BILL'S HOME TECH
Home & Small Business Tech Solutions

BILL'S COMPLETE MANUALS

ADT & Monitored Alarms

ADT, Vivint and Brinks Home: monitoring, codes, contracts and scams — explained in plain English, one step at a time

A plain-English guide for homeowners and families

Take your time — you can't break it

Written for you by Bill — Bill's Home Tech

(330) 200-8042 · BillsHomeTech.com

For ADT, Vivint, Brinks Home & similar monitored alarms · facts current November 2026

What's Inside

This is your guide to the professionally monitored alarm on your wall, whether it's from ADT, Vivint, Brinks Home or a local company. Read it in any order and at your own pace — there is no test, and you can't fall behind. It explains what the monitoring center really does, how to use your codes and verbal password, how to handle a false alarm calmly, what to know before you sign, move or cancel, and how to spot the scams that target alarm customers. Systems and contracts differ, so where yours differs, your own paperwork and your company have the final word.

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PART 1

Getting Started

What a professionally monitored alarm really is, who the big companies are, and which app and website go with the system on your wall.

CHAPTER 1

A Note from Bill

Hello, and welcome. Maybe you've had an ADT sign in the flower bed for twenty years and never been quite sure what happens when the alarm goes off. Maybe you just moved into a house with a keypad by the door and a sticker from a company you've never called. Or maybe someone knocked on your door last week offering a "free upgrade" and you'd like to know whether to believe them. Whichever it is, this guide is for **you**.

I'm Bill. I've spent more than 30 years working with technology, and these days I help folks here in Portage County feel at home with theirs. Alarm systems are part of that now: they have apps, codes, cellular radios, contracts and monthly bills. I wrote this guide the way I'd explain it sitting at your kitchen table: patiently, in plain English, and without trying to sell you anything. I don't sell alarm systems or monitoring, so I have no reason to steer you toward one company.

What this guide will do for you

- Explain what "professional monitoring" actually covers: who watches, what they do when an alarm comes in, and what they don't do.
- Help you find the right app and account for your system, whether it's ADT, Vivint or Brinks Home.
- Walk you through codes, the duress code, your verbal password and your emergency contact list.
- Show you how to cancel a false alarm calmly, and how Ohio towns handle permits and false-alarm fees.
- Lay out contracts, moving, and canceling in plain words, before you sign anything.
- Help you spot door-to-door "upgrade" scams, and compare monitored and do-it-yourself systems honestly.

The big promise: you can't break it

Pressing the wrong button on a keypad won't damage anything. The worst that usually happens is a loud siren and a phone call from the monitoring center, and Chapter 15 shows you exactly how to handle that. The few things that really matter, like your codes, your verbal password and the contract, I'll mark clearly.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

Why this matters

When you understand your alarm, you use it more, you trip it by accident less, and you're far harder to fool. That's real peace of mind, and it's worth more than any feature on the box.

And I'm only a phone call away

If anything in this guide leaves you unsure, call me at **(330) 200-8042**. There's no such thing as a silly question, especially about a beeping keypad at two in the morning.

Let's start with what "monitored" really means.

— Bill

CHAPTER 2

What "Professionally Monitored" Really Means

A **professionally monitored** alarm is one that reports to a **central station** (also called a monitoring center): a room full of trained people, open 24 hours a day, whose job is to respond when your system sends a signal. A **self-monitored** alarm only alerts *you*, usually with a phone notification and a siren. Nobody else is watching.

The chain of events, in plain words

1. A sensor trips: a door opens while the system is armed, smoke reaches a monitored detector, or someone presses a panic button.
2. If it's a door you normally use, the keypad gives you a short **entry delay** to type your code (Chapter 10).
3. If the code isn't entered, the panel sounds the siren and sends a signal to the central station over its communicator: cellular, internet or, on older systems, the phone line (Chapter 6).
4. An operator sees which sensor tripped and usually tries to reach you first, by phone, or on some plans by text, to ask whether it's real. This is the **verification call**.
5. If you answer and give your **verbal password** (Chapter 13), the operator can cancel. If nobody answers, or the password is wrong, they contact the police, fire department or ambulance.
6. Your emergency contacts are called in the order you chose.

ADT's help pages describe the same pieces. You need at least one emergency contact, ADT recommends at least three, and if nobody on the list can be reached, ADT contacts the local authorities.

What monitoring does NOT do

- Operators don't drive to your house. They call the authorities, who decide how and when to respond.
- It doesn't watch your cameras around the clock unless your plan specifically includes live video monitoring.
- It only covers the sensors connected to the system. A stand-alone smoke alarm from the hardware store isn't monitored just because you have an alarm company (Chapter 8).
- It can't help if the system can't reach the center: a dead phone line, an old 3G radio or a long power outage can leave it silent (Chapters 6 and 7).

GOOD TO KNOW

"Fire, CO and medical" are separate signals

A burglary signal, a fire signal, a carbon monoxide signal and a medical or panic signal are handled differently. Fire and CO are usually treated as more urgent. Chapter 8 explains which ones your plan covers and how to check.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Knowing the steps takes the panic out of an alarm. You'll know the phone will ring, what they'll ask, and what happens if you don't answer.

CHAPTER 3

ADT, Vivint & Brinks Home at a Glance

These are three of the best-known names in professionally monitored home security. They all offer 24/7 monitoring, an app and smart-home extras, but they sell and charge differently.

