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AVOID APPLIANCE REPAIR BILL SHOCK

Always ask for a cost estimate when you call for service on a major home appliance to avoid unpleasant surprises and make sure the service is really needed. Service agencies are independent and their charges vary, so ask what charges you'll be expected to pay.

Service charges cannot be judged solely by the time a technician spends at your home. The cost of sending a trained technician on a house call includes overhead costs, such as: expensive tools and accurate testing equipment; an inventory of parts; truck maintenance, gas and insurance; salaries for technicians and clerical staff; and educational training to keep technicians up-to-date on designs and features.

Unless your appliance is still under warranty, you will bear the responsibility of service calls, even if they prove unnecessary. Common charges include a trip or diagnostic charge, generally a fixed rate that covers the trip to your home and a minimum labor charge for a specified amount of time for the technician to diagnose the problem.

Additional labor rates are usually set up for every 15 minutes the technician is in your home following the expiration of the time allotted for diagnosis. A follow-up trip may be necessary if special parts are ordered, but some service agencies charge only for the necessary parts and labor.

Before you commit to an appliance service call, make sure you really need service. Check plugs, fuses and other power sources before assuming the problem is with the appliances. And remember to request and save receipts for all service calls, even when your appliance is under warranty.