I call it Empty Wallet Syndrome.

You could swear that you hit the ATM just yesterday, but when you swing by the supermarket to get a few things for dinner, you open your wallet and...nothing! Or maybe your bank account is running on empty and you still have bills to pay.

Lay down your credit cards and step away from the sales rack. It's time to get your cash flow under control. You can do this. Just change a few bad habits and reassess some of your bigger monthly expenses and, bingo, no more unpleasant surprises at the ATM.

MONEY PIT #1

Shopping the Sales

We've all been seduced by the lure of a sale. After all, if prices are discounted, you'll save big, right? Not always.

"Sale tags are a great marketing strategy because they make consumers think that merchandise is marked down, but that's not always the case," says Christine K. Walker, author of The Smart Mom's Guide to Staying Home.

- Remember that buying a sale item you don't need is still an expense that requires cold, hard cash. "People buy things just because they're on sale: clothes that don't fit well, home furnishings that don't match," says Walker.
- Beware of splurging at outlet stores. "Years ago outlets existed to farm out the remaining items in a product line," says Walker. "But now, retailers such as Brooks Brothers and Casual Corner make items exclusively for outlets that may be of lesser quality but sold at a similar price." Check the quality, pricing and return policy at the retail store before going to the company's outlet.
- "To stop overspending, arm yourself with a list, and hit the store with a thrifty friend. She'll make you stick to what you need," says Olivia Mellan, coauthor of Overcoming Overspending. "Or tape a picture of something you're saving for on top of your wallet. You'll be reminded of it every time you take out money."

MONEY PIT #2

Spoiling Your Furry Friends

We love our pets. In fact, last year Americans forked over $34 billion caring for them. "There are so many ways to save money on your pets, and they'll be none the wiser," says Charlotte Reed, a pet expert in New York City.

- Resist buying too many products for Spot. "Skip the special pads when you're house-training. Newspaper works just as well. And a dog or cat needs only a few toys; if you rotate them, he won't get bored."
- Nutro offers a frequent-buyer program, and Purina will send you coupons for two free cans of food. Just log..."
CASH-FLOW CONTROL
Continued

on to their web sites for information.
Medical care for a pet can be a real
financial drain. “The SPCA or local
Humane Society has very good low-
cost vet care,” notes Reed. “A regular
vet visit in New York City, for exam-
ple, is $65 to $70, but at these organi-
zations, a visit runs about $40.”

MONEY PIT #3
Overshopping at the Supermarket
“In our time-starved world, it’s very
easy to shop meal to meal, which can
be just as expensive as going to a
restaurant,” says Jean Chatzky,
author of Pay It Down: From Debt to
Wealth on $10 a Day.
To purchase only what you need,
shop with a list that includes a
week’s worth of meals, taking into
account a night or two of leftovers.
Clip coupons solely for items you
currently use, not ones you want to
try. Always look for stores that dou-
ble or triple your coupon savings.
Before you hit bulk stores, check
prices at your local shops. Some
paper goods might be less expen-
sive on sale at the drugstore. And forget
about super-size perishables. They
often go bad before you finish them.

MONEY PIT #4
Paying Late Fees
Each time you miss a credit card
company’s payment deadline, you
risk much more than a one-time late
fee. Soon, you may find your low
interest rate has shot up to as high as
29.9 percent. But it gets worse. “If
other credit card companies that you
do business with see you’ve been
late with another creditor, they may
bump up your rate on their card as
well,” says Leslie E. Linfield, author
of Budget! It’s Not a 4-Letter Word.
Try to pay off your balance each
month and send your payments early.
“The postal service is under no obli-
gation to get your payment to the bank
on time, you are,” says Linfield.
“Check what bills have arrived each
week and plan accordingly.” Use elec-
tronic bill payment—it’s faster.
Review your credit report annually
to ensure there’s no misinformation
on it, such as incorrectly reported
late payments. With the passage of
the Fair and Accurate Credit Trans-
actions Act, you’re allowed one free
credit report a year from each of the
three major credit bureaus. Log on
When all else fails, call the credit
card company. “If you’ve had a good
relationship, they may waive the fee
or lower the rate,” says Linfield.

MONEY PIT #5
Overpaying Taxes
Many people unknowingly have too
much in taxes withheld from their

If you’ve ever felt this kind of irritation, you’re not alone. 75% of women have some
kind of vaginal irritation at least once in their lives. And probably more than once.
That’s the bad news. The good news is, Vagi-Gard™ has lots of products that can help.
From medicated creams and douches to suppositories. And they’re all designed
to give you fast, soothing relief from irritation. So you can feel like yourself again.

For more information, call 1-800-537-8658
or visit www.lakeconsumer.com.
LOOSE CHANGE

It’s easy to think that a dollar here, a dollar there doesn’t make a difference. “But people are being nicked-and-dimed to death,” says Michael McAuliffe, president of the nonprofit Family Credit Counseling Service (www.familycredit.org).

Avoid these classic money-wasters:
1. Don’t take children with you when you shop. They often persuade you to buy unnecessary items.
2. Shop for cleaning supplies, beauty items and toiletries once every three months and stick to a detailed list.
3. Ask your employer about flexible-spending health benefits. These plans let you pay for OTC medications, prescription drugs and physician copays with pre-tax dollars.
4. Switch to a bank with a large network of ATM outlets to avoid fees each time you withdraw cash. Or take enough money at one time, then tuck it away until you need it.
5. Americans are increasingly ordering in or taking out, and it’s setting us back to the tune of more than $2,000 a year. So start cooking a few meals a week. Fast-food restaurants aren’t cheap solutions either. An American Dietetic Association study notes that forgoing fast food in favor of home-cooked meals boosts your health as well.

paychecks, and are overpaying throughout the year. “People get so excited when they get a refund in April, but this isn’t found money, and it’s not a windfall,” says Linfield.
- The average refund in 2004 was $2,100. That’s an extra $175 a month you could have in your pocket. To determine how much you owe per paycheck, look at last year’s tax return for a line that notes your tax liability to the government (the total taxes you owe). Divide this amount by the number of times you get paid each year. If your tax liability reads $5,000, and you’re paid 25 times a year, you should be paying $200 in taxes each paycheck. Go to your human resources department and change the number of deductions on your W-2 to keep your hard-earned money.

MONEY PIT #6
Not Updating Your Phone and Cable Plans

In 2001, American households spent an average of $225 a month on their combined phone, cable, Internet and cellular bills. “Chances are that since you’ve signed up with your carrier, it’s introduced lower rates, though it might not advertise them to current customers,” says Judy Lawrence, author of The Budget Kit, whose web site is www.moneytracker.com.
- Call the carriers of your present cell phone, long-distance and cable plans (or go online) and ask about current promotions. If you’ve seen a cheaper plan with a competitor, let your current carrier know you’ll make the switch if it can’t beat it.
- When possible, consolidate your service, such as cable and Internet, or local, long-distance and cell phone, with one company. You’ll often get a discount for doing so.

7/12/05 www.womansday.com 127