	ADT	Vivint	Brinks Home
How it's sold	Professional install, or ADT self-setup kits	Professional install, usually after an in-home or phone consultation	Professional or self-install packages
Main app today	ADT+ (older systems: ADT Control, ADT Pulse)	Vivint app	Brinks Home app
Contract	36 months for pro-installed in most states	Set by your service and financing agreement	Commonly a 3-year term
Equipment	Depends on your agreement; ask who owns it	Typically paid up front or financed	Bought with a package or financed

Contract lengths in this table are the usual terms as of November 2026. ADT's residential terms describe a 36-month monitoring contract (24 months in California), and Brinks Home says its term is usually 36 months. Your own paperwork is what actually counts; Chapter 18 shows you what to look for.

Other names you may see

- **Local and regional dealers** — many smaller companies install panels and resell monitoring from a central station they contract with. The sticker on your keypad may be the dealer, not the monitoring center.
- **Panel makers** — names like Honeywell (Resideo), DSC, Qolsys or 2GIG are the hardware makers. The company you pay each month is the one that monitors it.
- **Alarm.com** — a platform many dealers use behind their own app. You might see its name in an app or on a login page.

TIP

Find out who actually monitors you

Look at your most recent bill or bank statement. That's the company you have a contract with. Write its name and its customer-service number (from the bill, not from a web search) in the Cheat-Sheet in Chapter 25.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

When the keypad beeps or a stranger knocks claiming to be "from your alarm company," you'll know exactly who your company is and how to reach the real one.

CHAPTER 4

Which App & Account Go with Your System

Over the years each company has had several apps. Using the wrong one is a common reason people think their system "doesn't have an app." Here's how to sort it out.

ADT: ADT+, ADT Control, ADT Pulse and MyADT

- **ADT+** is ADT's newest app. It goes with the newer ADT+ systems, and it can also control Google Nest cameras, doorbells and thermostats in the same app.
- **ADT Control** goes with many ADT Command panels (the touchscreen wall panels). If your system is a few years old and has a large touchscreen, this may be your app.
- **ADT Pulse** is an older platform; some homes still use its app.
- **MyADT** (myadt.com and its app) is your *account*: bills, documents, emergency contacts and your verbal password.

Vivint and Brinks Home

Vivint customers use the **Vivint app** together with the Smart Hub touch panel on the wall. Brinks Home customers use the **Brinks Home app** and an online Customer Portal for billing and account changes.

Getting the right app

1. Find the name printed on your wall panel or keypad, and the company name on your bill.
2. Open the **App Store** (iPhone) or **Play Store** (Android) and search for that company's name.
3. Check that the developer listed under the app name is the company itself, for example "ADT LLC" or "Vivint". Skip look-alike apps.
4. Open the app and choose **Sign in**. If you've never had a login, look for **Create account** or **Register**; you'll usually need your account number from a bill.
5. If it says your system isn't supported, try the company's other app (for ADT, try ADT Control or Pulse), or call the number on your bill and ask which app your panel uses.

HEADS UP

One login per person

Don't share one login around the family. Most apps let the account holder add other users with their own logins and their own codes, so you can remove one person later without changing everything.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

With the right app you can arm and disarm from your chair, see who disarmed it and when, and get an alert on your phone the moment something trips.

PART 2

The Equipment

The panel, the keypad and the sensors; how your system reaches the monitoring center; what happens when the power goes out; and what fire, CO and medical monitoring really cover.

CHAPTER 5

The Panel, Keypad & Sensors

Every monitored system, old or new, has the same few parts. Knowing their names makes phone calls with the company much easier.

The pieces

Part	What it does
Control panel or hub	The "brain." On older systems it's a metal box in a closet or basement; on newer ones it's the touchscreen or a small hub (ADT Base, Vivint Smart Hub).
Keypad	Where you type your code to arm and disarm. Some panels are the keypad too.
Door and window sensors	Two small pieces, one on the door and one on the frame. When they separate, the system knows the door opened.
Motion detector	Usually high in a corner. Notices movement in a room when you're away.
Glass-break sensor	Listens for the sound of breaking glass.
Smoke, heat and CO detectors	Only monitored if they're connected to the alarm system (Chapter 8).
Siren	Built into the panel, plus sometimes a separate loud one.
Communicator	The part that sends signals out: a cellular radio, an internet connection or a phone-line dialer (Chapter 6).
Key fob or panic pendant	A small remote to arm, disarm, or call for help.

Finding your panel's model

1. Look on the front or bottom edge of the keypad or touchscreen for a brand and model name.
2. If there's a metal box in a closet or basement, look inside the door (don't touch the wiring) for a label.
3. Write both on the Cheat-Sheet in Chapter 25. Steps for codes and settings are different on each model, so this name is what you'll search for or read to the company.

STAY SAFE

Leave the metal box alone

The control box connects to household power through a transformer and to a backup battery. Opening it can set off a tamper alarm, and on some systems it's still the alarm company's equipment. Let a technician handle anything inside it.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

When you can say "my front-door sensor" or "my Command panel," a support call takes minutes instead of an hour, and you can tell whether a "technician" at your door actually knows your system.

CHAPTER 6

How Your System Reaches the Monitoring Center

This is the part most people never think about, and it matters most. If your alarm can't get its message out, the monitoring center never knows anything happened.

The three ways a system "calls out"

Path	How it works	Weak spots
Landline (phone line)	An older dialer calls the center over your home phone line	Phone companies are retiring copper lines; a cut line silences it
Cellular	A built-in radio, like a cell phone, talks to the center	Needs a supported network; old 2G and 3G radios stopped working
Internet (broadband)	Signals go over your home Wi-Fi or a cable to the router	Fails if the internet or router loses power

Many systems today use cellular as the main path, with internet as a second path. That's generally the most dependable setup.

