

When do you need a lawyer's help?

Sometimes it's a no-brainer, such as when you get sued or when you're arrested or charged with a crime. But keep in mind that people hire lawyers for advice and expertise all of the time, in all kinds of situations. While you may be able to get through a legal problem without hiring a lawyer, you should always remember that when you represent yourself, you might have a "fool for a client," as the saying goes.

One of the first things to ask yourself in deciding if you should consult an attorney is: "What's at stake?" When your finances or liberties are in serious jeopardy, the obvious answer is to get legal help. But what is *serious*? An ordinary parking summons is a brush with the law, but you need not consult with an attorney to pay the fine or even to fight it. However, if you've accumulated a number of unpaid parking tickets and a warrant has been issued for your arrest, you would probably want to hire a lawyer to help you best resolve the situation, and perhaps save you money or even keep you out of jail.

In good times as well as bad, individuals and businesses rely on their lawyer's advice to understand and secure legal rights and financial interests. Lawyers help clients with estate planning and business negotiations, strategies and

transactions. With good legal advice, clients are better prepared to comply with and navigate through the complex mazes of governmental rules and regulations.

It is also a lot easier to rest easily after consulting with experienced lawyers for important undertakings such as tax and estate planning, drafting wills and trusts, negotiating business deals and even pursuing personal family matters such as adopting children.

What should you consider before you hire a lawyer?

It never hurts to talk to a lawyer, and it may be the best thing you can do if you think you have a legal problem that you can't resolve yourself. If you're persistent, you can probably arrange a free consultation with a lawyer who will talk to you on the matter.

Short of hiring a lawyer, though, you may want to look at alternative sources to resolve your legal issues. For example:

- Many companies and public utilities offer customer service departments that effectively address consumer problems and complaints
- Many [state attorney general offices](#) and other agencies provide [consumer protection](#)

departments. (But it's not usually a good idea to try to gain an advantage in a legal dispute over adversarial parties by threatening to contact a government agency if they don't comply with your demands. It is possible that such action could be characterized as attempted extortion on your part.)

- If you have a problem with a regulated industry such as banking or insurance, contact the agency in your state responsible for overseeing that industry
- Many community groups such as elder associations, civil rights groups and other organizations offer free legal help and information.

Some disputes may be resolved by using increasingly popular litigation alternatives such as mediation or arbitration. Businesses and individuals might agree to use alternative dispute resolution (ADR) rather than court action to resolve legal conflicts.

How quickly should you consult a lawyer?

In many situations, it is obvious that you need to act fast. But even if you think you have lots of time to consider your alternatives, deadlines sneak up on you and lawyers need time to prepare. So it's

always better to start looking for a lawyer sooner than later.

If you've been injured in an accident, keep in mind that there are time limits on your right to file a lawsuit. These "statutes of limitation" vary greatly from state to state and depend upon the fact and type of each case. In some instances, the law requires a claimant to notify potential defendants about any injury within an extremely short period of time - as little as a few weeks or months.

If you sit on your rights, you could lose them. You might have been angry for years over your neighbor's fence encroaching on part of your property. But if you wait too long without objecting or taking some legal action, the law might give your neighbor the right in the form of a prescriptive easement to leave the fence there permanently.

What are you trying to achieve?

This is an easy question to answer if you find yourself a defendant in a civil suit or charged with a crime. In these cases, your goal is to keep your money out of your adversary's pocket, or avoid criminal sanctions.

In other situations, your objective may be less clear. If you feel your employer unlawfully fired you, you might want to get your job back. If you suffered an injury from a defective product, you

might wish to recover money damages. Or you may be faced with a situation where you need to seek an injunction against someone. Think about these things before you hire a lawyer.

And you must be realistic about your chances of winning and what your case is worth.

If you aren't sure what your legal rights are, it might be worth your time and expense to retain a lawyer to evaluate your situation and advise you on alternative courses of action. Even if you end up having to pay a few hundred dollars for to consult with an attorney, it could be a very wise investment that ultimately saves you time and money.

What type of lawyer do you need?

Many attorneys specialize in one type of law. Other lawyers handle a wide range of matters. You want to hire an attorney who has expertise to represent you effectively with respect to your legal problem. Knowing a bit about the law will help you become a smarter legal consumer. From agricultural law to zoning and land use - from family law to taxation and more, lawyers.com provides incredibly useful information that can empower you to make better decisions with respect to your legal problems.

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