month.
- Underground service line or irrigation leaks. A 1/16 inch leak can lose up to 790 gallons per day, and you may not see it right away!

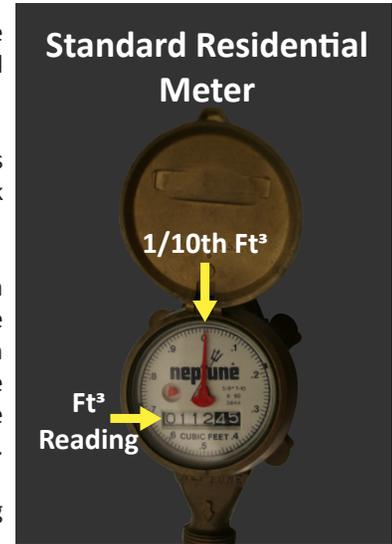
Other leaks can come from:

- Dripping faucets
- Leaking plumbing
- Swimming pools or fountains

How do I use my meter to determine if I have a leak?

All Columbia Water water meters should have a leak indicator. It is either a triangle (see image to the right) or a spinner in the middle of the meter that moves whenever water is flowing through the meter. To see if you have a leak:

- Turn off all faucets in your house. Make sure the dishwasher, washing machine, ice maker, and irrigation are all off as well.
- If the leak indicator is moving at all, water is flowing through the meter, and you have a leak somewhere in your system.
- If you think you might have a slow leak or a sporadic leak (i.e. a leaking toilet), note where the Dial is pointing and what Reading is showing. In the example, the Dial reads 0.00 cubic feet and the Reading shows 11,245 cubic feet. The total for the meter is the Dial + Reading or 11,245.00 cubic feet.
- Wait for 15 minutes to an hour (however long you feel comfortable) without using any water.
- Come back and read the meter. If it has changed, water is flowing through the meter, and you have a leak somewhere in your system.



Once the leak is repaired, you may be eligible for a credit (see www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/utility-billing/plumbing-adjustments for details).

How do I detect faucet, shower or tub leaks?

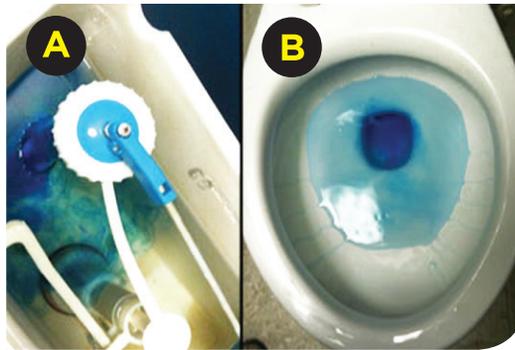
Faucet leaks are the most common around the home and also the easiest to repair. A faucet dripping slowly, at one drop every two seconds, will waste more than 1,000 gallons per year. If you have a leaky faucet, consider replacing the faucet or visit your local hardware store for repair information.

How do I detect a hot water tank leak?

If you have a tank-style hot water heater, check the pressure relief valve on your tank. Sometimes these valves are plumbed directly into a drain so it may be leaking without your knowledge. If you can't remove the drain pipe to check for a leak, listen for a hissing sound; it may be leaking.

How do I detect a toilet leak?

A slowly draining toilet is hard to detect. Toilets fill when the water in the tank drops below a certain level. If no one is home when the toilet refills, you may never realize that water is slowly leaking. If you have to shake your toilet handle to get it to stop running, or if your toilet runs for longer than usual, you may have a leak.



A running toilet can waste about 200 gallons per day! To put that into perspective, if you are losing 200 gallons per day through your toilet, that adds up to 6,000 gallons in a month. That is the average residential household use for Columbia Water customers! In other words, one leaking toilet can use as much water by itself as the average Columbia household.

There is a simple way to make sure your toilet tank is holding water and that the seals are operating properly:

1. Add a few drops of food coloring to the water in the tank (see A). Make sure you use food coloring or another colored liquid that will not stain! If you don't, you could end up with a stained toilet bowl. Customer Care Representatives at Columbia Water Bill Payment Centers have toilet tablets for customers free of charge.
2. Do not flush the toilet! You want the dye to stay in the tank to see if it will slowly leak into the bowl.
3. Wait one hour to see if the colored water appears in the toilet bowl. If it does, then you have a leak (see B).
4. Repairing a toilet tank leak is pretty easy and inexpensive. Check with your local hardware store for replacement parts and instructions for repair.

How do I detect a pool or fountain leak?

Even a small leak in your swimming pool can result in huge water bills! It is estimated that one in every twenty pools has at least a small leak. Some signs that your pool might be leaking include having to constantly add water, algae formation soon after chemical treatment, loose or falling tiles, pool deck cracks, gaps and cracks in the pool shell, or constantly damp soil surrounding the pool.

To check for leaks in your pool or fountain, place a bucket on the top step of the pool and fill with water. Put a piece of tape on the inside and outside of the bucket and mark the water level of the pool and the water level inside the bucket. After 24 hours, make a new mark on the tape with the new water level in the pool and bucket. If the water level in the pool/fountain has dropped more than the bucket, there is probably a leak in the pool/fountain structure or plumbing system.

What if I have an irrigation leak and the timer isn't on during the test?

It's always a good idea to know how much your irrigation system uses when it is functioning properly (for example, knowing how much it puts out when running for 30 minutes). You can use your meter by noting its reading before and after you run your irrigation system for 30 minutes without using water anywhere else on your property. If your use is higher than normal, you probably have a leak. If you do not have any obviously broken sprinkler heads, you may have a leak in a hose or pipe somewhere. Another sign of a broken buried line is a soggy spot in your yard.

My meter box is filled with water! Am I getting charged for this leak?

If the water passed through the meter before leaking, the meter will register the leak and it will show up on your bill. For example, if the leak is in the service line running from the meter to your house, since this line is owned by the property owner, it is the property owner's responsibility to repair this leak. Once the leak is repaired, you may be eligible for a credit. If the water does not pass through the meter before leaking, you will not be charged for the leak. Contact Columbia Water at 803.545.3300, and we will address it.



I had a leak, and I've fixed it. Can I get assistance with my bill?

Customers may be eligible for a charge reduction when plumbing problems occur on the property. The amount of credit depends on the type of problem and the customer's past average use.

Before an account can be reviewed for an adjustment, proof of repairs is required. Your use must return to normal before a credit will be applied. Only 1 adjustment is allowed per 12 month period, and no more than 3 months of billing will be adjusted for any plumbing problem event. Additional rules apply.

For more information about plumbing adjustments, call 803.545.3300 and speak to a Customer Care representative.

You can also learn more online at:
www.columbiasc.net/customer-care/utility-billing/plumbing-adjustments