The 3G shutdown

In 2022 the big cellular carriers switched off their old 3G networks, and the 2G networks before them were already gone. Home security systems were among the products that depended on them. An alarm with a 3G radio that was never replaced can no longer reach the monitoring center by cellular, even though the keypad and siren still work.

Landline retirement

Phone companies are also retiring old copper phone lines, and on March 26, 2026 the FCC adopted an order that made it easier for carriers to do so. If your phone company moves you to a new kind of phone service, an old alarm dialer may stop working without any warning on the keypad.

How to check your system

1. Call the number on your alarm bill and ask: "How does my system send signals, landline, cellular or internet? Is the cellular radio current?"
2. If you've dropped your landline or changed phone service, tell them so.

3. Ask them to put your system **on test**, then trip a sensor and confirm they received it. (Chapter 14 explains test mode.)
4. Ask whether any upgrade is needed, and what it costs, *in writing*.

SCAM ALERT

The "your radio is out of date" visit

The 3G shutdown and landline changes are real, and scammers use them. If someone calls or knocks to say your system "will stop working" unless you upgrade today, hang up or close the door, then call the number on your own bill to ask. Chapter 21 has more.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Five minutes on the phone tells you whether your alarm can actually call for help, instead of finding out the night you need it.

CHAPTER 7

Power Outages, Batteries & Trouble Beeps

A monitored system plugs into the wall, but it's built to keep running for a while when the power goes out.

What happens in an outage

- The panel switches to its **backup battery**. Depending on the system, that typically lasts from several hours to about a day.
- A cellular communicator usually keeps working on the backup battery. An internet-only path stops when your router loses power, unless the router is on a battery backup (UPS) too.
- Many panels send an "AC power loss" signal to the center after a while, and beep or show a message.

Trouble beeps and messages

A steady pattern of beeps, often with a word like **Trouble**, **Check**, **Low Battery** or **Comm Failure** on the screen, means the panel wants attention. It is not an alarm.

1. Read the message on the keypad or app. Write it down exactly.
2. On most keypads, entering your code once (or pressing a key such as ***** or **Status**) silences the beeping for now. Your panel's guide gives the exact key.
3. Low battery on a sensor: the sensor's name is usually shown. Many sensors use a small lithium coin or CR123A battery; check the old one before buying a new one.
4. Low battery on the panel itself, or "AC loss": check that the panel's plug-in transformer is still plugged in and the outlet isn't on a switch.
5. "Communication" or "Comm" trouble: call the company. This is the one that means it may not be able to reach the center.

> **TIP**
>
> **Batteries wear out, even with power**
>
> The panel's backup battery is usually replaced every few years. If the system beeps for low battery right after every storm, the battery is probably tired. Ask your company whether it's covered under your service plan or warranty.

STAY SAFE

In a long outage

If you use a generator, keep it outdoors and well away from the house. Generators produce deadly carbon monoxide. Your alarm doesn't need a generator to keep calling out for the first part of an outage.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Once you know a trouble beep from a real alarm, a 3 a.m. chirp becomes a five-minute fix instead of a sleepless night.

CHAPTER 8

Fire, CO, Water & Medical Monitoring

Burglary is only part of the story. For many people, the most valuable thing monitoring can do is call the fire department when nobody's home to hear the smoke alarm.

What's covered depends on two things

- **The right detectors.** The smoke, heat or CO detector has to be part of the alarm system, either wired or wireless to the panel. Regular battery smoke alarms aren't monitored, however many you have.
- **The right plan.** Not every plan or package includes fire and CO monitoring. Ask your company, and look for the words "fire," "smoke" or "carbon monoxide" in your monitoring agreement.

Water and freeze

Some plans also cover flood and low-temperature sensors, handy for basements and for snowbirds. Coverage varies by company and plan, so ask: "If my water sensor trips, do you call me, or only send an app alert?"

Medical and panic buttons

Many keypads have emergency buttons. Vivint's Go!Control panel, for example, has three 24-hour emergency choices: **Panic**, **Fire** and **Emergency**. Tapping the emergency button only opens the emergency screen; you then press and hold your choice for at least two seconds to send it. Fire sends a fire report to the monitoring station and sounds the fire horn; Emergency sends an emergency report and sounds the siren. The installer decides which of the buttons appear.

1. Ask your company which emergency buttons your keypad has and what each one sends.
2. Ask whether a wearable pendant is available for your system and whether it works in the yard.
3. With the company's help, put the system on test and try each button once, so you know how long to hold it.

GOOD TO KNOW

Monitored detectors and your own alarms

You still need working smoke alarms in the right places, and CO alarms on every level. Monitoring adds a call for help; it doesn't replace the alarms that wake you up. Bill's Smart Smoke & CO Alarms guide covers placement and testing.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

A monitored smoke or CO detector means help can be on the way even when you're out, asleep, or unable to reach a phone.

PART 3

Everyday Use

Arming and disarming, the countdowns, your codes, the duress code, and the verbal password and contact list that the monitoring center relies on.

CHAPTER 9

Arming & Disarming: Stay, Away & Off

Most systems have two ways to arm. The names differ a little between companies, but the idea is the same.

Mode	What it means
Stay (or Home)	Doors and windows are armed; motion detectors inside are off, so you can move around. Use it at night or when you're home.
Away	Everything is armed, including motion detectors. Use it when the house is empty.
Off (Disarmed)	Nothing triggers a burglary alarm. Fire, CO and panic signals usually still work.
Night (some systems)	Like Stay, but may also arm a few chosen motion sensors, such as a downstairs one.

