

Low cost ideas to cool down your electric bill

How to protect yourself from increasing energy prices

Everyone is aware that gasoline prices have risen 40-50% in recent months, but natural gas, the fuel used to generate most of Florida's Electricity, has almost tripled in price since 2002. Electric consumers need to be made aware that rising natural gas prices mean higher electric bills. While electric customers have no control over the cost of fuel used to make electricity, they can control the amount of electricity they use. Implementing energy saving strategies during summer months when electric consumption is highest can have the greatest impact on electric bills.

But before you spend money to save money by upgrading to the latest energy-efficient gadgets, check out our list of "no-cost" or "low-cost" tips for saving energy from the City of Vero Beach. Visit our website at www.covb.org for the complete list. Most of these tips cost little or nothing. Thanks to the Department of Energy's Energy Savers program, which provided most of these tips. You can also use free online calculators and get customized tips for improving your home's energy efficiency at a Web site sponsored by the Department of Energy (DOE). The web address is:

http://www.eere.energy.gov/consumerinfo/energy_savers

Some of the no cost tips to reduce energy consumption are simple like turning off anything you're not using. Other hints help reduce home energy consumption by using less energy on appliances that are operating like lowering the temperature on your electric water heater to 115 degrees F, and washing only full loads of dishes and air drying them.

Spending hundreds of dollars to save a few pennies doesn't make sense, but if you're already in the market for a new appliance, or even light bulbs, consider purchasing energy-saving products. To find the best level of efficiency for all products, look for those labeled "Energy Star" by the DOE. Compact fluorescent lamps use up to 75-percent less energy than standard incandescent bulbs, according to Home Energy Saver. Although they're more expensive initially, they can last up to 10 times longer, which mean big savings over time.

If you are inclined to make energy conservation investments, some are more cost effective than others like installing ceiling fans, attic fans, and having air conditioning equipment serviced by professionals. A quick check of your air conditioner's efficiency can help you decide whether to call in a service professional. Use a household thermometer to measure the temperature of the discharge air from the register and the temperature of the return air at the return-air grill. (Keep the thermometer in place for several minutes to get a steady temperature.) The difference should be from 14 to 20 degrees F. Experts say that an air conditioner that's not cooling properly could be low on refrigerant or have leaks. A unit cooling more than 20 degrees could have a blockage in the ductwork. Programmable thermostats are inexpensive ways to automatically adjust the temperature setting when no one is home or asleep. More expensive investments like increasing the amount of insulation, will save money, but are not as much bang for the energy buck.

Remember if an appliance is on, your electric meter is spinning. It all adds up at the end of the month. Here are a few simple ideas that add up to big savings.

Appliance Tips -- Easier Chores and Easy Savings

Turn off anything you're not using including all equipment and appliances, televisions, VCR's, computers (including monitors) and lights!

Refrigerator/Freezer: Give the unit breathing room, clean the coils, and don't set temperatures too low. Fresh foods keep at 37 to 42 degrees, frozen foods at 0 to 5 degrees. Defrost refrigerators and freezers before ice buildup becomes too thick.

Use your microwave instead of a conventional electric range or oven

Do laundry, vacuuming, cooking etc. early in the morning or late in the evening when the outdoor temperature is cooler.

Arrange items in your refrigerator for quick removal and return. The longer the door is open, the longer it runs to keep the contents cool.

Use ceiling fans and room fans in occupied rooms but keep fans off in unoccupied areas.

Air Conditioning Tips -- Cool Ways to Save

Heating and cooling your home uses more energy and drains more energy dollars than any other system in your home.

Use a fan with your window air conditioner to spread the cool air through your home.

Use a programmable thermostat with your air conditioner to adjust the setting at night or when no one is home.

Install white window shades, drapes, or blinds to reflect heat away from the house and close windows facing direct sunlight during the day.

Air conditioners: Clean or replace filters regularly. Provide shading for your air conditioner unit outside. Keep weeds and debris away to ensure proper air-flow.

Keep the thermostat set at 78 degrees or higher when the house is occupied and turn the AC off or set the thermostat warmer when the house is unoccupied. Installing a programmable thermostat will do this automatically. A lower air conditioner setting makes your costs much higher. Setting your air conditioner at 70 degrees instead of 78 will almost double your operating cost!

Don't select a lower thermostat temperature when you first turn on the A/C. It will not cool any faster. Whenever it's running it's cooling as fast as it can. If you set low, it cools longer, not faster.

Washer/Dryer/Dishwasher Tips -- Clean Up with These Ideas

When using the clothes washer and dryer, do only full loads; wash in cold water whenever possible. Clean the dryer lint trap after each use. Hang clothes to dry whenever possible.

Vent the clothes dryer to the out-of-doors. Otherwise it pours heat and moisture into the house air.

Dishwasher: Wash only full loads in the dishwasher. Use the energy saver, air- dry cycle or better yet open the door and let dishes dry naturally.

Passive Ways To Save -- Think, Natural

To keep your house cooler in the summer, install shades, awnings, sun-screens to windows facing south and west to block light. Use exterior shading devices or plants to shade your home from the sun.

Plant trees or shrubs to shade air conditioning units, but not block the airflow. An outdoor unit operating in the shade uses less electricity.

Drink plenty of cool liquids and wear light loose comfortable clothing to help the body regulate temperature when the thermostat is set higher than normal.

Open windows to take advantage of natural ventilation when the outdoor temperature permits. Make sure a/c is off when windows are open.

Deciduous trees planted on the south and west sides will keep your house cool in the summer. Just three trees, properly placed around a house, can save between \$100 and

\$250 annually in cooling and heating costs. Daytime air temperatures can be 3 degrees to 6 degrees cooler in the shade.

Indoor Tips -- Keep the Heat Out, the Cool In

Don't forget to close the fireplace damper to prevent cool air from escaping through the chimney.

Caulk around windows, doors, pipes, and anywhere else air can leak in and out. Use weather stripping around windows, doors and pipes.

Have your heating and cooling ducts tested for air leakage. Leaking ducts can affect the efficiency of your heating or cooling system by up to 20%. Make any necessary repairs.

Insulate ceilings to appropriate standards. Make sure attics have adequate ventilation. You can save more if you also insulate walls, floors and duct work.

Ensure windows are completely closed when heating or cooling.

Use curtains, shades and blinds to block the sun's rays from directly entering the home.

Outdoor Tips -- Keep the Heat Out, the Cool In

Cook outdoors whenever possible.

Seal gaps around pipes, fans and vents that go through walls, ceilings and floors, and accesses to unheated spaces.

Water Heaters -- Beat the heat

Lower the thermostat on your electric water heater; 115° - 120° is acceptable in most cases.

Take showers instead of baths to reduce hot water use. Install Aerating, low-flow faucets and showerheads to reduce water and energy consumption.

Wash only full loads of dishes and clothes.

Install insulating blankets to keep heat inside the water heater.

Lights -- Bright Ways to Save

Convert incandescent bulbs to fluorescent lamps with screw-in bases. Fluorescent lights give the same amount and quality of light as incandescent bulbs, yet use a fraction of the energy and last up to ten times longer. Or, use low-wattage incandescent light bulbs.