

Consumer Alert

Federal Trade Commission ■ Bureau of Consumer Protection ■ Office of Consumer and Business Education

Beloved...Bejeweled...Be Careful What to Know Before You Buy Jewelry

Washington, D.C. -- Planning a gift of jewelry? Whether it's for your sweetheart or yourself, build in time to compare prices and quality. A gift of jewelry can be expensive. If you're not familiar with any jewelers in your area, ask family members, friends or co-workers for recommendations. When you're shopping, ask your salesperson to write down any information you might rely on to make your purchase. And before you buy, ask for the store's refund and return policy.

The Federal Trade Commission has a few additional pointers for jewelry shoppers who are in the market for gold, watches, gemstones, pearls or diamonds:

1. There's a big difference between 14 karat gold and gold-plated jewelry. Fourteen karat (14K) jewelry contains 14 parts of gold, *mixed in throughout with* 10 parts of base metal. Gold-plated describes jewelry with a layer of at least 10K gold *bonded to* a base metal. Gold plating eventually wears away, depending on how often the item is worn and how thick the plating is.

2. If you're buying a watch, determine whether you want one that runs on a battery or one that must be wound daily. Ask if a warranty or guarantee is included, how long it lasts, and what parts and repair problems it covers. Also ask how and where you can get the watch serviced and repaired.

3. Know the difference between laboratory-created gemstones and naturally mined stones. Stones created in the lab are visually identical to stones mined from the earth. The big difference is in the cost: laboratory-created stones are less expensive than naturally mined stones. But because they look just like stones mined from the earth, they must be identified as lab-created. If you want a naturally mined stone, ask if it has been treated. Gemstone treatments — such as heating, dyeing or bleaching — can improve a stone's appearance or durability. Some treatments are permanent; some may create special care requirements. Treatments also may affect the stone's value.

4. Ask whether pearls are imitation or real. Real pearls are made by oysters or other mollusks; imitation pearls are man-made. Cultured pearls are made by mollusks with human intervention; an irritant introduced into their shells causes a pearl to grow. Real pearls that are not cultured are fairly rare and expensive. The cost depends on the size, usually stated in millimeters, and the coating or "nacre" on a real pearl, which gives it its iridescence.

5. When you're buying a diamond, consider four criteria: cut, color, clarity and weight, usually stated as carats. Each factor affects the price. Color is sometimes "graded" on a scale. However, scales are not uniform: a "D" may be the best color for one scale, but not for another. Make sure you know how a particular scale and grade represent the color of the diamond you're considering. A diamond can be described as "flawless" only if it has no visible surface cracks or other imperfections when viewed under 10-power magnification by a skilled diamond grader.

For more information, visit the FTC web site at www.ftc.gov.