Arming from the keypad

1. Close the doors and windows. Most keypads show a "Ready" light or message when everything is shut.
2. Press **Stay** or **Away** (on some keypads you enter your code first, then the button).
3. For Away, the exit countdown starts. Leave by the door you normally use and close it behind you.

Disarming

1. Come in by your usual entry door. The keypad beeps to remind you.
2. Enter your code before the countdown ends. On many keypads you press **Off** or **Disarm** after the code.
3. If you make a mistake, just enter it again calmly. You usually have more than one try within the countdown.

Arming from the app

In the ADT+, ADT Control, Vivint or Brinks Home app, the home screen shows the system's state with buttons for each mode. Tap the mode you want; some apps ask for a code or Face ID first. The app also shows which door or window is open if the system won't arm.

TIP

"Bypassing" a window

If a window sensor is broken or you want one window open a crack, most systems let you **bypass** that one sensor for this arming only. That window is then unprotected. Your panel's guide or the app shows how.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Using Stay every night costs you nothing and means a door opening at 3 a.m. gets noticed, while you can still walk to the kitchen for a glass of water.

CHAPTER 10

Entry & Exit Delays and Avoiding False Alarms

Most false alarms come from ordinary life: someone who forgot the code, a door left ajar, a pet, a balloon drifting past a motion detector. A few habits prevent nearly all of them.

The countdowns

- **Exit delay** — the time you have to leave after arming Away.
- **Entry delay** — the time you have to enter your code after coming in.
- Only the doors you normally use have a delay. A window or back door may alarm instantly.

The company or installer can lengthen the delays if you need more time, for example if you walk with a cane or the keypad is a long way from the garage door. Just ask.

Habits that prevent false alarms

1. Teach everyone who has a code how to arm, disarm and cancel, and let them practice once with the system on test.
2. Before arming Away, check that pets can't reach rooms with motion detectors, unless they're pet-friendly sensors set up for your pet's size.
3. Keep balloons, hanging plants and space heaters out of a motion detector's view.
4. Fix sticky doors and loose sensors; a door that rattles in the wind can trip.
5. Tell the company before painting, remodeling, or having cleaners or a pet sitter with a new code.
6. Replace sensor batteries when the keypad asks, not months later.

HEADS UP

Grandkids and the panic button

A curious little finger on the keypad's emergency buttons sends a real emergency signal. If you have young visitors, show them it's not a toy, or ask the company whether a keypad's panic keys can be set to need a code.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Fewer false alarms means no embarrassing police visits, no fees (Chapter 16), and operators and officers who take your alarm seriously when it counts.

CHAPTER 11

Codes: Master, User & Guest Codes

Your codes are the keys to your house. Treat them that way.

The kinds of codes

Code	What it does
Master code	Belongs to the main account holder. Can arm, disarm and add or remove other codes.
User codes	One for each person: family, a caregiver, a regular helper. They arm and disarm, but can't change codes.
Guest or temporary codes	Many newer systems let you set a code that only works on certain days or times, for cleaners or a dog walker.
Installer code	Used by technicians to program the panel. You don't need it, and you shouldn't give it to anyone who calls you.

Adding or changing a code

On the newer apps (ADT+, ADT Control, Vivint, Brinks Home) look for a menu called **Users**, **Codes** or **Access**. Brinks Home's help pages, for example, put user codes under **Users** in its app, and let you delete a code or give it an expiration date. On older keypads, the button steps depend on the panel model, so use your panel's own guide or ask the company.

1. Find your panel's model (Chapter 5) and its user guide on the company's website, or call the company.
2. Make a list of who has a code. Give each person their own.
3. Remove codes for anyone who no longer needs one: a former caregiver, a contractor, a relative who moved.
4. Change the master code if it's still the one the installer gave you, or anything easy to guess.

HEADS UP

Pick codes that aren't obvious

Avoid 1234, 0000, your house number, birth year or the last four of your phone number. Those are the first things a burglar tries. Also wipe the keypad now and then; worn or smudged keys can give away which digits you use.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Separate codes mean you can see who came and went, and you can take away one person's access in a minute without changing everyone else's.

CHAPTER 12

The Duress Code & Panic Buttons

A **duress code** is a special code you enter if someone is forcing you to turn the alarm off. The keypad looks like it disarmed normally, but a silent signal goes to the monitoring center.

How it works

- Monitoring centers treat a duress signal as a silent call for police. Ring, for example, says its center immediately requests police dispatch and doesn't call your emergency contacts; Frontpoint says it dispatches police without calling you first, because a call could put you in danger. Exact handling varies by company.
- It only helps if the system is professionally monitored. On a self-monitored system there's nobody to receive it.
- How the code is set varies. On some older panels it's a fixed pattern, such as one digit higher than your master code; on others you choose any code. Ask your company exactly how yours works.

Setting one up

1. Ask your company or check the app's codes menu: "Does my system have a duress code, and how do I set it?"
2. Choose a code you could enter under stress, but that you won't use by accident.
3. Write it in a safe place, not on the keypad or on the Cheat-Sheet you keep by the door.
4. Never test it without telling the company first. A duress signal is treated as a real emergency.

Panic buttons

A **panic** button (on the keypad, the app, a key fob or a pendant) sends an emergency signal right away, armed or not. Chapter 8 covers which buttons send police, fire or medical help.

STAY SAFE

In a real emergency

If you're able to, call 911 yourself as well. A direct call gives the dispatcher details that no alarm signal can.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

A duress code is a quiet way to call for help in the one situation where reaching a phone isn't possible.

