

Winter Energy Bill Blues

Submitted by Alexis Baker, Environmental Programs Coordinator

Unfortunately, winter is a time when we see our bills skyrocket. There are several ways to help improve the amount of energy you use. One way is to turn down your thermostat to 68 degrees. For every degree you lower your heat in the 60 to 70 degree range, you'll save up to 5% in your energy bills. For the times when you plan on leaving your house for extended periods of time, drop your thermostat to at least 55 degrees or off if it doesn't cause problems with heat pumps or pipes. You could save 5-20% in your heating bills. Using a humidifier to add moisture to your air can make the air feel warmer even when your thermostat is set lower.

Don't forget to clean or replace your furnace filters once a month. Dirty filters can increase energy usage through restricted airflow. Also, make sure your furnace is tuned up. Drain off hot water from your water heater to remove sediment that can interfere with the heater's long term use. Other ways to save energy is to reduce hot water temperature. Make sure you set the water heater to 120 degrees, unless the manufacturer indicates a higher temperature. Install low-flow showerheads and faucet aerators to reduce the amount of hot water used.

You may also consider replacing water heaters that are over 12 years old with newer Energy Star rated appliances. The best indicator of your water heater's efficiency is the Energy Factor (EF). A higher EF is a good indication of efficiency. For instance, electric resistance water heaters have an EF between 0.7 and 0.95 while a gas heater has an EF between 0.5 and 0.6, with some high efficiency models around 0.8. Oil heaters range from 0.7 to 0.85 and heat pump water heaters range from 1.5 to 2.0. Other energy features to look for are tanks with at least 1.5 inches of foam insulation and energy efficiency rating shown on Energy Guide labels. Most importantly, don't forget to insulate the pipe into your water heater.

A properly winterized house can also lower your energy bills. The addition of insulation, caulking, and weatherstripping can drastically cut your bills. Insulation should be installed behind electric outlets and switch plate covers. Also, make sure that windows are caulked and weatherstripped. Don't forget to check exterior doors for air leaks. This can be tested by placing a piece of paper between the door and the frame and shutting it. If you can pull the paper out without tearing it, you need to weatherstrip around the door. Also seal off unused rooms that do not have thermostats by shutting doors and closing off the floor or wall registers and return vents. Seal ductwork and make sure that attics, crawl spaces, floors, and roofs are also well insulated. However, before engaging in a weatherization project that may be costly, make sure a proper assessment is performed on your home.

Finally, remember that a traditional fireplace shouldn't be used for supplemental heating. A fireplace actually pulls heat out of your home to fuel the fire. Your heating system turns on to replace the warm air. A wood-burning stove may be a better option.

Remember to close wood stove and fireplace dampers when they are not in use to prevent air leakage.

Also be especially vigilant during these winter months. Unvented kerosene and gas heaters, leaking chimneys and furnaces, backdrafting from furnaces, gas water heaters, wood stove, fireplaces, and generators can be sources of carbon monoxide. Install a carbon monoxide meter. If it indicates high levels of the dangerous gas, believe it and fix the source of the carbon monoxide.

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