

pump. Typically, the gas station will create two transactions: the first to get approval from your bank for an estimated purchase amount (like \$50) when you swipe your card before pumping gas, and the second for the actual charges when you're done. Until the first (\$50) transaction is cancelled by the bank, usually within 48 hours, you won't have access to that amount in your account.

Because a debit card transaction is processed so fast, is it possible to order a "stop payment" or obtain a refund if I later discover a problem with the merchandise?

It depends. Because funds are deducted from your account very quickly, don't expect to have the option to stop payment or obtain a refund. If the transaction cannot be cancelled, you may be able to work out other arrangements with the store. For example, if you return an item to a merchant and you're not able to get a refund, you instead may qualify for store credit or a gift card.

Consumer protections are stronger for credit cards than debit cards, so if you are concerned that merchandise may be damaged or not what you expected, you may consider using a credit card for those types of purchases. The Fair Credit Billing Act (which only applies to credit cards) gives you the ability, under certain circumstances, to withhold payment on defective goods until the problem has been corrected.

Sometimes I'm asked to enter a PIN to approve a debit card transaction, other times I can sign my name. Does it matter?

It could matter. If you use a PIN at a merchant's sales counter, you also may be able to get cash back, and that can save you a trip to the ATM. However, be aware that some financial institutions charge consumers a fee for a PIN-based transaction. There also may be differences in how quickly the transaction is posted to your account, depending on how your bank processes PIN vs. signature debits.

If you would rather sign for a debit card transaction, you can generally swipe your card through the reader and choose "credit" (even though you are authorizing a debit withdrawal from your account, not a credit card transaction). To use your PIN instead of signing, select "debit."