CHAPTER 13

Your Verbal Password & Emergency Contacts

When the monitoring center calls, they need to know they're talking to the right person. That's what the **verbal password** (also called a passcode or security password) is for. It's different from your keypad code.

Your verbal password

- The operator asks for it during an alarm call. Give the right one and they can cancel; give the wrong one, or none, and they'll treat the alarm as real.
- Everyone on your emergency contact list should know it, or have their own if your company allows that.
- ADT says its dispatch operators ask for the verbal password during an alarm, and customer service asks for it when you call. You can manage it in MyADT, under **Verbal Passwords**.

Checking your emergency contacts

1. Sign in to your account website or app (MyADT for ADT, or your company's app or customer portal).
2. Find **Emergency Contacts**. In MyADT, ADT's help pages point to a **Manage Contacts** button in the Emergency Contacts section of the Overview page; other companies put it under Account or Monitoring.
3. Check the order. The first person should be someone who answers the phone and lives nearby.
4. Delete people who've moved away or passed on, and check every phone number.
5. If you'll be away for a while, add a neighbor or reorder the list so a local person is first.

HEADS UP

Never give your password to a caller who phoned you out of the blue

The real monitoring center asks for your password when *your alarm* is going off. A caller asking for it on a quiet afternoon, "to verify your account" or "for an upgrade," is a red flag. Hang up and call the number on your bill.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

An up-to-date list means the right person gets the call quickly, and a good password means a false alarm is canceled in seconds instead of ending with police at the door.

PART 4

When the Alarm Goes Off

Testing your system safely, what to do in the first minute of an alarm, real or false, and how Ohio towns handle alarm permits and false-alarm fees.

CHAPTER 14

Test Mode & a Simple Monthly Check

The only way to know your alarm can really call for help is to test it, the right way. Done properly, a test sends signals to the monitoring center without anyone being dispatched.

What "on test" means

When you ask the company to put your account **on test** (some apps call it **test mode**), the central station still receives your signals, but it knows not to call the police or fire department for a set time, often an hour or so. When the time is up, the account goes back to normal on its own.

Running a test, step by step

1. Call the number on your bill, or look in your company's app or account website for a test option. Say you'd like to put the system on test, and ask how long it will last.
2. Give your verbal password when they ask for it (Chapter 13).
3. Arm the system the way you normally would, then open a protected door and let the entry delay run out. The siren will sound; that's expected.
4. Disarm with your code.
5. If your plan includes fire or CO monitoring, ask the company how they'd like those detectors tested. Many use the detector's own test button.
6. Call back, or check the app, and ask: "Which signals did you receive?" Each sensor you tripped should be on their list.
7. Make sure the account is taken off test before you hang up, or that you know when it will end.

HEADS UP

Never test without telling them first

If you trip a sensor or press a panic button without putting the account on test, it's a real alarm to the central station, and police or firefighters may be sent. That can also count as a false alarm with your town (Chapter 16).

A five-minute monthly check

- Look at the keypad or app: does it say Ready, with no trouble messages?
- Open the app and check that the last few events (arming, disarming) are listed with the right times.
- Press the test button on each smoke and CO alarm, connected or not.
- Make sure the panel's power supply is still plugged in, and nothing is blocking a motion detector.
- Every few months, or after you change phone or internet service, do a full test with the company.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

A short test gives you proof, not hope. If something isn't reaching the center, you find out on a quiet afternoon instead of during a break-in or a fire.

CHAPTER 15

The First Minute of an Alarm: Real or False

The siren is loud on purpose. It's meant to startle. Take a breath. The steps below work whether you set it off by accident or something is really wrong.

If you know it's a false alarm

1. Enter your code on the keypad, or disarm in the app. This silences the siren.
2. Keep your phone close. The monitoring center will usually call within a minute or two.
3. When they call, say it's a false alarm and give your **verbal password**. They'll cancel.
4. If you miss the call, call the monitoring number on your bill or keypad sticker right away and do the same.
5. If a police officer arrives anyway, be polite, explain, and show you can disarm the system. They're doing their job.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> **Turning off the siren isn't always the same as canceling**
> On many systems, disarming quickly stops the signal before it's sent. But once the center has the alarm, only talking to them, or using their cancel option, stops the call to police. When in doubt, call them.

Text and app options

Some companies let you handle an alarm without a phone call. ADT's **Alarm Messenger** sends you and your emergency contacts a text with a secure link to a shared session, where you can verify or cancel the alarm. Brinks Home's text alarm notifications let you reply **No** to cancel or **Yes** to ask for emergency help. Whether you have these depends on your company and plan.

If it might be real

1. Don't go looking. If you've just come home and the alarm is sounding, don't go inside.
2. Get to a safe place: a neighbor's house, your car with the doors locked, or out the nearest door.
3. Call 911 yourself and say your alarm is going off and you think someone may be inside.
4. When the monitoring center calls, tell them too. Don't cancel.

5. Wait for the police to say it's safe before going back in.

STAY SAFE

Fire or CO alarm

Smoke or carbon monoxide alarms mean get out first, then call 911 from outside. Don't stop to find the cause or to call the alarm company. Fresh air and distance come first.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

With a plan in your head, a false alarm takes two minutes and a phone call instead of a police visit, and a real one gets you out of harm's way first.

CHAPTER 16

Alarm Permits & False-Alarm Fees in Ohio

Many cities and villages have an **alarm ordinance**: a local law that asks you to register a monitored alarm and charges a fee when police answer too many false alarms. The rules depend on where you live.

An example close to home: Kent

The City of Kent's website says every alarm user must register each alarm system with the city's Emergency Communications Center, before it's put into use or within 15 days afterward, and keep the registration up to date when asked (at least every two years). The page also describes false-alarm fees that start with a third false alarm and climb with each one after that.

Other towns handle it differently. Some require a permit, some only ask you to register, and some have no ordinance for homes at all. Fees, the number of "free" false alarms, and how long they count back vary from place to place.

Finding the rule for your town

1. Search the web for your city or village name plus "alarm registration" or "false alarm," and look for a result on your town's own website (it often ends in .gov or .oh.us).
2. Or call your police department's **non-emergency** number and ask: "Do I need to register my home alarm, and what are the false-alarm fees?"
3. If you live in a township, ask the township office or the sheriff's non-emergency line.
4. Ask your alarm company too. Many keep track of local permit rules and some will tell you if your address needs one.
5. Write the permit number and renewal date on the Cheat-Sheet in Chapter 25.

TIP

Who pays the fee?

False-alarm fees are usually billed to the homeowner, not the alarm company. Read your contract; some companies pass along fees, and none of them can make the fee go away once the town sends it.

HEADS UP

Pay fees only to your town

A real false-alarm fee comes on a letter or invoice from your city, village or police department. If someone calls demanding payment by gift card or wire, it's a scam. Hang up and call the town's number from its official website.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Registering keeps you on the right side of local rules, and gives dispatchers your contact details. The habits in Chapter 10 keep you from ever seeing a fee.

PART 5

Contracts, Moving & Canceling

What monitoring really costs, what to read before you sign, how to take your alarm with you when you move, and how to cancel without surprises.

CHAPTER 17

What Monitoring Really Costs

The monthly fee is only part of the cost. Before you sign, or when you're checking whether you're paying too much, add up all of these.

Cost	What to ask
Equipment	Bought up front, financed over the contract, or bundled into a higher monthly fee. Ask who owns it when the contract ends.
Installation	Sometimes free with a long contract, sometimes a one-time charge.
Monthly monitoring	The fee for the central station and the app. Video, cameras and smart-home control usually cost more.
Add-ons	Extra sensors, cameras, a second keypad, a smart lock, or a service plan that covers repairs.
Price changes	Contracts often allow the company to raise the monthly fee. Look for how much notice they must give.
Ending early	The early-termination charge and any unpaid equipment balance (Chapter 20).

Rough prices, as of November 2026

Prices change often and depend on the package, so treat these as a starting point, not a quote. Independent reviewers in 2026 list ADT's self-setup monitoring starting at roughly $25 a month, with video plans and professionally installed systems costing more. Vivint and Brinks Home price their plans by package and usually quote them during a sales consultation. For comparison, do-it-yourself systems with optional professional monitoring cost less per month (Chapter 23).

TIP

Get the full number in writing

Ask for one sheet showing the equipment cost, installation, monthly fee, contract length, and the total you'd pay over the whole contract. If a salesperson won't put it in writing, that tells you something.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Knowing the real total lets you compare companies fairly, and keeps a "free equipment" offer from hiding a much bigger bill later.

CHAPTER 18

Reading the Contract Before You Sign

Alarm contracts are long, and most people never read them. You don't have to read every word, but these few things are worth ten minutes with a cup of coffee.

How long it lasts

ADT's residential terms describe a 36-month monitoring contract for professionally installed systems (24 months in California). Brinks Home's help center says its monitoring plan is a contract for an agreed term, usually 36 months. Vivint's term is set by your service agreement and any equipment financing you sign. Look at your own paperwork for the exact start date and length.

The questions to answer before signing

1. How many months is the contract, and what's the date it ends?
2. Does it **renew automatically** at the end? If so, how much notice must you give to stop it, and how?
3. What does it cost to cancel early?
4. Who owns the equipment, and is any of it financed? Is that loan a separate agreement?
5. Can the monthly price go up during the contract?
6. What happens if you move (Chapter 19)? If you pass away or move into care?
7. Is there a trial period or a money-back promise, and what are its conditions?

Your three-day right to cancel

If you sign a home security contract in your home, or somewhere other than the seller's usual place of business, the FTC's **Cooling-Off Rule** generally gives you three business days to cancel, no reason needed, even if the system is already installed. The seller is supposed to give you a cancellation notice and form. The FTC also lists high-pressure sales tactics as a red flag.

HEADS UP

Don't sign on a tablet you can't read

Many salespeople ask you to sign on a tablet screen. Ask for a printed or emailed copy of the whole contract first, and keep it. If they say you can't see it until after you sign, don't sign.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Ten minutes now can save you from a surprise renewal or a cancellation bill of hundreds or thousands of dollars later.

CHAPTER 19

Moving: Taking Your Alarm Along, or Taking Over One

Moving while you're under an alarm contract is common, and the companies have a process for it. The key is to call early, before the movers arrive.

If you're moving out

1. Call the company as soon as you know your moving date. Have your account number and verbal password ready.
2. Ask what your options are: moving the service to your new home, a new system there, or ending the contract, and what each one costs.
3. Ask whether any equipment must be left behind, returned, or can come with you.
4. Get the plan, the dates and any charges in writing (an email is fine).
5. On moving day, don't pull equipment off the walls yourself unless the company says to.

ADT says existing customers can have their current system relocated and reinstalled at the new house, and that the cost depends on your situation. Ask about any current mover offers, since those change.

If you're moving into a house with an alarm

- The old owner's contract doesn't automatically become yours. You'll set up your own account, usually with a new agreement.
- Call the company whose name is on the panel or yard sign and ask whether they can activate service with the existing equipment.
- Have every code changed, including the master code, and set your own verbal password.
- If you don't want monitoring, ask how to make sure the old account is closed, so the system isn't still calling someone else.

TIP

Leaving the old house

Before you hand over the keys, make sure your account is closed or moved, your emergency contacts are removed, and the new owners know which company to call.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

A call a few weeks ahead means your new home is protected from the first night, and you don't keep paying for a house you've left.

CHAPTER 20

Canceling Monitoring Without Surprises

Canceling is usually done by phone, and the company will often try to keep you. That's normal. Stay polite, know what you want, and take notes.

What it can cost

- **ADT**: its residential terms say that if you end a 36-month contract early, ADT may bill 75% of the remaining monthly charges.
- **Brinks Home**: its help center says that if you cancel early, you pay the remaining monthly fees for the term in full.
- **Vivint**: the cost depends on your agreement; if your equipment was financed, expect the unpaid equipment balance to come due. Ask Vivint for the exact figure.
- Once the contract term is over, most companies only ask for notice, often 30 days. Check yours.

Canceling, step by step

1. Find your contract and look for the end date and the cancellation section.
2. Call the customer-service number on your bill (not one from a web search). Have your account number and verbal password ready.
3. Say clearly: "I'd like to cancel my monitoring service." Ask: "What will I owe, and when is the last day of service?"
4. If they offer a lower price to stay, it's fine to say "No, thank you." Or take it, if it suits you.
5. Ask for a **cancellation confirmation number** and a confirming email or letter.
6. Write down the date, time, the person's name and the number on the Cheat-Sheet.
7. Watch your next two bank or card statements to be sure the charges stop.

TIP

If you canceled by mistake

Call back right away and ask whether the same account can be kept or restored before the service end date. Asking early gives you the most options.

HEADS UP

Still being charged after canceling?

Call the company first with your confirmation number. If that doesn't fix it, your bank or card company can help you dispute a charge, and you can file a complaint with the Ohio Attorney General's consumer protection section.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

With a confirmation number and a few notes, canceling is one phone call, not a months-long billing argument.

PART 6

Scams & Smart Choices

Door-to-door "upgrade" pitches, fake technicians and phone scams, and an honest look at monitored systems next to do-it-yourself ones.

CHAPTER 21

Door-to-Door Sales & "Upgrade" Scams

Alarm systems have long been sold door to door, especially in spring and summer. Some of those salespeople are honest. Some have been caught telling people they were from the customer's own alarm company.

This isn't just a rumor

In 2018 Vivint agreed to pay $10 million to settle ADT's claims that Vivint's door-to-door agents had misled ADT customers into thinking Vivint was connected to ADT. In 2023 a federal jury in North Carolina found that Vivint had used deceptive door-to-door sales practices against customers of CPI Security, a regional alarm company, and awarded CPI about $189 million; Vivint contested the verdict. Other companies' agents have been accused of similar tricks.

The lines to listen for

- "We're here to upgrade your system" or "your equipment is out of date."
- "Your alarm company went out of business" or "we took over their accounts."
- "Your system will stop working when the network shuts off" (Chapter 6 explains the real story).
- "This price is only good today."
- "Just sign here so I can show the office I stopped by."

What to do at the door

1. You don't have to open the door. Talking through it, or not answering at all, is fine.
2. If you do talk, ask: "What company are you with?" and "May I see your ID and your business card?"
3. Don't let them in to "check" your panel, and don't sign anything or show them your bill.
4. Say: "I'll call my alarm company myself." Then close the door.
5. Call the number on your own bill and ask whether they sent anyone. They'll know.
6. If someone claimed to be from your company and wasn't, tell your company and your police department's non-emergency line.

SCAM ALERT

Signed already? You likely have three days

If you signed at home, the FTC's Cooling-Off Rule generally gives you three business days to cancel a home security sale, even if they've installed it (Chapter 18). Send the cancellation in writing, keep a copy, and call your original company too.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

One sentence, "I'll call my company myself," ends almost every one of these pitches, and keeps you from ending up with two contracts and two monthly bills.

CHAPTER 22

Fake Technicians, Phone Calls & Phishing

Your alarm company has your address, your codes and your schedule, so pretending to be your alarm company is an attractive trick. Here's how to tell real from fake.

At the door: "I'm the technician"

1. Real service visits are scheduled. If you didn't book one, be suspicious.
2. Ask for the technician's name and company ID, then call the number on your bill (not one they give you) to confirm the visit.
3. A real technician will know your account and won't mind waiting while you check.
4. Stay with them while they work, and never give them your master code or verbal password out loud. A real technician can do their job with the company's own tools.

On the phone

- A caller asks for your **verbal password** or a code "to verify your account" when no alarm is going off. Hang up.
- A caller says your account is past due and you'll lose service unless you pay right now by gift card, wire, payment app or cryptocurrency. Real companies don't ask for those.
- A caller wants to "remote in" to your computer or phone to fix your alarm. Say no.

Email and text

- Messages about a "failed payment," "account suspended" or "free upgrade" with a link. Don't tap. Open the company's app or type its website yourself.
- Fake support numbers in web search ads. Use the number on your bill or keypad sticker, and write it on the Cheat-Sheet.

SCAM ALERT

If you already gave out a code or password

Call your alarm company on the number from your bill. Ask them to change your verbal password, and change any keypad code you shared. If you paid with a card or bank account, call your bank too. Gift cards: call the number on the back of the card quickly.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Knowing the company will never call out of the blue asking for your password makes these scams easy to spot and easy to hang up on.

CHAPTER 23

Monitored or Do-It-Yourself? An Honest Comparison

You don't need a big company and a three-year contract to have a good alarm. Do-it-yourself systems like SimpliSafe and Ring Alarm can also be professionally monitored, often month to month. Here's a fair look at both.

	Traditional monitored (ADT, Vivint, Brinks)	DIY with optional monitoring
Installation	A technician does it	You do it, or pay someone to help
Contract	Commonly 36 months	Often month to month
Monthly cost	Usually higher	Usually lower; self-monitoring cheapest
Service visits	Included or available	Mostly by phone or mail-in
Moving	Call the company; may mean a new contract	Pack it up and take it
Hardwired old sensors	Can often reuse them	Usually all new wireless sensors

A few DIY prices, as of November 2026

SimpliSafe's Standard monitoring plan is $22.99 a month and its Core plan is $32.99. Ring's Pro plan, which includes 24/7 professional monitoring for Ring Alarm, is $19.99 a month. Bill's SimpliSafe and Ring guides go into these plans in detail.

Who tends to do best with which

- **A traditional monitored system** often suits someone who wants a technician to handle everything, already has a wired system in the walls, or values in-person service.
- **A DIY system** often suits someone comfortable with an app, who rents, moves often, or wants to avoid a long contract.
- **Self-monitoring only** (alerts to your phone, nobody else watching) is the cheapest, but it only helps if you see the alert and can act on it.

GOOD TO KNOW

Already under contract?

If you're happy, there's no reason to switch. If you're not, look at your contract end date first. Switching a year before it ends often costs more than waiting.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Comparing honestly means you pay for the help you'll really use, whether that's a technician at the door or a simple app on your phone.

PART 7

When to Call Bill & Your Cheat-Sheet

An honest word about when a hand is worth it, and a one-page summary to keep near the keypad.

CHAPTER 24

When to Call Bill

Most of what's in this guide you can do yourself, at your own pace. But part of being helpful is being honest about when a hand saves you time and worry. Here's my straight advice, with no pressure.

Times it's well worth a call

- **Setting up the app** — finding the right one for your system, signing in, adding family members with their own logins, and turning on the alerts you actually want.
- **Sorting out codes and contacts** — making a list of who has a code, cleaning out old ones, and checking your emergency contact list and verbal password are current.
- **A second opinion before you sign** — reading a contract or a quote with you, line by line, so you know the total cost, the term and the renewal rules.
- **A knock at the door you're unsure about** — an "upgrade" pitch, a technician you didn't book, or a call asking for your password.
- **Comparing monitored and DIY systems** honestly for your home and budget, with no commission on either.
- **Helping a parent** — making the keypad and app simple, and writing out easy instructions for arming, disarming and canceling a false alarm.

What I don't do

I'm a technology helper, not an alarm installer or a monitoring company. I don't open control panels, change wiring or program installer settings; that's for your alarm company's technician. I also don't sell systems or monitoring, so my only interest is that you end up with what suits you.

What working with me is like

I work at your pace, explain what I'm doing in plain words, and never talk down to anyone. I'll tell you honestly when something isn't worth your money. I've been doing this kind of work for more than 30 years, and I serve Portage County, Ohio, in person, and folks farther away by remote help.

FROM BILL

How to reach me

Call **(330) 200-8042** or book a time at **billshometech.com/book**. My help is **$49 remote · $99 in your home**. This guide is yours to keep for free; if you'd like a hand, I'm only a phone call away.

GOOD TO KNOW

You may meet Sophie first

When you call or visit billshometech.com, you might be greeted by **Sophie**, my AI receptionist. She can answer quick questions and help you book a time. A real person — me — does the actual help.

Thank you for taking the time to understand your alarm. Keep your codes private, your contact list current, and your company's real phone number handy.

— Bill

CHAPTER 25

Your Monitored Alarm Cheat-Sheet

Keep just this page somewhere private, not stuck to the keypad. The whole guide, boiled down.

The essentials

Topic	Remember
Stay / Away / Off	Stay at night or when home. Away when the house is empty. Off to disarm.
False alarm	Disarm, answer the call, give your verbal password. Missed it? Call them back.
Real alarm	Don't go in. Get to safety and call 911 yourself.
Fire or CO alarm	Get out first, then call 911 from outside.
Verbal password	Only give it when your alarm is going off or when you called them.
Duress code	Keep it secret. Never test it without telling the company first.
Testing	Always put the account "on test" first, then call to confirm signals arrived.
Trouble beeps	Read the message. "Comm" trouble means call the company.
Door-to-door pitch	"I'll call my company myself." Close the door.
Signed at home?	FTC Cooling-Off Rule: generally three business days to cancel.
Canceling	Number from your bill; get a confirmation number in writing.
Town rules	Check your town's alarm registration and false-alarm fees.

Write it down once

Keep handy	
Alarm company & phone (from my bill)	_____
Monitoring center phone (from sticker)	_____
Account number	_____
Panel / keypad brand & model	_____
App name & login email	_____
Communicator: cellular, internet or landline	_____
Contract start & end date	_____
Town alarm permit number & renewal	_____
Emergency contacts (in order)	_____
Last full test with the company (date)	_____

When something's wrong, in order

1. Siren sounding and you know why? Disarm, then wait for the call and give your verbal password.
2. Any chance it's real, or it's a fire or CO alarm? Get out and call 911.
3. Beeping but no siren? Read the keypad message; it's probably trouble, not an alarm (Chapter 7).
4. App won't connect? Check your phone's internet, then sign out and back in. The keypad still works.
5. Someone at the door or on the phone claiming to be your company? Call the number on your bill.
6. Billing or contract question? Find your contract end date, then call the number on your bill.
7. Still stuck? Call Bill at (330) 200-8042.